



# THE AMERICAN ENEMY

THE HISTORY OF FRENCH ANTI-AMERICANISM

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Washington had pronounced this beautiful and true idea:

“The nation which indulges toward another an habitual hatred or an habitual fondness is in some degree a slave.

It is a slave to its animosity or to its affection.”

—Alexis de Tocqueville,

*Democracy in America*

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## Introduction

Great Britain, Germany, Spain, and Italy have all been at war with the United States at one time or another. France has not. Yet as Michel Winock noted not long after the World Trade Center attacks, France is the country where “anti-Americanism has been, and remains, the most strident.”<sup>1</sup> This extreme paradox is part of the historical and cultural riddle of French anti-Americanism. Why are the French so anti-American? The question is all the more pertinent because it goes beyond any real or imagined relationship between France and the United States.

The recent crisis in French-American relations, serious as it was (and remains), is just the last, spectacular installment of a long and bizarre story: a century-old war of words. French anti-Americanism is not a recent fever we could use polls to chart, correlating the fluctuations with any given episode of Franco-American relations. Analyzing it as a short-term reaction to specific events or situations has never been a good way of understanding it. In the mid-1980s, pollsters and political analysts proclaimed that anti-American sentiment was in recession and would soon be extinct in France: to hear them talk, French anti-Americanism was on its last legs. Its stereotypes were outmoded,

and the general public was warned against falling prey to the other extreme, a triumphant “Americanomania.” Even the intellectuals, we were told, had found their “road to Damascus”; a “conversion of the intelligentsia” was described in lavish detail.<sup>2</sup>

Of course the word “conversion” would not have been so out of place if the miracle had really happened. But whether it was real or only imagined, the “clearing up” didn’t last.<sup>3</sup> By the turn of the third millennium, the clocks had been reset. Farmers stormed McDonald’s. The French government briefly took Coke off the market for public health reasons. “Lite high school” and the Americanization of higher education were publicly reviled. Accusations of “arrogance” and “unilateralism” became the daily bread of the French media again. And in the thick of the Kosovo intervention, the same French citizens who globally approved what NATO was doing in the former Yugoslavia responded to a *CSA-Libération* poll with more anti-American opinions than ever.<sup>4</sup> France had gotten its wits back, and the intelligentsia, annoyed that a passing lull could ever have been taken for desertion, had retaken its position on the front line. With precious few exceptions, the French intelligentsia’s reaction to the events of September 11, 2001, refuted any suspicion of a conversion. Only days after the attacks, the op-ed pages of major French newspapers were filled with the usual America-bashing contributions, which greatly outnumbered the declarations of sympathy or solidarity—with unexpected consequences. Exhibited in such tragic circumstances, the French intelligentsia’s rampant anti-American bias backfired for the first time ever, unleashing a yearlong public debate in France on the previously taboo notion of *antiaméricanisme*. Such was the paradoxical effect of 9/11 in France: it confirmed how deeply rooted anti-Americanism was and, almost simultaneously, paved the way for the first national discussion of the phenomenon. At long last, the French were looking at anti-Americanism without blinking; and what they saw involved France’s identity much more than America’s.



French anti-Americanism is a historical construct with deep roots in French culture. If you try to understand it by reading anything into its seasonal varieties, it is bound to slip through your fingers. Developed over and shaped by the long haul, it forces the investigator to plunge into the long haul. It did not start with the Vietnam War or with the cold war—or even in the 1930s, which was its peak. Nearly all the ingredients were there more than a century ago: its narrative structures had largely been formed, its argumentation polished up, and its rhetoric broken in as early as the 1890s. And even more sur-

prisingly, it was already consensual. In a time of strident divisions, it was (already) the most commonly shared idea in France. From then on, it was neither exclusively right wing nor left wing. It brought together spiritualists and secularists, nationalists and internationalists. Favored by the extremes, as might be expected of any “anti” stance, it also permeated the more moderate segments of the population.

Everyone knows how the Statue of Liberty was finished before its pedestal. The statue of the American Enemy raised by the French, however, is a work in progress: each successive generation tinkers at it, tightening its bolts. But its pedestal is well established. And its foundations—the Enlightenment’s strange hostility to the New World, which I will examine in the prologue—are over two hundred years old.

The present work stems from the firm belief that it is impossible to unravel the riddle of French anti-Americanism without taking a deep dive into the past. As we have noted and will see in detail, this strange cultural object is just not subject to circumstance. Passing trends have no important or lasting effect on it. Happenstance might have had a role in the early days of its development; we will see this in the case of the Civil War and the Spanish-American War of 1898. Quickly, though, the thick layering of discourses and representations amassed by French anti-Americanism allowed it to absorb exterior shocks without deviating from its flight path. France’s anti-American discourse is not solipsistic, but it is largely self-referential and autarchic—two characteristics inseparable from its Sartrean “bad faith.” How many incendiary rants and hyperbolic indictments of the United States are backed up and fueled by the reassuring and inadmissible thought that “nothing is really at stake here”? Clearly, that is just one more illusion or self-deception—and not the least dangerous, considering how, to give one example, such thinking helped hone France’s diplomatic, economic, and moral isolation in the 1930s; or, more recently, how otherwise perfectly legitimate political and diplomatic differences could easily evolve into an all-out confrontation, by triggering anti-Americanism again and again and setting off the infernal machine of a nearly Pavlovian hostility.

Where does all this come from? Semiotics generally has a hard time defining the exact critical moment when “it takes,” as Barthes put it; when a discourse takes on a certain *consistency*; when it can run on its own obtuseness. In France, anti-Americanism attracts a strong adherence by being a *narrative*, and this adherence need not necessarily be linked to any *felt* animosity—whence the honest protestation of those who, after spouting typical anti-American clichés, deny any ill-will toward the Americans. A discourse of this kind works through repetition. Its strength is in its stubbornness. Its

peaks can of course be charted (by opinion polls, for instance), but its most important element is elsewhere: in a long, drawn-out stratification of images, legends, jokes, anecdotes, beliefs, and affects. Shedding light on all of these elements takes more than just opinion polls (which, rather than plumbing the depths, offer a snapshot of a given moment): you have to root around, dig up old deposits, excavate the matter, clear out the veins, and follow the seams.

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"I'm not anti-American. I don't even know what the word means," declared Sartre in 1946.<sup>5</sup> His logic would have delighted Lewis Carroll—not to mention the Mad Hatter. The same logic still is running the show in current attempts to obstruct the concept of anti-Americanism. In fact, since Sartre's day, the hard line has only gotten harder. Anti-Americanism was an incomprehensible word for him—or comprehensible just long enough to absolve himself of it. *Antiaméricanisme* has been regularly described in France as "one word too many," whose use is "not innocent" and which needs to be eradicated, a machination contrived by "rabid 'philo-Americans,'"<sup>6</sup> a semantic plot concocted by the Yankee fifth column. As the French essayist Serge Halimi discovered and exposed in *Le Monde diplomatique* in May 2000, individuals with ulterior motives are hiding behind this empty word, and their mission is to "intimidate the last rebels against a social order whose laboratory is the United States." Anti-Americanism? Never heard of it. Except as a fabrication, pure and simple. Since Sartre's day, this denial has been the obligatory preamble to any use of anti-American rhetoric. Halimi's article is only a typical example of a widespread rhetorical device: everything in it works by mirror image, from the accusation of intimidation, introduced to justify censorship of the undesirable word, to the imputation that the opponent uses a "tightly screwed-together binary logic" (this masks the Manichean political views of the accusation itself). The semantic objection is there only to set the polemical machine in motion.

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Now for a more methodological objection. Even if we admit that anti-Americanism exists and that its manifestations can be pinpointed, does that give us the right to turn it into an analytical category? Given that "anti-Americanism" is part of the French "logosphere" and might even determine a certain number of attitudes and behaviors, does that mean we can raise it to the level of a concept? Doesn't that—wrongly—lend credence to the idea that America has an "essence" to which anti-Americans would thus be

opposed? We cannot address this objection without quickly examining the link it presupposes between "Americanism" and "anti-Americanism."

At the end of the nineteenth century, Americanism meant, in the United States, a set of values judged to be constituent parts of a national identity, as well as the attitude of those who adopted them and attempted to conform their personal identity to this national ideal. The expression, popularized by Theodore Roosevelt at the turn of the twentieth century, was inseparable from notions like being "100 percent American"—as opposed to "hyphenated American." Its intent is clear. Its content, however, is vague, as Marie-France Toinet notes, quoting Theodore Roosevelt: "Americanism signifies the virtues of courage, honor, justice, truth, sincerity, and strength—the virtues that made America."<sup>7</sup> Glorified and reinforced in the 1920s by a boom in prosperity, Americanism began to expand beyond the realm of innate virtues to encompass a certain number of traits characteristic of American "civilization," not of the American man: efficiency, productivity, access to material goods. Americanism's credo, though it kept its nationalist and even chauvinistic overtones, was thus coupled with another self-defining tautology: *the American way of life*, which was the material facet of the word "Americanism." The key element here is that, since it came out of the need to affirm an uneasy national cohesion through the emotional and intellectual adherence of each citizen to an "idea of America" as broad as it was vague, "Americanism" never attained the status of a political or ideological doctrine.

A narcissistic self-portrait and a slogan for internal use, "Americanism" would seem to be hard to export: yet America's power overflow pushed the term all the way across the ocean to Europe. The French discovered it in the full upswing of a new (polemic) interest in the United States in the late 1920s. But their attempts to give it ideological or political substance bumped up against resistant matter: "Americanism" means above all pride in being American; apart from that, it is a catch-all. So, logically enough, the French took the word over and gave it a meaning, most often negative, that reflected their own view of the United States. David Strauss, in his book on French anti-Americanism in the 1920s, rightly notes that in French, *américanisme* means "the cultural values and institutions which were *believed* by Frenchmen to be an integral part of American civilization."<sup>8</sup> Only Sartre, just after the war, would attempt to translate "Americanism" culturally: not by giving it a meaning it does not have, but by analyzing it as the psychological key to the way Americans are socialized.<sup>9</sup> But his was a very personal attempt, and it had no effect on the fate of a term decidedly destined for invective in France.<sup>10</sup> Régis Debray neatly summed up the semantic situation of the word in a book written in 1992. After giving a long catalog of its negative

connotations, Debray concludes: "Americanism seems to mean a blackened America, stripped of everything positive it has."<sup>11</sup> At the end of its ambiguous career, *américanisme* has wound up denoting nothing more than a repertoire of anti-American clichés about America.

Now we can come back and respond to the initial objection about essentializing America. The mistake there was imagining that anti-Americanism was derived from the notion of "Americanism." In fact, the false antonym has nothing to do with it, either historically or logically. As Sartre could have put it, in France, anti-Americanism's existence always preceded any essence of America.



One last scruple: our investigation covers two centuries. It might seem problematic, then, that the word *anti-Americanism* is so much more recent. Can we trace the genealogy of a nameless notion?

First we have to clear up the chronology. The word made a late entrance into the French dictionaries (1968 for the *Petit Robert*). But as we all know, dictionaries always lag behind usage. The first use of the term "anti-Americanism" catalogued by lexicographers dates back to 1948; by the early 1950s, it was a part of ordinary political language.<sup>12</sup> And it would not be going out on a limb to suggest that the term spread as a counterpoint to "anti-Sovietism." Its entry into the French lexicon seems to have been a direct consequence of the cold war.

As for the epistemological root of the question, we can look to one of the pioneers of semantics applied to cultural history, Reinhart Koselleck, for help with that one. Koselleck warns against falling prey to a "new nominalism," which would have us believe that the emergence of a notion or a category of thought is dependent on the creation of the term designating it. "It is not necessary for persistence and change in the meanings of words to correspond with persistence and change in the structures they specify," writes Koselleck; "words which persist are in themselves insufficient indicators of stable contents and, . . . vice versa, contents undergoing long-term change might be expressed in a number of very different ways."<sup>13</sup> The invitation is clear and the voice authoritative. It would be reductive to use lexicographical indications to limit the field of investigation on concepts or behaviors. There is indisputably in France, as of the late nineteenth century, an as-yet-unnamed anti-Americanism. (A name for it would probably have taken some form of "Yankism" or "Yankeeism" at the time.)<sup>14</sup> The lesson we can draw from dictionaries is elsewhere: they usefully remind us that "anti-Americanism" is the only noun in French with the prefix "anti-" based on the

name of a country. That this strange word finally emerged and became common coinage (and now seems to be impossible to get rid of) is in itself a sign of exceptional treatment, if not favoritism.



