On the Fourth of July in 1889, Rudyard Kipling found himself near Mammoth Hot Springs in Yellowstone with a party of tourists from New England. He winced as a “clergyman rose up and told them they were the greatest, freest, sublimest, most chivalrous, and richest people on the face of the earth, and they all said Amen.” Kipling—who had travelled from India to California, and then across the North American continent—was bewildered by the patriotic hyperbole that seemed to come so naturally to the citizens of the United States. There were many things about America that he loved—battling with a twelve-pound Chinook salmon in Oregon; American girls (“They are clever; they can talk. . . . They are original and look you between the brows with unabashed eyes”)—and he did go and live in Vermont for a while. But he was irritated by the relentless assurances that Americans seemed to require about their country’s incomparable virtue. When a “perfectly unknown man attacked me and asked me what I thought of American Patriotism,” Kipling wrote in “American Notes,” his account of the journey, “I said there was nothing like it in the Old Country,” adding, “always tell an American this. It soothes him.”

The Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun, who spent two miserable periods in the American Midwest in the eighteen-eighties—working as, among other things, farmhand, store clerk, railroad laborer, itinerant lecturer, and (more congenially) church secretary—treated the street parades of veterans “with tiny flags in their hats and brass medals on their chests marching in step to the hundreds of penny whistles they are blowing” as if the events were curiously remote tribal rituals. The fact that streetcars were forbidden to interrupt the parades and that no one could absent himself without incurring civic disgrace both interested and unsettled Hamsun. Something ominous seemed to be hatching in America: a strapping child-monster whose runaway physical growth would never be matched by moral or cultural maturity. Hamsun gave lectures about his stays in the United States at the University of Copenhagen, and then made them into a book, “The Cultural Life of Modern America,” that was largely devoted to asserting its nonexistence. Emerson? A dealer in glib generalizations. Whitman? A hot gush of misdirected fervor. For Hamsun, America was, above all, bluster wrapped up in dollar bills. “It is incredible how naively cocksure Americans are in their belief that they can whip any enemy whatsoever,” he wrote. “There is no end to their patriotism; it is a patriotism that never flinches, and it is just as loudmouthed as it is vehement.”
By the end of the nineteenth century, the stereotype of the ugly American—voracious, preachy, mercenary, and bombastically chauvinist—was firmly in place in Europe. Even the claim that the United States was built on a foundation stone of liberty was seen as a fraud. America had grown rich on slavery. In 1776, the English radical Thomas Day had written, “If there be an object truly ridiculous in nature, it is an American patriot, signing resolutions of independence with the one hand, and with the other brandishing a whip over his affrighted slaves.” After the Civil War, European critics pointed to the unprotected laborers in mines and factories as industrial helots. Just as obnoxious as the fraud of liberty was the fraud of Christian piety, a finger-jabbing rectitude incapable of asserting a policy without invoking the Deity as a co-sponsor. This hallelujah Republic was a bedlam of hymns and hosannas, but the only true church was the church of the Dollar Almighty. And how could the cult of individualism be taken seriously when it had produced a society that set such great store by conformity?

The face of the unloved American did not, of course, come into focus all at once. Different generations of European critics added features to the sketch depending on their own aversions and fears. In the early nineteenth century, with Enlightenment optimism soured by years of war and revolution, critics were skeptical of America’s naïve faith that it had reinvented politics. Later in the century, American economic power was the enemy, Yankee industrialism the behemoth against which the champions of social justice needed to take up arms. A third generation, itself imperialist, grumbled about the unfairness of a nation’s rising to both continental and maritime ascendancy. And in the twentieth century, though the United States came to the rescue of Britain and France in two world wars, many Europeans were suspicious of its motives. A constant refrain throughout this long literature of complaint, and what European intellectuals even now find most repugnant, is American sanctimoniousness, the habit of dressing the business of power in the garb of piety.

Too often, the moral rhetoric of American diplomacy has seemed to Europe a cover for self-interest. The French saw the Jay Treaty, of 1794, which regularized relations with Britain (with which republican France was then at war), as a cynical violation of the Treaty of Alliance with France, of 1778, without which, they reasonably believed, there would have been no United States. In 1811, it was the British who felt betrayed by the Americans, when Madison gave in to Napoleon’s demands for a trade embargo while the “mother country” was fighting for survival. But the gap between principles and practices in American foreign policy was as nothing compared with the discrepancy between the ideal and the reality of a working democracy. Although nineteenth-century writers paid lip service to the benevolent intelligence of the Founding Fathers, contemporary American politics suggested that there had been
a shocking fall from grace. At one end was a cult of republican simplicity, so
dogmatic that John Quincy Adams’s installation of a billiard table in the White
House was taken as evidence of his patrician leanings; at the other was a pa-
rade of the lowest vices, featuring, according to Charles Dickens, “despicable
trickery at elections, under-handed tampering with public officers . . . shame-
less truckling to mercenary knaves.”

