Journal of American Studies of Turkey
17 (2003) : 111-118

Review Essay
America Within or Without

Perin Gürel

America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism by Lieven Anatol. New York: Oxford UP, 2004. 274 pages. Available from: Oxford University Press, 198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016.

As Thomas Jefferson put it, "Every man has two countries—his own and France"—words that could be well applied, culturally speaking, to much of the world today with reference to the United States.

Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong*

Foreigners scrutinizing the United States, such as non-American scholars of American studies, often meet raised eyebrows—even as the American Studies Association (ASA), in theory and increasingly in practice, welcomes them. To study the United States, apparently, one must produce an intellectual green card, preferably presented along with an American accent, white-enough skin, and proper Western attire. "Why did you come to America" becomes "Why are you studying America," and both are questions I have been asked one too many times.

This general suspicion of unauthorized knowledge is perhaps to be expected, especially considering that the deadly terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 were largely unanticipated and seemed planned by a malignant foreign force that had its unseen eye on America for long, knowing her, in the Foucauldian sense of the term. The following "intelligence failures" contributed to the feeling that America's mighty Panopticon had been slighted by the stealthy workings of transnational Jihad, which seemed to know America without being known, infiltrating the country, just as communists were believed to have done half a century ago. And just as then, an unapologetic xenophobia and militant nationalism bub-

bled to the surface of American life, surprising America's allies in post-national Western Europe—and prompting Anatol Lieven, a British citizen and senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, to begin researching the sources of this nationalism that seemed to parallel as well as deviate from early 20th-century European nationalisms.

Interestingly, fears of foreign knowledge of America and belligerent dismissal of opinions of non-Americans corresponded with the rise of an International or Transnational turn in American Studies, preceding and surviving the terrorist attacks. Beginning in the mid-1990s, American studies scholars began asking for more attention to be paid to the work of non-Americans and questioned the unstated assumption that foreign scholars' work on America is at best derivative. Jane Desmond and Virginia Dominguez argued in 1996 that "studying others when we do not authorize them to study us reveals and maintains a fundamental imbalance of power"—a reversal of the perceived post-9/11 knowledge and power gap between foreigners and U.S. citizens (477). Janice Radway enthusiastically agreed and, in her 1999 address to the ASA, added that those positioned beyond the borders of "America" would advance American studies by perceiving "culture and convention where others see only the world" (61). She called for the true inclusion of foreign scholars and de-centered perspectives of America, in effect, agreeing with Linda K. Kerber that this would generate "multiply-dimensioned analyses which simply could not happen before" (quoted in Desmond and Dominguez 483). On June 1, 2000, The International American Studies Association was founded to further this cause and held its first conference in the year 2003. A few months before Anatol Lieven's book went to print, American studies scholars such as Paul Giles had already declared the international turn complete ("Response" 19). There was little to do but sit and wait for the manifesto that would arrive in a foreign language but be immediately recognizable as revolutionary.

Anatol Lieven's *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism*, though written in crisp English and hardly a manifesto, serves as an interesting case study for investigating both nativist denunciations of the foreign will-to-know and the scholarly pleas for it. As a British-written analysis of American nationalism, it is a well-executed example of what a non-American reading of a deep-seated American political institution might look like. Therefore, in this review, I will try not only to outline Lieven's valuable and timely contribution to the scholarly discourse on American nationalism, but also note how variations of that very nationalism have

influenced the book's and its author's reception, and how the book should guide our understanding of current and future American studies scholarship by foreign scholars.

In *America Right or Wrong*, Lieven traces the genealogy of what he believes is a dichotomous American nationalism, based on the conflation of a wide-spread belief in a mythic, universalizing American Creed and a less dominant reactionary, fundamentalist "antithesis." His aim, as he states in his introduction, is to analyze the intersection of these two different strands and provide much-needed contextualization and historicization to a subject that always posits itself as ahistorical and ephemeral. According to Lieven, the combination (not the opposition) of these two ostensibly different strands, as exemplified by their utilization by the current U.S. administration, determines "the overall nature of the American national identity" and directs America's relations with the rest of the world (5). Lieven, however, also has a moral purpose in writing: his book is first and foremost an appeal to American intellectuals "to recognize and confront their own nationalism and to transcend it in the name of higher universal values" and a warning to the U.S. elite on the dangers of an unbridled and self-righteous commitment to Exceptionalism (18).