A genealogy of French anti-Americanism—what exactly does that mean? First, that anti-Americanism will be considered here as a long war of words (and images) that France has been waging against the United States, and whose argumentative logic it is our task to untangle. We will therefore keep to the *disagreeable* side of Franco-American relations, where the punches are thrown and the low blows dealt. We will hang out dirty laundry that has never seen the end of the wash. We'll also follow the anti-American discourse into its weakest patches, where it runs in little rivulets, far from the torrential roar of invective. That is, we will track it back to the place where it *flows from the source*.

I open Claudel's *Journal* and find the following passage, written in 1933 in Washington, D.C.: "Al[exander] Hamilton in *The Federalist* notes that in his day they already attributed a degenerative influence to the American climate. 'In this country, even the dogs no longer bark.'" And Claudel adds, in parentheses: "Moreover, it is perfectly true."<sup>15</sup> Except that it is perfectly false. First of all, American dogs do bark. Second, Hamilton does not "note"; he decries as absurd the degenerative hypothesis: "Men admired as profound philosophers have, in direct terms, attributed to [Europe's] inhabitants a physical superiority and have gravely asserted that all animals, and with them the human species, degenerate in America—that even dogs cease to bark after having breathed awhile in our atmosphere." It is not Hamilton speaking against the dogs, but a Dutch-born naturalist writing in French, Cornelius De Pauw, whom he footnotes.<sup>16</sup> From the Enlightenment naturalist to the French poet-ambassador, despite a century and a half of proof to the contrary, as well as Hamilton's own words, the chain has held, shackling America to the legend of the mute dog. For more recent examples, we only need to open a newspaper or turn on the radio on any given day. This one was heard on a French public radio station in 2000. The day I finished this book, I found myself listening to a Toulouse bistro owner. He was strongly criticizing a new law reducing to nearly Scandinavian levels the authorized blood-alcohol content for anyone behind the wheel. Though he conceded that drinking too much *pastis* could be bad for you, the *cafetier* insisted on the well-known fact that Coca-Cola, a so-called soft drink, was in reality much harder on your stomach and more detrimental for your health than alcoholic beverages: "Try leaving a twenty-centime coin in a glass of Coke. . ." The legend of the

dissolving coin is less antique than the tale of the mute dog; it only dates back to the Coke war of 1949—still, more than half a century. (It will probably take as long for the anecdote to switch over to the euro.) The bistro owner and the ambassador, each in his own way, *forge the chain* I call anti-Americanism. Whether they personally are anti-American or not is unimportant.

Anti-Americanism is not “felt,” as I said before. For that reason and a few others (starting with the semantic nature of its appearance in particular historical contexts), it cannot simply be included among the “French passions” analyzed by the British historian Theodore Zeldin. It is worth stressing, apropos of passions, that French anti-Americanism, although deeply rooted, is in no way a gut reaction: there is nothing personal, so to speak, in French America-bashing; offensive anti-American clichés are usually proffered as so many innocently obvious statements and with no (personal) offense meant to any American in particular. Many Americans have had the same experience of dining with French people who, completely oblivious to their American guest, kept trashing the United States and, when reminded of the guest’s nationality, hastened to add with perfect sincerity: “Oh! We didn’t mean you.”

However, despite its linguistic nature, anti-Americanism is not a myth, in Barthes’s sense of the word, because it is not a “second language” in which the connotative meaning is insidiously “naturalized.” Anti-Americanism lacks this structural sneakiness.

Is it an ideology? The sheer number of existing definitions for the word “ideology” makes that a tricky question to answer. One of the most comprehensive definitions describes ideology as “a polemical discursive formation by which a passion attempts to attain a certain value through the exercise of power in a given society.”<sup>17</sup> The first part of this definition fits anti-Americanism perfectly, but not the second: the link between anti-Americanism and the politics of power seems more complex than that, given that on the one hand anti-Americanism is often coupled with the most mutually ideologically hostile political discourses and, on the other, that it is often used outside of any political agenda or objective we can pinpoint.

So, what is it?

We will just say: *anti-Americanism is a discourse*. After all, a discourse—as its etymology indicates (*dis-correre*) and as the use of the word up to the Renaissance attests—is a way of “running here and there.” Anti-Americanism is an unbridled discourse, not only because it is rife with irrationality and bubbling with humors, but also because it takes an essayistic form, rather than that of a dissertation or a demonstration. (It does not follow “orders” either; there is no anti-American conspiracy.) Its logic is one of

accumulation, accretion—“I’ll take that one” or “give me a little more of that”—in short, it is a mad dash that deliberately ignores the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction. (Anti-Americanism has never been ashamed to utter two mutually exclusive grievances at the same time.) But even with all its leaps and bounds, it is never “gratuitous,” and still less absurd. Only the complexity of its crisscrossing strategies gives it the false appearance of a bunch of individual whims. The whims are there, make no doubt about it; they flesh out the words and bulk up the sentences. But the anti-American discourse grounds them.

The word “discourse” brings Foucault’s name into the picture. This would be the early or the late Foucault, as opposed to the 1970s Foucault, who spoke of discourse as emanating from certain practices, or as a way of relaying domination. The anti-American discourse is *en situation*, but it remains autonomous and “acritic”—as Barthes said of discourses with no link to power. This does not, however, mean it is placeless or detached: the intelligentsia massively produces it; it is their emanation.

Which also indicates all that this book is not.

Though the United States is omnipresent here, this is not a book about the United States. Or a polemic history of Franco-American relations seen through mud-colored glasses. Or an ethnological exploration of the intercultural misunderstandings “of daily life.”<sup>18</sup> It is not (only) a thematic catalogue of the anti-American motifs circulating in contemporary France, either. Or a list of the “crossed images” the two countries send back and forth to each other and which would need to be inventoried to give a “balanced” assessment. French anti-Americanism has mostly been approached up to now as one of the aspects of an ambivalent, ambiguous, contradictory relationship—a flip side of the coin that is nonetheless recognized as the much more visible side. Our approach will be fundamentally different. Far from purporting to attain an impossible exhaustiveness or an illusory weighing of the “pros” and “cons,” we will look at anti-Americanism as a historical stratification that it is possible and even *preferable* to isolate in order to analyze it. In the following pages, positive representations of America, those (brief) moments of shared euphoria between the French and the Americans, will only come into the picture insofar as they elucidate a given inflection or strain of the anti-American discourse. Many kinder, gentler readers of America will thus be relegated to the sidelines of our investigation or treated obliquely (for the distortions they were subject to, or for the anti-American counterattacks they provoked). Their discreet presence indicates a fundamental choice of approach, not a sneaky attempt to muffle the voice of French Americanophiles.



The following chapters aim to be the genealogy of this anti-Americanism understood as a “discourse”—a genealogy in which history and semiology will have to silence their vain quarrels: history by accepting that a false “narrative” can be a true fact;<sup>19</sup> semiology by taking on the impurity Barthes incited it to accept in *Lesson*—in finally becoming “a work that collects language’s impurities, linguistics’ refuse, the message’s immediate corruption: nothing less than desires, fears, scowls, intimidations.”<sup>20</sup>

After over twenty months of French-American diplomatic tensions and inflammatory mutual accusations, a last caveat may be in order: this book owes nothing to a crisis it deliberately leaves out, but can perhaps shed light on—from the past.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, I was in New York City working on one of the last chapters of this book when I saw the first of the hijacked planes fly vertically over my building on Third Street. Less than a minute later, it crashed into the north tower of the World Trade Center. That the chapter I was writing was “Metropolis, Cosmopolis,” which deals with French hatred of the American city, struck me afterward as a tragic irony.

A witness to the catastrophe and a longtime resident of New York (where I had spent seven years of my life), I had a hard time relating to the very “distant” French perception of the event, when I got home a month later, and I was especially struck by the general eagerness to *relativiser* what seemed to me anything but relative and to see as unreal (“It was like a movie . . .”) what had been a shocking reality.

My memory of that morning is not so much visual as auditory: the unbelievable sound that, twice, as each tower crumbled, rose up from the city—a kind of gigantic bellow, the cry simultaneously leaping from 500,000 mouths (or a million, or more), a roar rising from the streets, squares, balconies, and roofs, the antique, formidable *planctus* of an entire city engulfed in horror. The images repeated ad nauseam of the towers falling can lose all meaning—if they ever had one. This inconceivable cry, so different from the din of the stadium or the clamor of a riot, will always—for me—cover over the clatter of “intelligent” commentaries.

French anti-Americanism has of course no direct connection with the aggression committed that day. But in all fairness, those who have been urging the Americans, since 9/11, to “get the message,” “learn from the lesson,” and, finally, take responsibility for the wound inflicted upon them would be better off doing their own homework and asking themselves to what extent systematic anti-Americanism, French and otherwise, has had a hand in the global process of demonization that facilitates slippage from a war of words to a war of the worlds.

## Prologue



### The Enlightenment versus America

French anti-Americanism not only has a history, but also a pre-history—one that has been overlooked, forgotten, and buried under the successive layers of a collective depiction. This prehistory occurred in the second half of the eighteenth century. It preceded the United States’ emergence as an independent nation and represents the first layer of a long drawn-out sedimentation. The whole continent was vilified on strange charges imputed by the Europeans—what Antonello Gerbi once dubbed “the dispute of the New World”<sup>1</sup>—but it was the newborn United States that would inherit the dispute, and Jefferson himself who would take up the gauntlet.

The “dispute” started around 1750 and went full swing in the 1770s and 1780s. It was then that it evolved into a Franco-American debate. Frenchmen and Americans had been allies on the battlefields of the American Revolution, but now they were locking scholarly horns over humidity levels in Virginia, the nitrate levels in Pennsylvania’s soil, the wheat yield, and colonists’ birthrate. The dispute was really more of a trial, scientifically

brought against the New World by the scholars and philosophers of the Old World. The stakes were anything but low. On the agenda were such weighty matters as deciding whether the land could keep its promises or if Nature had “gotten an entire hemisphere wrong”;<sup>2</sup> revising the overly naive or respectful images that had been proliferating at the hands of America’s apologists, especially over the course of the previous half century; and offering proof that this was in fact a disappointing continent. All in all, it was a crusade against the budding imposture of America worship—part scientific debate, part image war. Scholars, philosophers, and “men of letters” were all strikingly persistent and unexpectedly vehement in pursuing their new objective. And so our prologue could also be called the “age of disconcerting denigration.”

The first surprise is the origin of these debates. Unexpectedly, or, in any event, contrary to the eighteenth-century stereotype linking the New World with new ideas, anti-Americanism was born and prospered in philosophical circles. Not only was it contemporary with the Enlightenment at its brightest, it was forged and disseminated by men who were unquestionably associated with the program and progress of the “philosophical spirit.” Emanating from a Parisian epicenter, the dispute quickly spread throughout Europe and reached the United States at the end of the century. Its initiators were not marginal figures, social isolates, or temperamental misanthropes harboring some specific grudge against America. They were men such as Buffon, Voltaire, and Raynal. Others who are now less illustrious but were not without a certain reputation in their day, such as Cornelius De Pauw, followed suit. Together, they sought to alert blinkered or hoodwinked Europeans to the New World’s flaws. “If it was philosophy’s efforts that led to America’s discovery,”<sup>3</sup> as Voltaire wrote in his *Essai sur les mœurs* two and a half centuries after Columbus, it was once more through philosophy’s efforts that America would be rediscovered or, better put, revisited—somewhere between disappointment and repulsion.

A second characteristic: the anti-Americanism of the time presented itself as resolutely scientific and, more specifically, “naturalist.” Only later, in a second logical and chronological stage, would it take a political and moralistic turn. It was not until 1780 that the American controversy’s center of gravity shifted into the realm of political philosophy—though that did not temper earlier naturalist accusations. Quite the contrary: naturalist accusations would be revived in reaction to American pamphleteers bent on doing their own justice to the “French calumnies.” The Americans—with Jefferson first in line—were as anxious to prove that their country was of a naturally sound constitution as they were to defend its political institutions.