A few transatlantic pilgrims, of course, saw American democracy haloed with
republican grandeur. When, in 1818, the twenty-three-year-old Scot Fanny
Wright, along with her younger sister Camilla, visited the Capitol, the con-
gressional morning prayer—“may the rod of tyranny be broken in every na-
tion of the earth!”—caused her to tremble with admiration. Only later did she
concede that she might have mistaken the commercial bustle of the country
for democratic zeal. And, indeed, for most European travellers extravagant
idealism was followed by an equally unbalanced disenchantment. Nikolaus
Lenau, a German poet who told a friend he meant to stay in the United
States for five years, managed only a brief period, from 1832 to 1833. He
could not tolerate a country where, he claimed, there were no songbirds. (In
the eighteenth century, the Dutch naturalist Cornelius de Pauw, lecturing on
America to the court of Frederick the Great, had solemnly insisted that dogs
in the New World never barked.)

Other characteristics of American life alienated the Romantics: the distaste
for tragedy (a moral corrective to illusions of invincibility); the strong prefer-
ence for practicality; the severance from history; and, above all, what the
Germans called bodenlosigkeit, a willed rootlessness, embodied in the flimsy
frame construction of American houses. Europeans watched, pop-eyed, while
whole houses were moved down the street. This confirmed their view that
Americans had no real loyalty to the local, and explained why they preferred
utilitarian “yards” to flower gardens. No delphiniums, no civility.

The British who arrived in the United States in the eighteen-thirties and for-
ties had imagined the young republic as a wide-eyed adolescent, socially
ungainly and politically gauche, but with some hint of promise. What they
found was a country experiencing an unprecedented growth spurt, both ter-
ritorial and demographic, and characterized by an unnerving rudeness, in
both senses of the word. ladies and gentlemen dodged quids of tobacco juice
and averted their gaze from the brimming cuspidors that greeted visitors to
steamboat saloons and hotel and theatre lobbies. The hallmark of Jacksonian
America seemed to be a beastly indifference to manners, the symptom of a
society where considerateness to others was a poor second to the immediate
satisfaction of personal wants.
The conduct of Americans at dinner said it all. They wolfed down their food, cramming corn bread into their sloppy maws during meals that were devoured in silence, punctuated only by slurps, grunts, scraping knives, and hacking coughs. (All those cigars.) At the Plate House, in the business district of New York, the naval captain and travel writer Basil Hall was astonished by the speed at which the corned beef arrived and then by the even greater speed at which it was demolished: “We were not in the house above twenty minutes, but we sat out two sets of company at least.” Only the boy waiters yelling orders at the kitchen broke the quiet. The lack of polite conversation suggested the melancholy and dispiriting monotony of American life, on which almost all the early reporters commented. Tocqueville explained the apparent paradox of anxiety amid prosperity as the result of the relentless obligation to be forever Up and Doing.

The European commentators’ dismay at the tyranny of American materialism was disingenuous, since many of them had come to the United States to repair their tattered fortunes or make new ones. Frances Trollope decided to sojourn in America when a rich uncle did the Trollopes the disservice of marrying late in life and, still worse, begetting an heir. Fanny Wright, whose ardor for America had been relit by the Marquis de Lafayette’s triumphal tour in 1824 and 1825, visited Mrs. Trollope at her expensive rented house at Harrow Weald, outside London, in 1827 and persuaded her to join her. Wright had bought two thousand acres of land on the Wolf River at Nashoba, Tennessee, with the aim of establishing a communal settlement where slaves would receive the education and practical skills that would fit them for freedom. Mrs. Trollope planned to visit the Nashoba utopia, with three of her five children, and then proceed from Memphis, fifteen miles away, up the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers to the thriving new city of Cincinnati, where she intended to make a smart little bundle.