Lieven begins by studying American nationalism in the context of earlier European nationalisms, in part to challenge this widespread belief in American Exceptionalism, and successfully demonstrates how faith in the exceptional nature of one's country is not, in fact, specific to the United States—the only difference being that "in the United States this myth is very much alive" (33). Throughout the first chapter, Lieven cements his anthropological role as an outsider, always contextualizing and grounding in Western history what he believes many intellectuals take to be peculiar and essential. His reading of the different meanings of the word "treason," used without recoil by American conservative commentators, but virtually absent in today's Europe and Japan, where many intellectuals were persecuted under its banner during World War II, shows this contextualizing project at its best. Lieven has the gift of perspective, and uses it most skillfully in the first chapter of the book, aptly named "An Exceptional Nationalism?"

The following three chapters set out to outline the two different strands of American nationalism. In "Thesis: Splendor and Tragedy of the American Creed," Lieven identifies a civic nationalism based on the tenets of an American Creed, the centerpiece of which is a potent and universalizing belief in the essential rationality and equality of all humans stemming from

the axioms of Western Enlightenment. In this version of American nationalism, one becomes an American not through his or her affiliation with a race or ethnic group but by conforming to an ideology. This ideology-based system also enables people to be billed "anti-American" in a way that they cannot be billed anti-Swedish or anti-Spanish. Lieven is much more sympathetic to this face of American nationalism, which he acknowledges as a necessity in a nation-state made up of people of diverse ethnic, racial and religious affiliations such as the United States, and to a certain extent, France. However, he deserves credit for noting the way in which most Americans' unquestioned semi-religious belief in a set of ideologies generates conformism and messianism, "a belief in the nation's duty to save the world" (63). Lieven is interested in explaining how these national myths make Empire possible, by co-opting even liberal intellectuals with the alluring rhetoric of American Exceptionalism:

> This identification of the principles and spread for democracy with the American nation is a key link between the ideological bases of American Creedal nationalism and American Imperialism. Insofar as they can use this rhetoric in support of their plans, the imperialists have a tremendous means of seduction, as far as many Americans are concerned. (70)

Lieven's subsequent analysis of the Bush administration's use of this ubiquitous messianic strain to garner the support of a bewilderingly large portion of U.S. citizens for the 2003 invasion of Iraq is especially insightful.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on more militant and conspicuous forms of American nationalism, which Lieven calls the "Antithesis": the xenophobic and fundamentalist nationalism of the "embittered heartland" and much of the South. Lieven argues that, in contrast to the essentially optimistic and officially accepted American Creed, this religion-infused, unofficial nationalism is bitter and fatalistic. It also gains much of its potency from class, race and ethnic resentment and is essentially anti-modern, as opposed to the American Creed, which aims to erase difference and is based on the principles of modernity and Enlightenment. In these two chapters, it also becomes clear that *America Right or Wrong* occasionally suffers from its wide scope. Lieven's explication of this Anti-Creedal nationalism, in which he jumps from the Frontier to the Scopes Monkey Trial to Irish-American nationalism leaves the reader breathless. While this might make for a stimulating read, it unfortunately leaves many intriguing points half-explored. For example, Lieven touches upon the relationship between

crises of masculinity and American nationalism, but this gendered dimension is quickly abandoned after a few sentences affirming the existence of a connection. These chapters, densely peppered with endnotes, gallop through American political and cultural history, constantly referring the reader who would like more depth to their impressive compendia of secondary sources.