Right up through its later politicized permutations, anti-Americanism sought validation in the natural sciences: from geology to zoology, from botany to anthropology. Buffon was an instrumental figure, both initiating the trend and lending it his authority. All of America’s later detractors would write from the standpoint of a “natural history from which we can only ever distance ourselves with great reluctance,” as Cornelius De Pauw wrote.<sup>4</sup> Buffon’s system provided the ammunition as well as the base camp, and in a pinch, even supplied the trenches. “When attacking a book written about a science,” De Pauw continued, “arguments drawn from this science, and not another, must be used.”<sup>5</sup> With this solid scientific footing, De Pauw, like Buffon, firmly confronted America’s defenders. The natural sciences were “modern,” taking a logical rather than descriptive tack, or, as with Buffon, using description itself as a means of demonstration. The naturalists, none of whom ever crossed the Atlantic, did not feel the need to describe America’s environment in detail in order to dismiss it as a whole. Zoology and botany were used not to establish a colorful inventory of “indigenous productions,” but rather to sum up the natural characteristics of America itself. The most striking of these—the most astonishing to us now—was the “smallness” of America’s productions. As though in reaction to the many dazzling features found in earlier accounts of the New World, America’s natural elements were reduced to a short list of qualities: cold (even in the tropics, it was said, the earth was cold just a few inches below the surface), wet, salty. Likewise, an astonishing jumble of new and unusual fauna was reduced to a few numbers. Weight? Height? Distinguishing features? The New World’s animals were there, first and foremost, to be *measured* by the philosophers. Weighed and judged, they were used as evidence of a meager land.

Third characteristic: the scientific critique of the new continent’s shortcomings was made at the expense of any diversity in the images presented. The dispute attacked the New World as a whole, which in and of itself was a novelty. Until then, descriptions of America, from the first discovery narratives to more recent accounts by missionaries such as Lafitau and Charlevoix, had juxtaposed distinctly different portraits. From the kingdom of the Incas to the nomadic lands of the north, America was an immense patchwork of climates, physical types, and customs. The “West Indies” were rife with violent contrasts and hard to generalize about. To observers—even those who believed the natives all had the same origins—the inhabitants seemed as diverse as their different ways of life. Endlessly strange places, scattered populations, myriad customs: such was the European vision of post-Columbian America. A considerable change was thus instigated by imposing taxonomies

that, though they did not entirely refrain from evoking picturesque particularities—we will come back to the most detrimental of these—stressed the continent's homogeneous nature. A unified picture of America emerged, both continental (from Patagonia to Labrador) and insular (the Antilles and the Caribbean being the most salient examples). Though it had once been a place riddled with mysteries and rife with contrasts, the New World became, for the uses of the attack waged against it, a continuum where likeness won out over contrast, uniformity over difference. The “English colonies”—the future United States—had trouble struggling their way out of this massive composite. Around 1750 they were still completely swallowed up in it. Durand Echeverria notes that of the two hundred authors cited as authorities on America in the *Encyclopédie*, only eight spoke of the English colonies “specifically.”<sup>6</sup>

The fourth and final characteristic: for the men of the Enlightenment, anti-Americanism was also anticolonialism. Depreciating the country and denigrating its inhabitants were ways of saving those they could by disparaging colonization. “We should leave the savages to vegetate in peace,” De Pauw pleaded, “and pity them if their misfortunes surpass our own, and if we cannot contribute to their happiness, we should not increase their misery.”<sup>7</sup> America, disdained by Mother Nature, had been devastated by the conquest. It was a vast graveyard of men, languages, and customs, the wreckage of a successful extermination. Its detractors were not at all unaware of the tragic dimensions of America's fate; on the contrary, De Pauw and Raynal (or Diderot writing under Raynal's name) can be counted among those who most stridently denounced Europe's crimes. But their hatred for the wrongdoers did not lead them to idealize the victims. The New World's destroyed civilizations filled them with a regret that lacked empathy. For Cornelius De Pauw—as for his sovereign, Frederick II, who was hostile to any demographic outpouring to America's advantage—and for the authors of the *Histoire des deux Indes* recopying Montesquieu, the most important thing was to pull European compatriots back from the shores and discourage “crossings.” It was a twofold philosophical crusade; the aim was both to spare the natives and, at the same time, prevent Europe from being drained. But the argument was dressed up to look like a law of nature: “the law of climates is such that each living and vegetable species grows and dies in its native land.”<sup>8</sup>

It was a watershed moment, then. The magical kaleidoscope bequeathed by the first explorers, the mobile vignettes painted by subsequent travelers, and the ethnological tables minutely compiled by missionaries gave way to a massive tableau of the continent as a whole. Globes were still white with unknown lands, yet a compact image of America was already being imposed.

These *terrae incognitae*, once populated by singular creatures sprung from cartographers' flights of fancy—as though while awaiting discovery they needed to be filled with the stuff of dreams—were now nothing but “unexplored” lands, suspended spaces: temporary gaps in a world where all the pieces fit together under the naturalist's and philosopher's gaze.

Early anti-Americanism repainted the New World as a single world. But not only was this new coat of paint uniform, its palette was gloomy. Instead of the colorful tiles of a mosaic, a drab fresco appeared: America in shades of gray.

### Diluvian America

America's new detractors rose up to express their disappointment, proclaim their disgust, or cast anathema against an entire continent—its fauna, its flora, and its natives and colonists willy-nilly. But what exactly did they have to reproach the New World with? What bee had gotten into these Enlightenment men's bonnets? Or rather, what terrible tarantula, like the ones they so generously sprinkled throughout the continent in their zoological accounts? Their first complaint against the “New” World was precisely that—it was far too new. The stereotype of America's youthfulness began here, with the naturalists. And for them it was not a compliment.

Here, we have to go back to the flood. The age of the world was one of the great debates of the eighteenth century, and had heavy religious and philosophical implications. The concept of the flood, criticized by freethinkers, had been rehabilitated; the tale of Noah was once more afloat, so to speak, and was espoused by the most unexpected allies: geologists and the first “religious historians.” Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger was both of these. As a civil engineer, he mapped the roads in Touraine and, using Réaumur's techniques, notoriously discovered seashells—later called fossils—in the marl beds, proving that the region known as the “Garden of France” had once been a sunken garden. A chemist and comparative mythologist, Boulanger was one of those atheists who said no to the Bible and yes to the flood. No to the Bible's chronology and the Ark's providential journey, yes to the material reality of a universal flood, whose physical traces (seashells) were corroborated by cultural and religious traces. If every single religion included accounts of the earth's inundation, it was, in Boulanger's estimation, because of a real superstitious dread lingering in all men. Rehabilitating the flood narrative reoriented inquiries as to the age of humanity. Now the question was whether humanity predated the flood and had survived it, albeit considerably diminished—which was Boulanger's theory—or, on the contrary,

humanity had begun some time after the flood and come into being with the progressive ebb of the universal immersion, as Benoît de Maillet argued in his *Telliamed* (1748). In the latter system, the ages of different populations corresponded to the lands they inhabited: in lands that had emerged from the waters long ago, there were old civilizations; in more recently dried-off lands, there were new populations, still wet behind the ears. America would become an object of scrutiny in light of these different hypotheses.

The reigning consensus was indeed that of the youthfulness of the American peoples. Naturalists and philosophers agreed: these populations displayed physiological and intellectual immaturity, and their institutions were embryonic or inexistent. Such was the anthropological "evidence" that geology was called on to explain. It did so willingly and in many different ways.

First possibility: the American continent had been formed more recently than the Old World.<sup>9</sup> Its population, believed to be indigenous, was therefore more recent as well. Second possibility: the earth was the same age everywhere, but America had been "overtaken" at a later point in time than the other continents; it thus presented a relative youth in relation to the other continents, as calculated according to a series of "floods" staggered over several eras—with the same results for its population's immaturity. Third possibility (adopted by De Pauw): floods occurred simultaneously on the different continents, but the chances of survival were uneven. The American populations were unable to find subsistence on the "summits of their mountains, which are all the more sterile, all the more arid, because they are so high," and which "could not produce enough nourishing plants to sustain the refugee families with their flocks." In this last scenario, the Americans *had been* as old as the rest of humanity, but they did not survive a catastrophe the Tartars (for instance) had been better able to weather because their mountains were "convexities."<sup>10</sup> Since the antediluvian Americans were not lucky enough to have flat mountains, America's current inhabitants were new, postdiluvian peoples. The three scenarios were based on incompatible systems, but what is important is that they reached the same conclusion: rationalizing the juvenile developmental stage of America's human population.

But there was more. The American flood, either because it had been a recent event or for some other reason yet to be elucidated, had not entirely gone away. This gave the continent its most overarching and disastrous quality: it was *wet*. A new America emerged, an America that had almost been forgotten since the days of the first explorers' accounts.<sup>11</sup> It was a gloomy vastness, less hostile than repulsive, less frightening than simply disheartening. This was an America where colors were washed out and contours blurred. Sharp lines melted into hazy horizons. Oceans, land, and lagoons

merged and were muddled. Tangled vegetation crept and twisted into inextricable clumps. Even the animals seemed shifty, with their ambiguous physiognomies. Dogs no longer barked; tigers were cowardly. Men were deficient. Buffon described vast solitudes, wandered over rather than peopled by "so-called nations,"<sup>12</sup> silhouettes roving in the darkness of the forests. Water, mist, fog, and wind held empire in the naturalists' America. Especially water, which encircled the coasts and colonized the land. Just past the coastline, America stretched out in a giant marsh. A boundless swamp of a continent, a "fetid and boggy terrain,"<sup>13</sup> an unending backwater over which towered, far in the distance to the west, pitiless peaks—rock barriers as hostile to life as the briny element in which their colossal base was sunk. Echoing Buffon, De Pauw wrote: "The land, either bristling with mountainous peaks or covered with forests and swamps, looked much like a vast and sterile desert."<sup>14</sup>

The wary Europeans who rediscovered America from their studies in Paris or Berlin believed that the continent was saddled with an immense geological and geographical flaw, and only its discoverers' folly or treachery could ever have made them portray it as rich in marvels. A new New World flowed from their pens and took shape. But the shape they gave it was formless, and the world itself, hardly viable. America's "manifest destiny" for Buffon, Raynal, or De Pauw was stagnation. It is hard to imagine more intensely contrasting depictions than the ones coming from either side of the Atlantic: just as the New England colonies were solidifying their aspirations for a *vita nuova*, the most listened-to voices in Europe were consigning America to sterility and death.

Things could have stopped there, with the diluvian conclusion that America was eternally scarred by its abysmal start. But naturalists and philosophers did not see it that way. In any case, it would be a shame to interrupt them—they're just getting started.

### Buffon Shrinks America

So, America was a rudimentary continent that had just barely emerged from the flood. Neither its crumbling peaks nor its stagnant plains did mankind any favors. Even now—circa 1770—it was sparsely inhabited, if at all, and by youngsters still wet behind the ears, who had most likely come from far off—maybe even Asia? Or were they the result of some local, spontaneous generation? An unanswerable and therefore superfluous quandary. What's the use, Voltaire inquired mockingly, of asking "every day how it came about that men could be found on that continent and who led them there," if "one does not marvel that there are flies in America"?<sup>15</sup> In either case, they had *not*

mon image of America is one of sheer size and even disproportionate measure: on the new continent, everything was small, much smaller than in the Old World. The species were slighter. The animals, timid. Even human beings were more modest in size—except for the famous Patagonian giants, whose existence was moreover rather doubtful. Over the course of several successive studies—*Variétés dans l'espèce humaine* (Varieties in the Human Species, 1749), *Animaux de l'ancien continent*, *Animaux du nouveau monde*, *Animaux communs aux deux continents* (Animals of the Old Continent, Animals of the New World, Animals Common to Both Continents, 1761), *De la dégénération des animaux* (On the Degeneration of Animals, 1766)—Buffon hammered in the same fact: on this huge new continent, living things were atrophied. The fundamental lesson he repeated from chapter to chapter and from treatise to treatise was simple: “we have said that in general all the animals in the New World were much smaller than those of the ancient continent.”<sup>19</sup> But what exactly does that mean?