But Fanny Wright’s settlement turned out to be a cluster of woebegone huts. Plank floors were set only a few feet above sodden mud. The chimney in the hut Mrs. Trollope shared with Wright caught fire several times a day. Instead of a model farm, there were a few slaves who were barely subsisting. Of the all-important school there was no sight and no prospect. Mrs. Trollope, aghast at the filth and the fever-bearing mosquitoes, fled with her children to Cincinnati, which was, alas, an “uninteresting mass of buildings,” where hogs rooted in the streets. Together with the French painter Auguste Hervieu (who had intended to teach at Nashoba), she flung herself into show business, remodelling a “Western Museum,” which had hitherto been a collection of natural curiosities and patriotic waxworks. Her son Henry became the Invisible Girl, booming prophecies in creepy darkness, and, with the help of glass
transparencies, she created a vision of the Infernal Regions, featuring frozen lakes with erupting fountains of flame, and electric shocks should the customers, peering through grates, try and touch the exhibits.

Mrs. Trollope’s next venture, a galleried, gaslit emporium of consumer wonders, stocked with fancy goods supplied from Harrow by her husband, ended in debt practically before it began. Mrs. Trollope was not quite prepared to admit defeat, but one of her children was seriously ill, and she decided that they had to return to England. She stopped in Washington, then spent five months with a hospitable friend in Stonington, Maryland. There, filling notebooks with a tart, vivid account of her experiences, Frances Trollope took a genteel revenge on the land that had betrayed her. “As I declare the country to be fair to the eye and most richly teeming with the gifts of plenty, I am led to ask myself why it is that I do not like it,” she wrote. She is struck by the fact that servants call themselves “help,” and bewildered that so many thousands of young women would rather toil “half-naked” in factories than seek to enter domestic service. When a Cincinnati neighbor, “whose appearance more resembled a Covent Garden market-woman than any thing else,” made the mistake of taking her arm and walking her about, “questioning me without ceasing,” Mrs. Trollope noted that, while democracy was very fine in principle, “it will be found less palatable when it presents itself in the shape of a hard greasy paw and is claimed in accents that breathe less of freedom than onions and whiskey.”

“Domestic Manners of the Americans” made Frances Trollope, at the age of fifty-two, a sudden literary reputation and two hundred and fifty pounds from the first edition. Her book was popular in Britain because it documented the stereotypes of cultural inferiority and boorish materialism that the Old World was avid to have confirmed about the New. Stendhal annotated a copy and concluded that there was indeed a “smell of the shop” about the country. Baudelaire remarked that it was the Belgium of the West. But the book sold equally well in Boston and Baltimore, albeit to scandalized and infuriated readers. “Trollope” soon became a popular shout of abuse in American theatres, and on display in New York was a waxwork of the author in the shape of a goblin.

The wounds inflicted on American self-love by Mrs. Trollope were superficial compared with the deep punctures made by Charles Dickens. In 1842, when Dickens published “American Notes,” an account of a visit to the United States, he had a huge American readership. His novels were instant best-sellers here, and many of them—most notably “Nicholas Nickleby” and “Oliver Twist”—had been dramatized on the popular stage. Despite, or perhaps be-
because of, the unhappiness “American Notes” engendered, fifty thousand copies were sold in a week in the U.S.

Dickens’s America is all Yankee repression and southern stupor. He saw Boston, New York, and Philadelphia through the keyhole of the prison cell and the madhouse. The Tombs, in New York, served as a metaphor for the dark, unforgiving world in which it was situated. And the geographical heart of the country, though not a jail or an asylum, or a reeking warren like the Five Points, was a river of death. Decades before Joseph Conrad steamed his way upstream into the heart of imperial darkness, Dickens, travelling from Cincinnati downstream to Cairo, Illinois (reversing Mrs. Trollope’s route), experienced the Mississippi as a septic ooze, a turbid soup of animal and vegetable muck. Cairo lay in the stinking belly of the beast: “The hateful Mississippi circling and eddying before it, and turning off upon its southern course a slimy monster hideous to behold; a hotbed of disease, an ugly sepulchre, a grave uncheered by any gleam of promise: a place without one single quality, in earth or air or water, to commend it: such is this dismal Cairo.”

The sense of America as a sink of contamination extended to its society and its institutions. In the Capitol, where Fanny Wright had been flooded with tremulous rapture, Dickens saw “the meanest perversion of virtuous Political Machinery that the worst tools ever wrought”—a clamorous gang of fakes, fools, and tricksters. His habitual outrage extended to the unrepentant practice of slavery in the South, but he never took the North’s support for emancipation as evidence of moral uprightness. The North, he wrote in a letter to a friend, hates the Negro quite as heartily as the South, but uses slavery as a pretext for domination.

Many people in the governing circles of both Britain and France were sympathetic to the South, not only because of the threatened interruption of raw-cotton supplies but also because a Confederate victory would preëmpt the emergence of a gigantic and powerful nation. In November, 1861, when an American warship stopped the British steamer Trent to remove two Confederate agents bound for London and Paris, the ailing Prince Albert had to intervene to restrain British calls for war. According to Philippe Roger, whose “L’Ennemi Américain” (2002) is a brilliant and exhaustive guide to the history of French Ameriphobia, the fate of the South became a sentimental fashion in Napoleon III’s Paris.