In the last two chapters, Lieven traces the legacy of the Cold War, which he argues strengthened and bound together the messianic and Jacksonian strands of American nationalism, and analyzes the reasons for and results of America's unconditional backing of the Israeli government. The latter, "American Nationalism, Israel and the Middle East," allows Lieven ample ground to demonstrate his expertise on Middle Eastern politics and reads more like a political tract than a historical look into American nationalism, despite Lieven's skill in drawing parallels between Israeli nationalism and the American antithesis. In both of these chapters, Lieven continues his function as a sympathetic foreign ally, urging Americans "to reexamine deeply rooted elements in their political culture" and warning them that Israel has become a "liability" with regards to the United States' struggle against terrorism (152). The two stated missions of the book, analyzing and advising, also come to the foreground in the conclusion, as Lieven asks American intellectuals to "step outside American national myths and look at the nation with detachment, not as an exceptional city on a hill, but as a mortal nation among other nations" as he himself has done for over 200 pages (222).

As previously argued, in the current atmosphere of xenophobic nationalism, "knowledge" in the Foucauldian sense has been reserved for the U.S. government and for imperial aims. (A very sinister example, which Lieven mentions in his book, is the way in which anthropological "knowledge" about the power of sexual shame in Arab culture has dictated methods of torture at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo.) Coming from a foreigner studying American culture, many of Lieven's analyses have already drawn dismissive criticism. Jonathan Tepperman, in a *New York Times* essay that basically classified Lieven and his book under the rubric of "Anti-Americanism," has accused him of anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism. In a letter to the liberal journal the *Nation*, Michael McFaul has also charged Lieven with trying to "meddle" in American domestic politics (2). This attack, coming from an American intellectual, is all too reminiscent of the response of some voters to English engagement with the 2004 elections, as expressed in an e-mail to the *Guardian* from an American

citizen: "Hey England, Scotland and Wales, mind your own business. We don't need weenie-spined Limeys meddling in our presidential elections" (quoted in Michelini 32.) Lieven, in the letter answering the accusations of his critics, noted the use of the word "meddle" is this sense and argued that "cogent criticisms from well-meaning and pro-American foreigners [are] too often dismissed out of hand as illegitimate" (2). It seems that the American Studies Association's call for foreign analyses of the United States is not widely embraced outside the academia.

But what does Lieven mean when he defends himself by stating he is "pro-American," without problematizing the term the way he has skillfully done its binary opposite? And in what ways does his lack of an American birth certificate enhance or disable his scholarship? *America Right or Wrong* fits well within the work of new Americanists today, as it aims to "re-examine certain fundamental national myths, including that of liberal messianism," and succeeds at least in relating the importance of doing so. Much of Lieven's earlier articles are equally dedicated to "wising up" American liberals, helping them see their own unquestioned assumptions and provide them with non-American views of American acts. For example, one of Lieven's early book reviews begins, "Many works on international affairs from the 'Realist' school of foreign policy in the United States don't necessarily look that way to the rest of humanity" ("Empire" 58). So Lieven actively positions himself both outside and inside the United States, as a knowing expert as well as a non-citizen with the advantage of perspective. In *America Right or Wrong*, he replicates this active positioning, staking out a territory of knowledge both as an intellectual authority and as a non-American. In many ways, then, Lieven's work epitomizes Janice Radway's belief that "those positioned beyond [America's] borders and hence at remove from ordinary and taken-for-granted ways of seeing and doing things can frequently denaturalize the familiar with greater effectiveness and thereby see culture and convention where others see only the world" (61).

Yet, it is equally revealing how "American" Lieven can be. In letters answering to charges of "meddling," he aligns himself with another attractive American myth, right after mentioning the need to question all such myths. "To say this is not the standpoint of an arrogant foreigner," he retorts, "It stands in a great tradition of critical American thought, which should be revived as a matter of profound intellectual and indeed patriotic urgency" (Letter 2). It seems to me that, like his description of American nationalism, Lieven's work is double-stranded. At his best, Lieven not only explains but deconstructs the myths and symbols of American nationalism

from the privileged standpoint of an outsider, and, at other times, he utilizes terms such as "great tradition," "modernization" and "patriotic" without the slightest problematization. Take for example his baffling assertion that "the success of the American Dream joined with the American Creed to form the American Thesis and to tie up the demons of the American Antithesis," which follows pages of careful analysis on how the American Creed and the Antithesis coalesce in American politics. Equally inexplicable is his sincere enthusiasm for an American hegemony directed by "soft power" and modernization (222). In these instances, Lieven seems all too "American," all too eager to accept one Western myth, while rejecting another. While Lieven does not foreground this double allegiance, to his credit, he does mention its possibility, as the quotation I chose to use as an epigraph to this review shows: "As Thomas Jefferson put it, 'Every man has two countries—his own and France' —words that could be well applied, culturally speaking, to much of the world today with reference to the United States" he writes in *America Right or Wrong* (35).