It means that, for example, the tapir was markedly less impressive than the elephant, rhinoceros, or hippopotamus. That llamas were smaller than camels. That vicuñas were like miniature sheep. And to the impartial observer, the peccary seemed to be a shrunken pig. Not that Buffon confirmed the same hereditary relationship in each case. The peccary unquestionably belonged to the same “family” as its counterpart, the pig. The tapir, on the other hand, was not part of the hippopotamus family, the rhinoceros family, or the elephant family. And in a third possible case, the llama and the vicuña both had ambiguous ties to their Old World counterparts. Buffon informed his readers that they “appear to have more distinctive signs” than the tapir “of their former kinship” with their Old World siblings, the camel and the sheep, respectively. But the relationship immediately broke down and became a simple proximity—a proximity whose exact nature was as ambiguous as the word Buffon used to describe it: *voisinage* (being neighbors). “They are neighbors and are not relatives,”<sup>20</sup> he wrote. So the vicuña could be the sheep’s neighbor but not its (American) cousin? The idea is not strikingly clear. Buffon replaced a proposed, then immediately refuted, relationship with a notion as hazy as it was paradoxical, considering that these were animals whose habitats lay thousands of miles apart.

His system warrants closer examination, especially given the considerable influence it had on representations of America up to the end of the eighteenth century. His reasoning is clearest in the extreme example of the tapir. The tapir, far from being related to the rhinoceros, hippopotamus, or elephant, was not even their “neighbor.” It did not share important features with them. It only resembled them in a few secondary morphological or environmental

there hopelessly late. And their tardiness would be their undoing; their sketchy history would be overrun by Others—sprung from the waves wearing boots and helmets and riding on strange sheep.

But the worst was yet to come. Under natural historians’ scrutiny, the New World not only seemed disenchanting; it was a lesser world, atrophied and shrunken, a world where living things vegetated, men withered away, and species got smaller. That was natural history’s astounding revelation. That was the strange vision, or bizarre conviction, that took hold of the best minds of the second half of the eighteenth century.

One man played a major role here: Buffon. He was the one who proclaimed that America and its productions were physically inferior. He had a scholar’s authority and a genius’s prestige. He was given a respect bordering on veneration. Painters depicted him in a one-on-one discussion with Mother Nature anxiously revealing all her secrets to him. A cult sprang up around him, no less fervent than the ones devoted to Voltaire or Rousseau. Travelers set out for Montbard just to catch a glimpse of the great man. It was not easy to contradict someone with a reputation like his. Jefferson, when he refuted Buffon in 1784, took pains (in the English version as well as the French one) to pepper his text with flattering remarks and praise for the “celebrated Zoologist.” “It is one of those cases,” Jefferson explained, “where the [public’s] judgment has been seduced by a glowing pen.” He himself was unfortunately obliged to contradict Buffon, but not without “every tribute of honor and esteem.”<sup>15</sup> The Virginian tendered a velvet hand; he knew he would not ingratiate himself to the French by scratching “Nature’s confidant.” Well aware of the danger in being iconoclastic, he instead chose to soften the sharp angles of his attack and take a few exegetical liberties, writing to the Marquis de Chastellux that “as to the degeneracy of the man of Europe transplanted to America, it is no part of Monsieur de Buffon’s system.”<sup>17</sup> It was clearly a better idea to have Buffon on your side than against you! Jefferson played the part of the good apostle; but in private, when he jotted down commentaries in the margins of his own copy of Buffon’s works, he was less flattering to the “celebrated zoologist”: “No writer, equally with M. de Buffon, proves the power of eloquence, and uncertainty of theories.”<sup>18</sup> But the fact that Buffon’s part in constructing a naturalist base for anti-Americanism had been decisive was not lost on Jefferson, who spent a long chapter of his *Notes on the State of Virginia* refuting him.

#### America’s Sickly Animals

What earth-shattering information about the American continent did Buffon reveal? Something that sounds strange to us now, given that the most com-

ways—one of which was the moderately distinctive trait that “like the hippopotamus, it often stands in the water.” The three animals to which the tapir was likened only had “slight relations” with it, as Buffon wrote. So slight that we might ask why they were being correlated in the first place.

What justified these comparisons, in Buffon’s opinion, was the relative situation occupied by the animals observed in the broader context of their hemisphere’s fauna. It was because the tapir was “on its continent the first in size” that it was equated with the rhinoceros, hippopotamus, or elephant, though it was barely. Buffon admitted, “the size of a donkey.” Buffon’s method is disconcerting: rather than relying on an observation of common features, which could have been shown to be numerous enough to justify comparing the two continents, it seems to give morphological appraisal short shrift. However, it is not as impressionistic as any given portrait, such as the llama’s, might lead us to believe (“The llama has, like the camel, high legs, a very long neck, a light head, a cleft upper lip; it also resembles it in its gentle nature, etc.”). The method was founded on the explicitly acknowledged use of analogy.

Analogy has a bad reputation, scientifically speaking. Buffon, however, took the risky step of rehabilitating it, both as an accurate, coherent view of living things and as a more refined investigative tool that could be used to complement or rectify simple observation. On a theoretical level, the idea of using analogy did seem to him to go hand in hand with the notion of human and animal species’ fundamental unity—even in the apparently separate place known as the New World. The unity hypothesis was essential to Buffon’s way of thinking. It was part of his naturalist’s and philosopher’s credo. He extended it without hesitation to the Americans: “As for their first origins, I do not doubt—even independent of theological reasons—that it is the same as our own.”<sup>21</sup> Natural history was thus confronted with the task of identification, or, rather, recognition. The lineage from the Old World to the New had to be reestablished, whenever possible; or, failing that, relationships hidden beneath apparent differences uncovered. The unity of the planet’s living things implied a universal correspondence from one world to the other. The American fauna and that of the old continent, if put side by side, could and should divulge their points of correspondence.

The method was simple. The first thing to do was draw up tables of all the animals on each continent. Juxtaposing the two tables would then help pinpoint parents, cousins, or “neighbors.” Since naturalists, like nature, abhor a vacuum, the animals in the New World were kindly asked to fill all the slots at their disposition, with analogous respect to their already indexed siblings. This led Buffon to write—still comparing the tapir to the hip-

popotamus, rhinoceros, and elephant—that the tapir “alone represents all three in these small ways,” which included, for instance, their “muscular and protruding upper lip” or their tendency to wallow in the mud. “Represent” is the key word here. On the one hand, it reminds us how important representing animals was to the naturalist: rhetorical and physical description was the backbone of natural history. But in a passage like the one just quoted, “represent” is used in another sense: it refers to the correspondences between the two continents and discreetly legitimates the analogical method. The hippopotamus’s representation by the tapir, in this second sense, was inextricably linked to the system’s own preconception: that the New World animal, however dissimilar it might be in appearance and even in reality, took the place of one or several animals from the Old World. It was their transatlantic representative. This was comparative natural history on a macrocosmic scale; it did not compare specific animals so much as it superposed two organized wholes in which all the animals of each continent were indexed. Buffon was proposing not portrait galleries, but conversion charts.

### Transplantation and Degeneration

All the protagonists in the American dispute would draw on another text by Buffon, *Dégénération des animaux*, published in 1766, which attempted to theoretically justify the combined use of “analogy” and “experiments.” There were cases, Buffon more or less argued, where observation alone was insufficient. In those, one had to “resort to the most attentive inspection, and even to experiments and analogy.”<sup>22</sup> What cases was he talking about? Ones in which animals had been transplanted or forced into exile, “constrained to abandon their native land” by “revolutions of the globe or man’s force.” A displaced animal was a deformed animal.

Buffon’s tactic shows through the page here and confirms the strong link between the analogical method and the American problem in his work. The analogical method, a kind of fine tuning applied to morphology, was the naturalist’s secret weapon for revealing the true “nature” of transplanted and thus “degenerated” animals. The New World’s ambiguous beasts forced the naturalist to redouble his efforts: the geometrical precision of his universal tables would go unheeded without the persuasive force of his analogical flair. *We have to pay attention*, Buffon was saying, *close attention! if we do not look very closely, if we do not go beyond appearances, if we just toss a heedless glance, we will not see anything, we will not recognize them, because their tribulations under horrendous climates have made these animals unrecognizable.* Whence his use of the twenty-question method. Is it like a sheep? Then it must be a

vicuña. . . Confronted with America, Buffonian zoology turned into a series of morphological riddles, or a game of hidden pictures, where only the vigilant observer would find the missing clues.

Buffon's animals were malleable, unstable, shaped by their climate and diet, of course, but also by all the vicissitudes of their habitat, which had marked them with its "stigmata." The same was true for humans. Buffon, as we know, believed that black people's skin color was a function of the climate they lived in, and he imagined in vivo experiments to determine "how much time would be needed" for blacks "transported" to Denmark "to re-establish man's nature"—that is, for their skin to get back its original whiteness. . . Humans, animals, and plants all lived under the law of "alteration," the key word in Buffonian interpretation. We find it in the very first sentence of *Dégénération des animaux*: "Once man began to change skies, when he spread out from climate to climate, his nature underwent alterations." The change in humans' skin color was an alteration; the change in size and shape of America's animals was an alteration. Alteration and degeneration, not change or mutation: the Old World was still the reference point and, at least implicitly, the source.

But what stayed with Buffon's readers, and would particularly appeal to America's detractors, was less the method than the "results." Buffon's works offered illustrations—better yet, *measurements*—of the disparity between the species, and always to the new continent's detriment. They offered a demonstration, bestiary included, of Nature's widespread "degeneration" in America. There were of course a few methodological snags in Buffon's tables: a hint of circularity,<sup>23</sup> a dollop of prejudice. No matter; the eloquent Buffon, as Jefferson would say, won people over, and America came out lastingly diminished, with its long procession of stunted animals. His affirmation of a "degeneration of animals in America" gave the concept of America's inferiority scientific credentials. It was a valuable endorsement, and one that provided anti-Americanism with an unhoped-for legitimacy. The idea that living things atrophied on the American continent needed this kind of clout in order to counteract two and a half centuries of favorable, enthusiastic, or simply credulous accounts.

#### American Degeneration

Buffon's analysis was pivotal: all naturalist anti-Americanism can be traced back to it. It not only gave an account of America's general deficiency—exploited with fiendish panache by De Pauw in the first pages of his *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*—it also framed America's future,

using the rhetorical model of decline. Right from the start, the comparative gaze was slanted. Its mission was to uncover and record indications of the American world's "alteration." Not only was the pitiful "smallness" of American species brought to light; the whole process of their degeneration was, as well: their "sizable diminishment in size," as Buffon put it in a strange and revealing expression that betrays the preconceptions of the comparative gaze. From now on, it was one or the other: either the animals in the New World were decidedly too estranged (neither neighbors nor "allies") from those of the Old World, in which case their indigenous nature would be recognized and their smallness in comparison to their distant "correspondents" played up; or else an animal (such as the peccary) could be linked to a "source" present on the old continent (the pig "type"), and so "it has degenerated to the point of forming a distinct and different species from the one it originally belonged to."<sup>24</sup> The analysis, in both cases, shamed America, which had either given birth to mediocre species or had atrophied species that had thrived elsewhere.

What America's detractors found in Buffon's writings was thus the conjunction of a "climate" theory reformulated as strident physiological determinism, coupled with a set of "observations" that led to the conclusion of a lesser development or degeneration of all living things in America. According to Montesquieu, climate influenced all bodies and fashioned behaviors, which in turn created dispositions toward certain mores and favored different political institutions. For Buffon, climate was a more direct and absolute dictator. It brutalized humans and animals right into their morphology. It brought on transformations even in the distinguishing features of different races. It was what had "varnished [man] in black . . . under torrid zones" and "weathered and shrunk [him] by the glacial cold" near the pole.<sup>25</sup> It was what would restore the Negro's or Lapp's "original traits, . . . primitive size, and . . . natural color"<sup>26</sup> once they returned to more clement climes. And once again, it was what created even more "prompt and sizable" changes in animals, "because they cleave[d] to the earth much more closely than man"<sup>27</sup> and suffered its caprices without any of the protective measures human culture had invented. If a climate's effects had been able to "shrink" human beings, they could clearly shrivel the peccary a little. . .