When the American republic failed to break up, the European angst about its economic transformation and territorial expansion became a neurosis. For some time, the British government, worried about the growing imperial rivalry of the new Germany and the French Republic, had complacently assumed
that American expansionism could be manipulated to keep its rivals at bay. If the American fleet would, for its own purposes, prevent European undesirables from straying into the Pacific at no cost to the British taxpayer, jolly good for the Stars and Stripes. The Spanish-American War of 1898, which the French treated as the unmasking of Yankee imperialism, was looked at in London with relaxed tolerance. Rudyard Kipling’s lines on “the White Man’s burden” were written not in praise of some triumph of the Union Jack beneath far-flung palm and pine but to celebrate the fall of Manila.

Much as he loved the energy of America, Kipling became progressively unhappy the farther east he went. Soot-black, fog-fouled Chicago, its scummy river speckled with rust and grease, was, he thought, an apparition of the American future. He stood on a narrow beam at the Chicago stockyards, looking down on the “railway of death” that carried squealing hogs to an appointment with two lines of butchers. The fact that the stockyards were also a tourist attraction only heightened his stupefaction. Unforgettably, he saw “a young woman of large mold, with brilliantly scarlet lips, and heavy eyebrows . . . dressed in flaming red and black, and her feet . . . were cased in red leather shoes. She stood in a patch of sunlight, the red blood under her shoes, the vivid carcasses tacked round her, a bullock bleeding its life away not six feet away from her, and the death factory roaring all round her.”

It is hard to know where fact ends and fiction begins in Kipling’s “American Notes,” but the book’s bravura passages established the idées fixes of Europeans about the muscular republic on the verge of its imperial awakening: awesomely carnivorous, racially mongrel, and socially polarized, both ethically primitive and technologically advanced. At the turn of the century, that stereotype, along with America’s cultural poverty (exceptions were always made for Mark Twain), imprinted itself in the literature of reporters from the old world. In an age absorbed by the physiology of national types, homo americanus seemed to have evolved for the maximization of physical force. While chewing gum was preferable to chewing tobacco, its ubiquitousness mystified French observers like Jules Huret, until he decided that it was a workout for the overevolved Yankee jaws and teeth, which needed all the power they could get to tear their way through the slabs of steak consumed at dinner.

Likewise, the appeal of American football—the Harvard-Yale game became almost as much a fixture of foreign itineraries as the stockyards—was explicable only as quasi-Spartan military training. What really startled Europeans was the blood-lust the sport seemed to provoke in spectators. At one Harvard-Yale game, Huret listened in appalled fascination as a nineteen-year-old yelled “Kill him!” and “Break his neck!” from the bleachers.
Modern anti-Americanism was born of the multiple insecurities of the first decade of the twentieth century. Just as the European empires were reaching their apogee, they were beset by reminders of their own mortality. At Adowa in 1896, the Ethiopians inflicted a crushing defeat on the Italians; in 1905, the Russian Empire was humiliated in war by the Japanese. Britain may have ruled a quarter of the world’s population and geographical space, but it failed to impose its will decisively on the South African Boers. And Wilhelm II’s Germany, though it was beginning to brandish its own imperial sword, remained fretful about “encirclement.” The unstoppability of America’s economy and its immigrant-fuelled demographic explosion worried the rulers of these empires, even as they staggered into the fratricidal slaughter that would insure exactly that future.

It was self-evident that France and Britain should have been grateful for the mobilization of American manpower in 1917, which tipped the balance against the Germans and Austrians. Colonel Charles E. Stanton’s declaration “Lafayette, we are here,” and the subsequent sacrifice of American lives for a European cause, seemed to herald a restoration of transatlantic good feelings. But, as Philippe Roger (and others, like the historians David Strauss and Jean-Philippe Mathy) explains, if the war created a brief solidarity, the peace more decisively destroyed it. When Woodrow Wilson failed to persuade Congress to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and America withdrew into isolationist self-interest, all the old insecurities and animosities returned. Wilson was perhaps the most detested of all American Presidents by the French, for whom his self-righteousness was compounded by his failure to deliver results.