After being proclaimed half-dead and irrelevant by influential social and cultural critics in the early 1990s, nationalism has once again reared its ugly head to become a "fundamental social principle" in the world, dictating foreign and domestic policy around the world (Giles 440). Anatol Lieven's work gives us an insightful and timely "anatomy" of American nationalism while eerily demonstrating its scope. For American studies scholars, therefore, *America Right or Wrong* should foreground important questions its author probably did not intend: Is there really an uncontaminated space from which a purely non-American critique of American political acts and American studies can be launched? Does globalizing American studies really thoroughly "displace American perspectives on the subject," as Robert Gross has eloquently argued? (384). As a foreign scholar of American studies, I am tempted to agree enthusiastically with calls for an international American studies and believe in the ultimate sensibility of swinging open the gates as wide as possible. Anatol Lieven's excellent contribution to the debate on American nationalism stands as proof that there is merit to the oft-repeated postulation that, like an anthropologist studying a culture other than his own, a foreign, multilingual scholar will be able to bring fresh and revolutionary perspectives to the proverbial table.[1]

---

[1] An excellent example, as depicted skillfully by Donald E. Pease, is Trinidadian writer and critic C. L. R. James, whose a-national position as an immigrant awaiting deportation, allowed him to challenge the tenets of the Myth and Symbol school of American studies.

Many of Lieven's observations are, as previously argued, strikingly novel and thought provoking. However, they should also teach us to note the extent to which non-American scholars are "American," and the degree to which we, as foreign Americanists, are not immune to a kind of double consciousness, as well as self-Orientalizing. If Americanism, as Leon Samson argued, is "an impersonal attachment toward a system of ideas" unbound by nation-state and highly exportable, perhaps we need not be so idealistic about the possible contributions of non-US citizens to the discourse of American studies (quoted in Denning 357). At the very least, we must recognize the extent to which non-American scholars of American studies—myself included—are influenced by selected pet myths.

Works Cited

Denning, Michael. "'The Special American Conditions': Marxism and American Studies." *American Quarterly* 38.3 (1986): 355-380.

Desmond, Jane C. and Virginia R. Dominguez. "Resituating American Studies in a Critical Internationalism." *American Quarterly* 48.3 (1996): 475-90.

Giles, Paul. "Virtual Americas: The Internationalization of American Studies and the Ideology of Exchange." *American Quarterly* 50.3 (1998): 523-547.

———. "Response to the Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, Hartford, Connecticut, October 17, 2003." *American Quarterly* 56.1 (2004): 19-32.

Gross, Robert A. "The Transnational Turn: Rediscovering American Studies a in Wider World." *Journal of American Studies* 34.3 (2000): 373-393.

Lieven, Anatol. Letter. *Nation* 29 Nov. 2004: 2.

———. "Empire State Building." Rev. of "American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy" by Andrew J. Bacevich. *Washington Monthly* Jan - Feb. 2003: 58-60.

McFaul, Michael. Letter. Nation 29 Nov. 2004: 2.

Michelini, Melissa. "An Atlantic Bond Undone?: Ties between Great Britain and the United States." *Berkeley Political Review* Jan. 2004: 32.

Pease, Donald E. "C.L.R James, Moby-Dick, and the Emergence of Transnational American Studies." *The Futures of American Studies*. Ed. Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman. Durham: Duke UP, 2002. 135-163.

Radway, Janice. "What's in a Name?" *The Futures of American Studies*. Ed. Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002. 135-163.

Tepperman, Jonathan. "The Anti-Anti-Americans." *New York Times* 12 Dec. 2004, late ed., sec.7:24.