The concept of *alteration* was useful in rounding out Buffon's explanatory system. Alteration affected all life forms, and, since Buffon linked it to the climate and nourishing earth, it was considered an unavoidable consequence of species' (including humans') spatial relocation from one climate to another, from one land to another. *De la dégeneration des animaux* begins not with the animal kingdom, but with man and his malleability. "Once man

began to change skies, when he spread out from climate to climate, his nature underwent alterations: these were slight, in the temperate zones, which we suppose neighbored on his place of origin; but they increased as he moved farther away from it."<sup>28</sup> Then it was not only animals that "degenerated." Human nature was "altered," too, even if man's resources (habitation, clothing, etc.) made the alteration slower and less mechanical. It was not a negligible advantage for Buffon's anti-American descendants that "alteration" was an extremely ill-defined concept. Cornelius De Pauw got it right away. If by chance a peccary was more corpulent than expected, it was because "alteration" had taken a different path, changing the animal's shape, for example: "the pigs that atrophy in Pensilvania [*sic*] change shape in other places without losing any of their size."<sup>29</sup> A peccary that had not grown smaller was considered an exception that proved the rule, and its "degeneration" could be found in some haphazard change other than a "diminishment of its largeness."

Blaming migration as a cause of alteration and degeneration was a way of radicalizing—and popularizing—the political, naturalist theory of transplanted Europeans' physiological and intellectual collapse. Buffon was thus the source of a surge of scientific denigration of America that for the next twenty years would continue using natural history to justify itself. However much Cornelius De Pauw might scoff at the old master—"such an ingenious naturalist—sometimes more ingenious than nature itself"<sup>30</sup>—however much he might niggle about the age of humanity in America or some other hypothesis he judged too tenuous, his *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains* owed its force to Buffon's breakthrough.

#### Poisonous America

The New World was too new. Its climate was hostile and ruled by the cold, the wet, or both. It was a sterile land, or at least scantily fruitful. Often barren, always underpopulated; a place where all of nature's kingdoms emerged "altered"—man being no exception: man's humanity itself was problematic. In America, people did not live, they "vegetated." Those were the kinds of scholarly words used by the earliest anti-Americans. And their words blossomed into portraits. America had no shortage of amateur Hieronymus Boschs keen on filling it with Acephaluses, Antipodes, and sheep trees. It found its El Greco in Las Casas, who painted a martyred continent's tortments in stark colors. Lafitau, Charlevoix, the Jesuits, and the Franciscans cloaked the savages in royal purple and lit the canvas from above, like an Annunciation. Then, in 1768, America found its Goya: Cornelius De Pauw.

De Pauw was born in Holland. He lived at the court of Frederick II and wrote in French. He was not even thirty when he published his *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*. Fame came to him overnight among the European intelligentsia: his book was talked about, discussed, considered important enough to bother refuting. In Berlin, De Pauw weathered attacks from the French Benedictine monk Antoine-Joseph Pernety. It was a comprehensive attack, followed by a *Défense* from De Pauw and a counterattack by Pernety. The skirmish kept tongues wagging in the city, court, and academy for two years.

We might be tempted to call it just a local quibble, a struggle for influence among the denizens of Frederick II's philosophical zoo. Yet the influence of the *Recherches* went beyond the small, inbred world of Berlin politics. Raynal was putting together the first draft of the *Histoire des deux Indes* at the time; it is full of traces of De Pauw's work. And if Pernety, Frederick II's librarian, had personal reasons to resist what he saw as a young rival and rising star, the same could not be said of Delisle de Sales, for instance, who added a discussion of De Pauw's book into his *Système de la nature*, though the American debate was not really relevant to his topic. It was as though around 1770 no one could discuss cause and effect without crossing swords with De Pauw.

De Pauw was hyperactively negative. He cast the whole edifice of respectful or enthusiastic accounts of America into the mud. He castigated sham specialists, dubious missionaries, and shoddy writers left and right. Practically every traveler was suspect: "A general rule can be established that for every hundred travelers, sixty are lying for no reason, as though out of imbecility; thirty are lying out of self-interest or, if you will, guile; and finally, ten are telling the truth and are men."<sup>31</sup> And the facts coming from those ten still needed to be picked through. . . . De Pauw hit hard and did not let up. He trampled the noble-savage tradition still dear to so many philosophers—and which had even started to appear in sentimental novels and plays.<sup>32</sup> He painted a strikingly dark picture. Goya at his bleakest is not even an accurate point of comparison; De Pauw's America conjures up images of the morbid currents of lava and blood found in Mexican muralism. Not Rivera, whose works are too full of life even amid the bloodshed; more like Orozco's hideously charred spectrum—though De Pauw's atrocities were even more irrevocable. Death had not come to America in battle dress, with the European invaders; it emanated from the very earth, putrid and infectious. Not that De Pauw neglected to denounce Europe's crimes, with a detailed description of the conquest at its most gruesome; he did this vehemently. But for him, the evil went deeper. The massacre's instigators were



loathsome and should be denounced, but America was accursed and he stigmatized it.

"I shall place at the start of this work several striking and decisive observations," wrote De Pauw. Striking indeed. In Buffon's honor, the first shots were fired at the fauna. "America's climate at the time of its discovery was very contrary for most quadruped animals, which were a sixth smaller than their analogs on the old continent." A second round came right on the heels of the first and blasted human bipeds: "This climate was especially pernicious to men, who were astonishingly idiotic, enervated, and vitiated in all the parts of their organism." The third was aimed at nature as a whole: "a vast and sterile desert." De Pauw did not spare his efforts—or his readers. With three vigorous brushstrokes, he painted the background onto which the inexorable Spaniards would proceed. And what Spaniards they were! No Cortez or Pizarro came marching forth from the pages of De Pauw's book. There were no destroyers of empires, conquerors of continents, or even mass torturers; just a bunch of anonymous riffraff. The Spanish were starving "fortune hunters"—so starving they ended up eating each other. "From time to time, the Spaniards were forced to eat Americans and even Spaniards, for lack of other food." The French, too, for that matter. "The first French colonists sent into this unfortunate world ended up devouring each other." The English had a little more luck (or self-restraint): they escaped this living hell and went back home, but got there in a state of starvation so severe that "in London, they were taken for specters!"

And this is only page 3—there are 769 more in the original edition. How's that for a preamble? With this extraordinary primal scene, De Pauw was killing two birds with one stone: he proved that this was a wretched, desolate country where no one could survive, and he hinted at the terrible "revolution" that America provoked in its invaders, who were transformed into cannibals as surely as Circe's visitors had been turned into swine. Three birds with one stone, actually. Because this unbelievable opening could also be read as an allegory of the fate of colonizing countries: Europeans devouring each other symbolized the draining of their vital energy into the human abyss known as America. Even now, De Pauw affirmed, several colonies were "absolutely unable to feed themselves with their own productions." Instead of nourishing humans, America devoured them. De Pauw was in agreement with a whole century of philosophers on that point, from Montesquieu to Diderot. Right from the start, he proclaimed that the fate of America's indigenous populations and colonizers would converge in misery. He enlarged the traditional snapshot of the historical evils inflicted on America into a fresco of eternal and natural misfortune, a land into which the

Europeans had intruded for the natives' greater misery as well as their own. De Pauw was a painter of disaster rather than battle and was less interested in the conquest and its butchery than in the deep-reaching putrefaction of a morbid continent that would be its illusory conquerors' grave.

Now he could get to the point: the land and its climate. Now he could follow the lethal logic that went from salt to sap, brine to poison. From now on he would speak scientifically.

First off, salt. It was everywhere. It rose from the ubiquitous swamps and endless marshes into the atmosphere and fell back down on the vegetation in a deadly sedimentation. America's waters, "corrupted, harmful, and even mortal," waters subject to "fermentation," sat under the sun and gave off a miasma of salt that "then crystallize[d] on each leaf dipped into this brine."<sup>33</sup> According to De Pauw, plant life in America was not so much plant life as plant preserves, a gigantic heap of sauerkraut. A thick salt fog suffocated the vegetation, which stopped being "tender and herbaceous," as in Europe, and survived only in the "ligneous" form "of underbrush." Because, to make matters worse, on top of the salt there was also "earth niter," which dried out the continent's feeble productions from the inside. It was a researched and undeniable fact, De Pauw added: when the colonists in New France went to scrub their laundry with ashes, as was done back in Paris, they were "astonished to find that this washing powder instantly shredded the cloth to tatters and then reduced it to parenchyma, which was attributed—rightly so—to the violence of the acrid, copious salt the ashes contained."<sup>34</sup> This unpalatable chemistry experiment echoes earlier accounts of America's wonders. De Pauw's stroke of genius was to master the rhetoric and parody the clichés while turning them against America. He kept the verve and the astonishment, but there was nothing enchanting about his remarks. Get your head out of the clouds! Enough fun and games! All the *lusus naturae*, the strange marvels that had enchanted curious Europeans for two centuries, were rewritten by De Pauw as a long series of unhappy surprises, like the rotten tricks played on human beings by a flippant or frankly sadistic Mother Nature. De Pauw did not describe the devouring laundry detergent with its party-trick overtones in order to amuse. His goal was to fill the reader with fear and disgust for a place that was fecund only in traps.

An "evil stepmother" like the one Sade would later describe, Nature had filled America with snares and treacherous turns. And along with the nitrate, she had even equipped it with saltpeter, which the Spanish would use to replenish their depleted powder stocks and subjugate the Mexicans—who were thus betrayed by their own soil. This vitiated land was also a vicious land. And the fact that it had rearmed its invaders was the least of its evils. It

had been slaughtering men since the dawn of time. It sought to depopulate the continent with its anemic sap—and did not do a bad job of it. (De Pauw, like his forerunners, emphasized the human emptiness of America's lands.) America was not only repulsive and sterile, it was poisonous. Its "fetid and swampy terrain" made "more venomous trees vegetate than grow in all parts of the rest of the known universe."<sup>35</sup> A champion of malevolence, the vegetation secreted death out of every pore. Curare, which—as reported by innumerable travelers—the savages daubed on the points of their arrows, had a symbolic value for De Pauw. Poison is mentioned on the first page of his essay and is the main topic of the last chapter on "the use of poison arrows"; it literally bookends the *Recherches*. An overabundance of vegetable toxins confirmed nature's criminality in America. But the terrible curare was nothing next to the horrors of manioc. For even the few plants that could be used to nourish human beings were poisonous, too. De Pauw, stressing the "causticity" of the starches that were the mainstay of the American diet, constructed the striking paradox of humanity surviving by eating poison—*alimentum in veneno*. "The Americans' principal food," he wrote, evoking the era of the first contacts, "was a poisonous plant that only skill could render comestible." The "skill" was simply cooking it, but by using the term, De Pauw suggested that there was somehow a secret struggle going on between a barbaric nature and men reduced to a state of desperation. Death lurked between the raw and the cooked. Yucca and manioc in their natural state made for a fatal pittance: "I am speaking of so many species of *Jucas* and *Manihots*, which are almost all mortal when eaten raw, as they come from the bowels of the earth. It was nevertheless this *Manihot* which, for the Indians, took the place of rye and wheat, which they did not know of." America was stupefying—it pretended to nourish its offspring in order to kill them! As De Pauw wrote: "One must admit that the history of the old continent offers no comparable example, and whatever the sum of misfortunes may have been, there has never been an entire population constrained to draw its primary fodder from a venomous vegetable."

So it came as no surprise that this many-poisoned land had also poisoned Europe—not with manioc or yucca, but by flooding it with the "venomous germs" of venereal disease. De Pauw obviously considered "risible" any hypothesis that situated the origin of syphilis elsewhere than in America (such as Africa, for example): that "the venereal plague was born in America" was a proven point and "irrefutable."<sup>36</sup> The contrary would have been implausible. He did not go so far as to give the statement a specific source. But he framed his comments on syphilis with two "naturalist" remarks, as though better to moor the disease to American soil. Because even if in all

truthfulness he could not really say where the malady had originated, De Pauw did not neglect to affirm that it was aggravated and sometimes reawakened by consuming excessive amounts of iguana. There was thus a suspicious symbiosis between a malady quite wrongly called "from Naples," given that it came from the New World, and the "American lizard," the ingestion of which was "deadly for those affected." Moreover, this burrowing malady, which went to the very roots of the reproductive system, could be argued to have the same cause as the Americans' "weakness." Americans were all "deprived of the living, physical force that results from the tension and resistance of the muscles and nerves."<sup>37</sup> De Pauw seemed to believe this; once again, it was the flood, the "atmosphere's great humidity," the "incredible quantity of stagnant waters stretched out over its surface" that had "vitiating and depraved its inhabitants' temperament."<sup>38</sup>

In the horrible place known as America, humanity was born losing and lame. The Americans' recent history had been disastrous, but from the dawn of time, America's natural history had been a tale of woe, an irreparable misdeal. "Struck with putrefaction," "deluged with lizards, snakes, serpents, reptiles, and monstrous insects,"<sup>39</sup> unhealthy and malevolent, America was not the patriarchs' Canaan that feverish missionaries had described:<sup>40</sup> it was an Egypt beset by more plagues than men could withstand.