American generosity (in the French view) toward German reparation schedules fed into the conspiracy theories that seethed and bubbled in the anti-American press in the nineteen-twenties and early thirties. In “The American Cancer,” Robert Aron and Arnaud Dandieu went so far as to argue that the First World War had been a plot of American high finance to enslave Europe in a web of permanent debt, a view that was echoed in J.-L. Chastanet’s “Uncle Shylock” and in Charles Pomaret’s “America’s Conquest of Europe.” The newspaper France-Soir calculated the weight of debt to the United States at seventy-two hundred francs for every French man and woman. Nor was there much in the way of sentimental gratitude for General Pershing’s doughboys. Why, it was asked, had the engagement of American troops on the western front been delayed until 1918? The answer was that the United States had waited until it could mobilize a force large enough not just to win the war but to dominate the peace.
For French writers like Kadmi-Cohen, the author of “The American Abomination,” the threat from United States was not just economic or military. America now posed a social and cultural danger to the civilization of Europe. The greatest “American peril” (a phrase that became commonplace in the literature) was the standardization of social life (the ancestor of today’s complaints against globalization), the thinning of the richness of human habits to the point where they could be marketable not only inside America but, because of the global reach of American capitalism, to the entire world. Hollywood movies, which, according to Georges Duhamel, were “an amusement for slaves,” and “a pastime for the illiterate, for poor creatures stupefied by work and anxiety,” were the Trojan horse for the Americanization of the world. Jean Baudrillard’s belief that the defining characteristic of America is its fabrication of reality was anticipated by Duhamel’s polemics against the “shadow world” of the movies, with their reduction of audiences to somnolent zombies sitting in the dark.

The charge that the United States was imposing its cultural habits on the prostrate body of war-torn Europe returned with even more force after 1945. Americans thought of the Marshall Plan (together with the forgiveness of French debts) as an exercise in wise altruism; European leaders like de Gaulle bristled with suspicion at the patronizing weight of the program. Complaints against Coca-Colonization, the mantra of the anti-globalizers, were already in full cry in the nineteen-fifties. But as Arthur Koestler, who bowed to no one in his loathing of “cellophane-wrapped bread, processed towns of cement and glass . . . the Organization Man and the Readers’ Digest,” put it in 1951, “Who coerced us into buying all this? The United States do not rule Europe as the British ruled India; they waged no Opium War to force their revolting ‘Coke’ down our throats. Europe bought the whole package because Europe wanted it.”

Yet somehow, in the present crisis, American democracy has let itself be represented as American despotism. Some in the European antia war movement see the whole bundle of American values—consumer capitalism, a free market for information, an open electoral system—as having been imposed rather than chosen. Harold Pinter told peace marchers in London two weeks ago that the United States was a “monster out of control.” And while representatives of the Iraqi exile community in Britain narrated stories of the atrocities their families had endured at the hands of Saddam Hussein, banners in Hyde Park equated the Stars and Stripes with the swastika.

These cavils are not necessarily false, just because they’ve been uttered by Ameriphobes. Fast-food nation was invented in the eighteen-thirties, and Captain Hall’s puzzled observation that in America the word “improvement”
seemed to mean “an augmentation in the number of houses and people and above all in the amount of cleared land” has not lost any of its validity with the passing of a hundred and seventy-odd years.

Early on, Europeans identified appetite and impatience as the cardinal American sins. Among the many anxieties of European friends, as well as enemies, of the United States is that Americans are not being told that what lies ahead may be much more testing than a fly-by war and a drive-through peace.

But of all the character flaws that Europeans have ascribed to Americans, nothing has contributed more to widening the Atlantic than national egocentricity (a bit rich, admittedly, coming from the French). Knut Hamsun put the emphatic celebration of separateness down to a lack of education about other places and cultures and commented, perhaps waspishly, “It is almost incredible how hard America works at being a world of its own in the world.” Virtuous isolation, of course, wasn’t a problem so long as the United States saw the exercise of its power primarily in terms of the defensive policing of its own continental space. But now that policing has gone irreversibly global, the imperious insistence on the American way, or else, has only a limited usefulness in a long-term pacification strategy. Like it or not, help will be needed, given America’s notoriously short attention span, intolerance of casualties, and grievously wounded prosperity. Serving the United Nations with notice of redundancy should its policies not replicate those of the United States and the United Kingdom might turn out to be shortsighted, since in Europe, even in countries whose governments have aligned themselves with America, there is almost no support for a war without U.N. sanction. Perhaps Mrs. Trollope put it best after all: “If the citizens of the United States were indeed the devoted patriots they call themselves, they would surely not thus encrust themselves in the hard, dry, stubborn persuasion, that they are the first and best of the human race, that nothing is to be learnt, but what they are able to teach, and that nothing is worth having, which they do not possess.”