#### The "Americans' Moronic Spirit"

The first victim of the "unfortunate world" was man—starting, of course, with the savage, whose complete dereliction was proclaimed by De Pauw, before Joseph de Maistre and for other reasons.

"On the Americans' Moronic Spirit": the title, which is the heading of the fourth part of the *Recherches*, sets the tone for a chapter the author himself considered decisive. As a direct consequence of the handicaps forced on him by nature's abominable cruelty, the American was both feeble and feeble-minded. "A stupid imbecility is the fundamental disposition of all Americans," De Pauw warned, judging them "deprived of both intelligence and perfectibility."<sup>41</sup> But instead of looking for the reason for this in some extraordinary "prevarication," some mind-boggling sin committed by their forefathers—as the author of the *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, De Maistre, later would—De Pauw found the reason more naturally to be poor blood circulation, which led to a "weakness of the understanding."<sup>42</sup> The Indians' ideas were "poorly imprinted" because of the "coarse and viscous humors" that characterized their temperament. Their fundamental disposition was one of insentience. "In them, insentience is a vice of their altered constitution: they

are unpardonably lazy, invent nothing, undertake nothing, and do not stretch the sphere of their conception beyond what they see: pusillanimous, cowardly, enervated, with no nobility of mind; discouragement and the absolute lack of that which constitutes a reasonable animal make them useless to themselves and to society." De Pauw was "tempted to refuse a soul" to these beings who "vegetate rather than live."<sup>43</sup>

Since the days of Buffon's first remarks in 1749, observations about America had gotten worse and worse. *Variétés dans l'espèce humaine* insisted first and foremost on the fundamental imperfectability of the indigenous Americans. De Pauw depicted beings somewhere between humanity and nonhumanity, physiologically undermined by the "secret vice" nature had inflicted on them. Physical and mental weakness were the main results, but there were other defects, as well: probable impotence; men's confirmed lack of desire for women ("alienation for the fair sex"); even hardness under torture, the major topos of the savages' nobility, was transformed into supplementary proof of atrophied sensibilities: it was not so much the sublime heroism of their resolve at the torture stake as a simple defect of their "fibers."

Was the inhabitant of this "unfortunate world" really a man, or was he a monster? The dismal and limited savage was a forerunner of natural history's later fixation on *abnormality*. The American man was neither virile nor hirsute; his breasts often lactated; he fled women in order to engage in his predilection for "antiphysical" acts.<sup>44</sup> This predilection was so notorious that De Pauw did not need to insist; Diderot had written about it at length. The *Histoire des deux Indes* had confirmed it: "They have few children, because they have no taste for women: and it is a national vice, with which the elders ceaselessly reproach the young men." Those were pointless lectures, De Pauw laughed; they "could not master their temperament, no more than where the contrary is preached." And what about women? Wanton and lascivious, the women furiously threw themselves at their invaders, who probably would not otherwise have managed to subjugate such immense lands. The women's libido was inversely proportional to the men's, yet this did not imply that they were feminine. It simply confirmed the inversion of gender roles. Moreover, the American male was hard to distinguish from the female: it was "difficult to distinguish between the sexes by their faces."<sup>45</sup> And whereas milk came readily in men, "in several regions, the American women do not experience any flow at any time."<sup>46</sup> American men and women faced off like Sodomites and Tribades.

But love was not the only monstrous thing in America. Anomaly roamed the hills and populated the forests. There were "blafards" in abundance; also

called "kackerlackes," blafards were strange albinos long surmised to be the result of some kind of simian crossbreeding, but which De Pauw, like Buffon, believed to be a simple "accidental variety." Their proliferation was just one more symptom of America's "degeneration." Caused by a deficiency "in their parents' spermatic liquor," they were "absolutely deprived of the power of generation, or [did] not engender children that resemble them."<sup>47</sup> It is not surprising that they cropped up so frequently in naturalist writings on America. And no less symbolic than the blafard was the hermaphrodite, which epitomized America's sexual disorder. A fallen monster, as well, the Floridian hermaphrodite lacked the androgyne's completeness; the hermaphrodite was a man "less perfect than those who only have one sexual organ." Lafitau had denied their existence and affirmed that they were simply men dressed and treated like women. De Pauw objected that the "unheard-of custom of disguising men and tyrannizing them is . . . as surprising in the moral order as the quantity of hermaphrodites in the physical order."<sup>48</sup> Why shouldn't there be a real race of hermaphrodites, after all, in a land where nature seemed to delight in breaking all the rules?

#### The "Creole" Question

Such was the portrait of the American degenerate—or monster—as it was tirelessly reproduced between 1750 and 1770. Did this only apply to the savages? Not at all, replied Buffon, De Pauw, and Raynal. It applied to all the "inhabitants" of the "unfortunate world." Opinions, it is true, were more discordant on this point, and pronouncements more hesitant. But the main argument was clear: there was every reason to believe and conclude that the horrible effects of nature in all its brutality had not spared transplanted Europeans any more than it had the chickens, which were sterile, and the dogs, which had become mute. *The Défense des Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, written in response to Dom Pernety, gave De Pauw the chance to add a few more brushstrokes to an already bleak canvas and, above all, to extend unambiguously to the Creole—that is, any European born in America—the law of deformation and degeneration established by Buffon. It was a decisive development. From then on, in the anti-American discourse inspired by natural history, the Indian and the Creole shared the same fate. "In northern America," wrote De Pauw, this time backing up his statements using the Swedish naturalist Peter Kalm's recently translated *Histoire Naturelle & Politique de la Pensilvanie*, "Europeans are perceptibly degenerating, and their constitution is altered with each successive generation."<sup>49</sup> The "degeneration of Europeans settled in America" was an indubitable fact. And

just as chickens brought across the Atlantic often went thirty years without laying an egg, for four or five generations, by the same principle, Creoles could be expected to suffer the same "tepidness in love" and near-sterility as the natives.<sup>50</sup> Here De Pauw forcefully confirmed the hypothesis he had put forth in the *Recherches*: "All the animals led from the Old World to the New have suffered, without a single exception, a perceptible alteration, either in their form or in their instinct"; it could only be the same for humans; "and through reiterating observations on this subject," comparing the Creoles who had been living there for some time with newly arrived Europeans, "one became convinced that the degeneration one had believed possible was real."<sup>51</sup> The "one" here clearly implies Buffon, whose authority De Pauw uses again and again, all the while lamenting his tentativeness; Buffon would finally denounce the way his disrespectful disciple had distorted his works.

It would not be true, however, to say that De Pauw stretched Buffon's ideas all that far from the shape they had taken in 1766. *Dégénération des animaux* justified, at least hypothetically (precisely as De Pauw says), extending the climate theory of animals' degeneration to humans. Over the course of these texts, the defect natural history saw as marking living things in America became more and more pronounced: the native inhabitants' "degeneration" was considered a proven fact, and that of the European colonists seemed at least probable. And at the same time—in the 1770s—descriptions started to reach beyond the field of natural history, in both its scholarly and its popularized versions. Explanatory schemas crossed over into the general public and took hold. It was an alarming trend for the colonists, who witnessed the clinical analysis of America's inferiority and the hypothesis of their own unavoidable decrepitude winning out as scientific realities in such widely read works as the *Histoire des deux Indes*.

The main topic of the *Histoire des deux Indes* was not America's natural history but "European establishments" throughout the world. It was presented as an "economic, philosophical, and political" work. Written by several different authors and published under the Abbé Raynal's name, modified with each successive printing, it offered shifting, sometimes contradictory glimpses of its subject. Its presentation of America owed a great deal to Buffon's explanatory schemas and faithfully transcribed his alteration-degeneration theory, but it was also influenced by De Pauw's mephitic painting, especially since De Pauw's anticolonialism fell in line with Raynal's own. The influence is particularly apparent in the first edition (1770), which presents the hypothesis of man's degeneration. Raynal was even more heavily handed about it than De Pauw. Concerning "free men" in "English America,"

he wrote in the first edition: this class of men "has visibly degenerated. None of the Creoles is as robust in his work, as strong in war, as the Europeans." Yet these offspring of transplanted Europeans had been born in America and were "accustomed to the climate from the cradle." With this remark, Raynal suggested that their deficiency could not simply be explained as trouble adapting. Worse, he added, "under this foreign sky, the mind has become as enervated as the body." And Raynal concluded by stressing the absence of any "man of genius" in colonial America: "it should amaze us that America has not yet produced a good poet, a skillful mathematician, a man of genius in any art, or any science." The reason for this was a "facility" in all areas and a precocity much like the climate's; both quickly ran out of steam: "precocious and mature before us, they fall well behind when we come to completion [that is—when we reach maturity]."<sup>52</sup> The Anglo-Americans were feeble-bodied and feeble-minded; precocious and lively in their youth, they were incapable of prolonged reflection. Their intellectual inferiority was no less certain than their physical weakness was "visible."

The representatives of the insurgent colonies would have paid dearly to have a page like that one ripped out of the *Histoire des deux Indes*. At least they managed to have it rewritten.

#### French Prejudice's "Augean Stables"

Benjamin Franklin arrived in Paris in December 1776 to represent the rebel colonies. Eighteen months had gone by since the first military skirmish between the American militia and the British army, in Lexington on April 19, 1775. These had been trying months for the insurgents.

Franklin, with his bonnet and overcoat, was wildly popular in the city and at court; everyone was crazy about the strange fellow, who was often taken for a Quaker. Diplomatically, though, he sensed things were not ripe. The king, Louis XVI, would commit himself only to a sure thing and with the approval of Vergennes, who had become all-powerful since Turgot had stepped down. Patience was in order: *le bonhomme Richard* cultivated his popularity and bided his time. A year went by. Finally, in Saratoga on October 17, 1777, an English army of ten thousand men, exhausted and cut off from their provisions, surrendered to the insurgents. The shock wave was considerable. It reached London on the night of December 2–3. Despite ministerial efforts to minimize the affair, everyone could sense that this was a turning point in the war. The news was no less resounding in Paris. It was now or never—*aut nunc aut nunquam*—Vergennes decided. On December 6, Louis XVI had Franklin informed of his decision to recognize the colonies' independence

and draw up a treaty with the insurgents for future trade, friendship and alliance. Vergennes and Franklin signed it on February 6, 1778.

Yet the "dispute" continued, despite the alliance. The fact that "extremely polite society"—to use Crébillon's expression—was crazy about George Washington did not stop the naturalists from sticking to their theories and "political writers" such as the Abbé de Mably from joining the debate and criticizing the American Constitution. The situation was paradoxical, intellectually speaking: the insurgents were a new high-society fad—rhymed couplets and hairdos were dedicated to them—which made for a strange contrast with the universally negative image of America now firmly anchored in cultivated people's minds. Buffon's prestige and De Pauw's impressive success (the *Recherches* would go into its eleventh printing in 1799, and his response to Pernet, its ninth) were the principal reasons for this. De Pauw, the all-out detractor, was even asked to write the article "Americans" for the *Encyclopédie's* supplement in 1776—a pretty symbolic year. To make matters worse, in 1777 the English naturalist William Robertson produced an inspired compendium of Buffon's ideas—one that was caustic toward America, a place where nature was "less prolific" and "less vigorous in her productions" than in Europe, where the fauna was "inactive and timid," and even man, far from having a kind of savage energy, was "a pensive melancholy animal."<sup>53</sup> Through Robertson, the Buffonian virus made new progress in Europe, particularly in Germany, where the anemic-America theory was approved by Humboldt.

Neither Franklin nor Jefferson, his successor in Paris in 1785, took the endlessly rehearsed stories of sterile chickens and cowardly tigers lightly. We might imagine that they could have been more legitimately concerned with the political criticism the Franco-American alliance had encountered, from, among others, Linguet, a lawyer and brilliant, paradoxical polemicist, who predicted that if the colonies won their independence the result would be a crop of small-scale, localized tyrants, and that in the long run a kind of "rogue state" would emerge, using all kinds of military tactics to take over global trade. They might also have worried about the severe institutional criticism developed by the Abbé de Mably in his *Observations sur le gouvernement et les lois des États-Unis d'Amérique* (Observations on the Government and Laws of the United States of America, 1784). There was indeed a concerted rejoinder from the Americans—but it did not address political or institutional criticism, a fact that speaks volumes. Linguet was ignored. Mably was left to Mazzei, an American citizen originally from Florence whose refutation, published in Paris, was not a success; Jefferson himself took care of selling off the leftover copies.

Jefferson's informal brain trust considered the decisive arena to be the field of natural history, with the calamitous images of America it had produced. That was where the main effort went, and the Americans profited from a sudden uncertainty among enemy ranks in the face of recent events: could the soldiers of Valley Forge, Long Island, and Saratoga still be depicted as degenerates? The theorists of America as a "lesser world" had also started tearing into each other. De Pauw had annoyed Buffon with his ironic description of America as both young and decrepit: "It is not easy to conceive how any beings could be, just after their creation, in a state of decrepitude and old age." If the Americans had degenerated—a point everyone agreed on—then America's youth was "untenable."<sup>54</sup> Buffon's answer in 1779 in *Époques de la nature* was concise but fairly confusing. He suddenly distinguished between northern America (which was clearly on its way up) and southern America, where "nature, far from having degenerated through great age, was on the contrary born late, and has never existed with the same force, the same active power as in northern lands." But Buffon's argument ended on a different note. He went back to generalizing about America as a whole and maintained the hypothesis of a "principle" of lesser activity, of Nature as "less active" than in Europe. Neither Buffon nor his fellows naturalists were quite ready to surrender. . .

Things were not much better with the Abbé Raynal and his torrential *Histoire des deux Indes*. The stakes were high, given the work's popularity in France and Europe. How could you get around the abbé? It seems that Franklin first decided on an object lesson. According to Jefferson, he invited an equal number of Americans and Frenchmen to his dinner table in Passy—including Raynal as guest of honor. Franklin got the abbé started on America's "smallness," then suddenly stopped the conversation and asked his guests, who were grouped by nationality, to stand up. All the Americans were taller than the tallest Frenchman. Raynal, who was himself very short ("a mere shrimp"), apparently took the joke gracefully, but refused to accept the argument. There was no way he would defer to the crudest empiricism when the greatest minds in Europe all agreed that in America nature was anemic. However, the 1780 and 1781 editions of the *Histoire des deux Indes* show the distinct effect, if not of this particular episode, then at least of Franklin's salutary influence. Several passages were rewritten to put America in a more favorable light. The most spectacular change dealt with something the Americans in Paris were particularly touchy about: the "degeneration of the Creoles"—that is, their own degeneration. The lengthy argument developed in the 1770 edition on the American continent's inability to produce geniuses was still there, but this time as an example of a *prejudice* that

should be suppressed! "To dissipate this unjust prejudice," the text now read, "it took a Franklin to teach the physicians of our astonished continent to master lightning, etc."<sup>55</sup> The lightning rod had been invented in 1753, so the authors of the *Histoire des deux Indes* could conceivably have recognized Franklin's genius sooner—but better late than never.

The match was far from over, though. Even after its change of heart, the *Histoire des deux Indes* continued to blow hot ("the glory and good fortune of changing [the Americans] must be the work of English America") and cold ("which is what it has not yet done"). Remorse and rewrites still left whole swaths of prejudice intact. Devoid of self-criticism, sparing with revisions, the *Histoire des deux Indes* perpetuated the stereotype of North America as a harsh place for humanity and so bereft of resources that nothing, not even independence, could pull it out of its congenital anemia. "America lacks everything,"<sup>56</sup> De Pauw had pronounced. Raynal would not be as categorical in 1780. He was forced to admit that "the country will more or less attain self-sufficiency." But that was it; no progress was in sight. In these lands, which "are very rapidly degenerating," Raynal noted, "if ten million men ever find assured subsistence there, it will be a lot."<sup>57</sup> In the conclusive chapter, "Quelle idée il faut se former des treize provinces confédérées" (What Idea One Should Have of the Thirteen Confederated Provinces), he insisted once again on the poor quality of the land and its rapid depletion. In the south, the plantations were only producing a third of the tobacco they had been "formerly." Toward the north (Maryland, New York, and New Jersey), an acre that had once produced sixty bushels of wheat "only rarely now produces twenty," given the way "the ground has rapidly deteriorated there." Raynal's United States still looked a lot like the "unfortunate world" described by De Pauw: a few "lands that are almost generally bad or of mediocre quality"; further on, "swamps"; and "when the country rises, there is nothing but rebellious sands or frightful rocks, interspersed every now and then with pastures of a bulrush nature." Reading these lines written in the heady days of the Franco-American alliance by declared supporters of the insurgents gives a good idea of how deeply rooted the naturalist prejudice against America was—and helps us understand why Jefferson himself entered the fray.

Like Franklin, Jefferson wanted to get to the root of the evil and "scientifically" rehabilitate America in French opinion, which had been fed calamitous images of the New World for the past thirty years. The most urgent task, and one that was more profoundly political than any political or institutional controversy, was to dismantle and destroy the mass of prejudices, which John Adams, in a letter written in 1785, interestingly compared to the "Augean stables."<sup>58</sup> Jefferson's political apology of the United States consisted

in demonstrating the country's physical and economic viability. Let others refute the criticism or reservations that were being shot off from various quarters against America's institutions. The emergency, the first priority for Jefferson, was to rectify the disastrous image of America as *deteriorating*. In order for American political innovation to acquire any credibility, the negative mythology that had held sway since Buffon's day had to be uprooted.

In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson responded to all the New World's critics—but with a subtle sense of their hierarchies and a perfect intuition of the best way to win over his anticipated readers—a Parisian intelligentsia raised on philosophy. He treated De Pauw (who was not even French) with contempt. He stridently but quickly chided Raynal, to whom he attributed the theory of white men's degeneration in America, and reproached him with having thoughtlessly affirmed, before repenting, that America had not produced any men of genius. It had already produced three: Washington, Franklin, and David Rittenhouse, which for three million inhabitants matched the European average.<sup>59</sup>

But above all, he refuted Buffon point by point, going so far as to fill several pages with his own tables listing the animals of each continent and giving their comparative weights. Weigh and judge, Jefferson told his French readers. First, judge: is it really fair to face America off against the rest of the world? Would it not in fact be more reasonable to oppose one part of the world to another and, since this is a European debate, compare America to Europe alone? Then weigh the animals, and see if your bear (153.7 pounds) holds its own against ours (410 pounds).<sup>60</sup> Most important, look at the discrepancy at the top of the lists: far larger than the bear, which is now your largest animal, we have the bison (1,800 pounds) and perhaps even a giant animal of which skeletons have been found and which the Delaware Indians assure us still exists in the northwest—a mastodon called the *mammoth*.

But even excluding this perhaps extinct champion of American immensity, the cross-examination sufficiently proved that Count Buffon had lacked prudence, if not discernment. His triple "opinion"—first, that animals found in both the Old and New Worlds were smaller in the latter; second, that those that were found only in the New World were small in size; third, that those that had been domesticated in both worlds had degenerated in America—was entirely invalidated by the comparative method (the very one he advised) if it was scrupulously applied. As for Monsieur de Buffon's considerations on the climate and the cold and damp nature of America in general, Jefferson practically forgave him for that. He simply noted that the humidity measured in Philadelphia seemed to be inferior to that of Paris or London; moreover, he voiced reservations—still respectfully—about the scientific prejudice

underlying Monsieur de Buffon's opinions, which seemed to consider humidity intrinsically adverse to living things. . . . No, decidedly, Jefferson concluded, there was no good reason for the "celebrated Zoologist" to write (he quoted him verbatim) that "la nature vivante est beaucoup moins agissante, beaucoup moins forte"<sup>61</sup> in America than in the Old World.

This was how a founding father, a reader of Montesquieu and the English constitutionalists and an architect of the New World's political landscape, took the stand for enlightened opinion; this was how he pleaded in America's favor, from a wanderer's, meteorologist's, and botanist's standpoint; this was how—completely deadpan—he surprisingly and amusingly compared precipitation figures, exhibited different types of plant life, and weighed and measured the slandered bestiary of the American homeland. Revitalizing "American nature" was no longer just a matter of natural history, but of history itself. It was as though America's political and diplomatic fate—the solidification of a foundling republic—also (chiefly?) depended on uprooting the extraordinarily detrimental prejudices about the new continent that had grown out of the philosophers' sciences.

From here on in, the battle would take place on the representational front. Such was the unspoken conclusion that dictated Jefferson's strategy. If he pursued the adversary into his own territory—that of natural history, where Buffon and his followers were hiding out—it was so he could calmly take over. It was up to the Americans to *spea*k America. The land would not be as marshy as it was in Monsieur de Buffon's writings, it would be less "venomous" than De Pauw imagined it to be, and it would not be quite so "deteriorated" as the Abbé Raynal described it. Jefferson countered figures with figures, theories with observations, descriptions with specimens, disagreeable hypotheses with flattering possibilities (such as the existence of the giant mammoth)—a rhetoric of denigration with a poetics of glorification. The European gentlemen said the American tiger was cowardly? No matter. Jefferson threw a wondrous "megalonyx" at them. All's fair in image war. . . .

Jefferson spared no effort in tugging intellectual France back to a more positive view of America. Nor money. Buffon was curious to see an elk; Jefferson sent him a moose from Vermont. The trophy and its shipping cost a breathtaking sixty guineas; but the truth, like the unsullied honor of the New World's great ruminants, was priceless. Despite Jefferson's financial sacrifices (he also procured a magnificent cougar skin), Monsieur de Buffon died in 1788 without keeping his promise to fully rehabilitate America's nature and humans. As for Raynal, whom the Revolution had at first coddled as the last remaining "patriotic" philosopher, he was brutally shoved off his pedestal when he dared to criticize the disorderly conduct of his revolution-

ary countrymen in 1791. De Pauw lived until 1799, but he turned his interest exclusively to the Greeks and Egyptians and, taking his own advice, "left America in peace." The "dispute of the New World" was not over, but France now had other things to quibble with America about than the size of the elk or the megalonyx's fearlessness.

Michelet described 1790 as the French Revolution's finest hour and the Fête de la Fédération as its euphoric pinnacle. It was doubtless also in 1790 that the celebration of America reached its apex in France, with the three days of mourning decreed after Franklin's death. Though a touching event, it was an isolated tribute. The Revolution became more radical and France was soon cut off from any reference to America, except purely declamatory ones. Advocates of the American model and the men who symbolized the Franco-American alliance left the public sphere or lost their lives. Diplomatic relations grew tense between the federal government and revolutionary France, whose militant minister in Washington, Genet, made increasingly belligerent declarations and attempted to form French commandos on American soil in order to attack the British in the Antilles. The Terror, which imprisoned Paine, alienated the French Revolution from the sympathies of an American government careful to avoid any Jacobin contamination, as well as a major part of American public opinion, which was shocked by the executions. Robespierre's fall did not bring about any great change. The United States negotiated and signed a secret treaty with Great Britain (Jay's Treaty). When Paris found out about this treacherous agreement, the dismayed authorities of the Directory launched a violent press campaign against the United States. French privateers started attacking American ships. Twenty years after the "trade, friendship, and alliance" treaty, France and the United States were in a state of belligerence. American historians call this the "Undeclared War"; and it is true, it was a war in all but name. It makes for a strange epilogue to a century of enlightenment in which, even before the birth of the American nation had taken place, the French anti-American image war had begun. To clean these Augean stables would be a labor more Sisyphean than Herculean.

## Notes



### Introduction

1. Michel Winock, interview with Marion Van Renterghem, *Le Monde*, November 25–26, 2001.

2. These examples are taken from a collective work edited at the time by Denis Lacorne, Jacques Rupnik and Marie-France Toinet, *The Rise and Fall of Anti-Americanism: A Century of French Perception*, trans. Gerry Turner (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990) (*L'Amérique dans les têtes: Un siècle de fascinations et d'aversion* [Paris: Hachette, 1986]), which remains a solid work on the topic. See, respectively, the introduction by Lacorne and Rupnik, "France Bewitched by America" (1–27), and Diana Pinto's contribution, "The French Intelligentsia Rediscovered America" (97–107) ["La conversion de l'intelligentsia" in the original 1986 version].

3. The word is used by André Kaspi, whose text concludes *The Rise and Fall*, and who noted in 1999 that the presumed death of anti-Americanism as described at the time by several participants was premature (*Mal connus, mal aimés, mal compris: Les États-Unis aujourd'hui* [Paris: Plon, 1999], 31).

4. *Libération*, April 10 and 11, 1999.

5. Jean-Paul Sartre, "A Letter from M. Sartre" [November 18, 1946], *New York Herald Tribune* (November 20, 1946); 2, quoted in *The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, trans. Richard C. McCleary, 2 vols. (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 1:139. Sartre is responding to critics who accused him of presenting an unflattering image of (white) America in *The Respectful Prostitute*.



6. Serge Halimi, "Un mot de trop" and "Les 'philo-américains' saisis par la rage" (Rabid "Philo-Americans"), *Le Monde diplomatique* (May 2000): 10; the first title can be translated "A Superfluous Word," but also conveys the notion that the word should be gotten rid of; the second title is an allusion to Sartre's notorious article protesting against the Rosenberg executions, "Rabid Animals." The rabid philo-Americans in question are, in order, Michel Wieviorka, Alain Richard (then secretary of defense), François Furet (posthumously), Bernard-Henri Lévy, Pascal Bruckner, Jean-François Revel, and Guy Sorman.

7. Toinet, "Does Anti-Americanism Exist?" in *The Rise and Fall*, 219.

8. David Strauss, *Menace in the West: The Rise of Anti-Americanism in Modern Times* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978), 6. My italics. Strauss defines "Americanism" as "a set of values, practices, and institutions which had their origin in the United States and were far more permanent than official policies." American anti-Americans, furthermore, have consistently used the American tradition itself to support their arguments against Americanism and to attack its official versions.

9. Sartre was the only person to truly make an effort to give "Americanism" a non-projective meaning. He saw it as the key to the socialization of the American psyche, and the chief mechanism by which the collectivity coerces the individual in the United States. "Am I American enough?" is the question America (op)presses each American with, the "neighbor's gaze" being the normalizing agent in a society obsessed with conformity. For Sartre, *Americanism* is thus a strictly American affair—as well as a typically Sartrian phenomenon.

10. At the same time, in the Communist press, *Americanism* became a vague term of reproach. An extreme example, from *La Nouvelle Critique* 3 (February 1949): 15: "French writers [who] stoop to passing their creations off as translations from the American" are accused of parroting "Americanism at its most vile."

11. "An ideal polygon with multiple sides: endless, unregulated consumerism; universal merchandise and a belief in the neutrality of technology; citizens transformed into consumers; a deaf ear to tragedy; a confusion of the public and the private; the cult of success and money; the forced reduction of human life to a set of principal activities, etc., etc." Régis Debray, *Contretemps: Eloges des idéaux perdus* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 103. Debray's innovation is his perfect awareness of the stereotypical nature of the anti-Americanism he espouses.

12. In an article in *Esprit* lambasting "a new anti-Americanism that has shown itself, in its arguments as much as in its vocabulary, worthy of that of '42-'44": Chris Marker, *Esprit* 7 (July 1948), quoted in Pierre Enckell, *Datations et documents lexicographiques*, 2nd ser., no. 20 (1982). Even *La Nouvelle Critique*, the intellectual monthly of the French Communist Party, uses it—true, in quotes: "a man so blameless of 'anti-Americanism' as Mr. Étienne Gilson." *La Nouvelle Critique* 12 (January 1950).

13. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), 88.

14. Toinet suggests in the previously cited article (n. 8) that the word "anti-Americanism" has been "in use since the 19th century"; unfortunately, she doesn't provide any specific references. I personally have not come across it in any work written between 1860 and 1900, which, considering the thousands of anti-American pages I have read, would point at the very least to its extreme rarity.

15. Paul Claudel, *Journal*, January 18, 1933, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 2:5.

16. Alexander Hamilton, *Federalist* no. 11, November 23, 1787, ed. E. M. Earle (New York, 1941), 69. The footnote indicates: "Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains."

17. Jean Baechler, *Qu'est-ce que l'idéologie?* (Paris: Idées-Gallimard, 1976), 60.

18. A topic well explored by Raymonde Carroll in her book *Cultural Misunderstandings: The French-American Experience*, trans. Carol Volk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) (*Evidences invisibles: Américains et Français au quotidien* [Paris: Seuil, 1987]).

19. See Jean-Noël Jeanneney, ed., *Une Idée fautive est un fait vrai: Les stéréotypes nationaux en Europe* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2000).

20. Roland Barthes, *Leçon* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), 33; *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Eric Marty (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 3:809.

### Prologue

1. Antonello Gerbi, *The Dispute of the New World: The History of a Polemic, 1750–1900*, trans. Jeremy Moyle (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973) (*La Disputa del Nuovo Mondo: Storia di una polemica, 1750–1900* [Milan: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1955]). A historian of ideas and disciple of Croce, Gerbi left Fascist Italy for Latin America and used successive editions (Spanish, English, and Italian) of his work to compile a considerable body of material on the "dispute." It has never been published in France, however. Recently, James W. Ceaser interestingly prolonged the history of this "dispute of the New World," showing how a nineteenth-century "naturalist" legacy that grew into the "racial sciences" diverged from the tradition of political science *stricto sensu*. See his *Reconstructing America: The Symbol of America in Modern Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

2. Jean-Baptiste Delisle de Sales, *De la philosophie de la nature*, 6 vols. (1770–74; London, 1777), 4:247.

3. Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs* (Paris: Classiques Garnier-Bordas, 1990), 2:340.

4. Cornelius De Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains ou mémoires intéressants pour servir à l'histoire de l'espèce humaine*, 2 vols. (1768; Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1990 [a facsimile of the 1774 Berlin edition]), 2:191. A short, much-abridged version of De Pauw's work (including his writings on China and Egypt) was published in English in 1806 as *A General History of the Americans, of their Customs, Manners, and Colours: An History of the Patagonians, of the Blafards and White Negroes; History of Peru; An History of the Manners, Customs, &c. of the Chinese and Egyptians, Selected from M. Pauw*, by Daniel Webb (Rochdale: T. Wood, 1806).

5. De Pauw, *Recherches*, 2:137.

6. Durand Echeverría, *Mirage in the West: A History of the French Image of American Society to 1815* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957), 15.

7. De Pauw, *Recherches*, 1:v.

8. Guillaume Thomas Raynal, *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*, 10 vols. (Geneva, 1781), 9:133.

9. An argument found, for example, in Samuel Engel, *Essai sur cette question: Quand et comment l'Amérique a-t-elle été peuplée d'hommes et d'animaux?* (Essay on This Question: When and How Was America Peopled with Men and Animals?) (Amsterdam, 1767).

10. De Pauw, *Recherches*, 2:303.

11. The first Spanish and Portuguese accounts introduced the topos of ubiquitous water. From then on, America's climatic anomalies were interpreted as deleterious to the men who lived there. A quote attributed to Queen Isabella would become almost mythic

over the centuries: "This land, where the trees are not firmly rooted, must produce men of little truthfulness and less constancy." Quoted in Gerbi, 40.

12. Georges Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, *Variétés dans l'espèce humaine* [1749], in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Imprimerie et Librairie Générale de France, 1859), 5:441.

13. De Pauw, *Recherches*, 1:3.

14. *Ibid.*, 1:2.

15. Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs*, 2:340.

16. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. Frank Shuffleton (London: Penguin Classics, 1999), 68.

17. Jefferson to the Marquis de Chastellux, June 7, 1785, in *Notes*, 267.

18. *Ibid.*, 308, n. 111.

19. Buffon, *Dégénération des animaux* [1766], in *Oeuvres complètes*, 8:240.

20. *Ibid.*, *Dégénération*, 8:241.

21. Buffon, *Variétés*, 5:451.

22. Buffon, *Dégénération*, 8:219.

23. They supposed right from square one that there was already an established analogical relationship between the two sets of fauna, one that allowed the naturalist to move on to particular comparisons in light of the place occupied on each table by whatever animal fit in ("the first in size," etc.). The specific comparisons (the llama to the sheep) are disappointing, given that they are analogical only in certain points of detail. Their goal was not to open the door to new discoveries about these animals, but rather to legitimize the first operation: matching up the two tables.

24. Buffon, *Variétés*, 5:241.

25. Buffon, *Dégénération*, 8:217.

26. *Ibid.*, 8:218.

27. *Ibid.*, 8:219.

28. *Ibid.*, 8:217.

29. De Pauw, *Défense des "Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains," par Mr. de P\*\*\** [1770], in *Recherches*, 2:205.

30. De Pauw, *Recherches*, 1:188.

31. De Pauw, *Défense*, 2:320.

32. The first Indian-themed play staged at the Comédie française seems to have been *La Jeune Indienne* in 1764. It was also Chamfort's first success, at the age of twenty-four.

33. De Pauw, *Recherches*, 1:3.

34. *Ibid.*, 1:4.

35. *Ibid.*, 1:4.

36. *Ibid.*, 1:19.

37. *Ibid.*, 1:31.

38. *Ibid.*, 1:20.

39. *Ibid.*, 1:4–5.

40. The anti-Americans contradicted Fathers Lafitau—author of *Mœurs des Sauvages Américains comparées aux mœurs des Premiers Temps* (1724) (*Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Times*, trans. and ed. William N. Fenton and

Elizabeth L. Moore [Toronto: Champlain Society, 1974–77])—Buffon, and Charlevoix, who compared the Indians to the patriarchs in his *Journal historique*: "I then recalled those ancient Patriarchs, who had no dwellings and lived under tents." *Histoire et description générale de la Nouvelle France: Avec le Journal historique d'un Voyage fait par ordre du roi dans l'Amérique septentrionale* (Paris: Vve Ganeau, 1744–46), 6:254.

41. De Pauw, *Défense*, 2:108.

42. *Ibid.*, 2:109.

43. *Ibid.*, 2:160. De Pauw was sketching a portrait of the natives of California here but added that it was "consistent with the one we have given of all the Americans."

44. See Michel Delon, "Du goût antiphysique des Américains" (On the Americans' Anti-Physical Tastes), *Annales de Bretagne* 2 (1977): 317–28.

45. De Pauw, *Défense*, 2:145.

46. De Pauw, *Recherches*, 1:51.

47. *Ibid.*, 1:354, 1:352.

48. De Pauw, *Défense*, 2:53.

49. Peter Kalm's *Travels into North America* was published in Swedish between 1753 and 1761 (*En resa til Norra America: På Kongl. svenska wetenskaps academiens befallning, och publici kostnad, förättad af Pehr Kalm* [Stockholm: Tryckt på L. Salvii kostnad, 1753–61]); it was partially translated into French in 1761 and "adapted" under the pen name Rousselot de Surgy and the title *Histoire naturelle & politique de la Pensilvanie* (Paris, 1768); cited in De Pauw, *Défense*, 2:136.

50. De Pauw, *Défense*, 2:206, 2:145.

51. *Ibid.*, 2:118.

52. Raynal, *Histoire philosophique*, 6:376.

53. William Robertson, *History of America*, 2 vols. (London: W. Strahan, 1777), 1:398.

54. De Pauw, *Recherches*, 1:20, 1:91.

55. Raynal, "De quelles espèces d'hommes se sont peuplées les provinces de l'Amérique septentrionale" (On What Species of Men Peopled the Provinces of Northern America), chap. 32 in *Histoire philosophique*, 4:353.

56. De Pauw, *Défense*, 2:250.

57. Raynal, *Histoire philosophique*, 4:459. Same text in the Geneva in 12° edition of 1781.

58. John Adams to Mazzei, December 15, 1785, quoted in Echeverria, *Mirage*, 123.

59. The third American "genius," according to Jefferson, was David Rittenhouse (1732–1796), an astronomer and mathematician who invented and built numerous measuring devices. He held different government positions and was the first head of the American mint. He succeeded his friend Franklin as the head of the American Philosophical Society.

60. Jefferson, 51; the answer to the sixth query ("Query VI") includes a refutation of Buffon.

61. "Living nature is much less active, much less strong." Buffon, from the Paris edition of 1764 (18:122), quoted in Jefferson (48).

#### Chapter One

1. Gérard de Nerval, *Promenades et souvenirs* (Rambles and Recollections) in *Oeuvres*, 2 vols., Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 1:136.