Alan McPherson
Anti-Americanism Studies, Past and Future: The Case of Latin America
by Sinan Hastorun

Alan McPherson is a specialist in American and Latin American history whose current research focuses on anti-Americanism and its role in US-Latin American relations. Given the current surge in interest among the American public in understanding anti-American feelings around the world, McPherson delivered a highly relevant and timely lecture at the Mershon Center on this phenomenon and its causes and offered his suggestions how the topic could be more fruitfully approached.

McPherson’s lecture provided an overview of the long history of studies of anti-Americanism in Latin America by American scholars and then identified certain directions scholarship in this field may need to take if it is to move towards a serious cluster of inquiry. McPherson argued that there have been four waves of scholarship on the subject since the 1920s and research on US power in Latin American is certainly plentiful. Though each successive wave reflected an improvement in certain respects, however, up until the final and current wave following the events of 9/11 earlier waves were often restrained by political polarization, lack of reliable sources, prejudice and bias and a lack of imaginative approaches to scholarship. In contrast, the current wave of scholarship on anti-Americanism in Latin America as well as other regions is more detached, analytical and empirical, and, McPherson believes, more promising.

Through his extensive, critical survey of these waves, McPherson showed that many of the earlier studies suffered from lack of evidence and systematic research, and had methodological problems. This was mainly because their source was the great texts of anti-Americanism, authored by elites or intellectuals. Systematic polls to gauge the full
extent and intensity of anti-American feelings or narratives and popular writings of average Latin Americans were rarely consulted. Further, these studies often reflected an overriding goal of American scholars to defend, even justify, the actions of the US in the face of Latin American criticism and hostility rather than served as a serious attempt to understand anti-Americanism.

Early studies were also plagued by their out-of-hand dismissal of any criticism of the United States as an irrational fear of American power and the supposed progress it brought to the region. McPherson argued that by viewing Latin American resistance to American military occupation or investment as a pathological condition denied agency to Latin Americans. Such obscured our understanding of the sources and effects of hostility towards and criticism of the US in the region and perpetuated a highly biased view of such feelings as an irrational phobia that needed to be cured.

The scholarship in the latter half of the 20th century benefited from more systematic analysis and greater direct interaction with ordinary people in the region. However, widespread anti-Communism that existed during the Cold War served to distort studies of anti-Americanism to a great extent. These studies suffered from two prevalent tendencies. First, analysts and ultimately US policy circles tended to equate any kind of criticism of the United States with Communist propaganda in this era. Secondly, researchers focused their attention on small groups of guerillas and communists in the region and extrapolated from their ideas and actions the belief that wider society also believed the same.

Slowly, though, more analytical and empirical treatments of anti-Americanism emerged. This was due to a number of factors, among which the end of the Cold War and the erosion of Western paranoia about communism in the developing world. More and
more, political scientists came to the fore, devising definitions, undertaking case studies, and developing models for comparative purposes.

Progress was evident, but some traces of past intellectual errors remained. These studies suffered from an abiding tendency to defend Washington from its critiques rather than trying to understand those critiques on their own terms.

The events of 9/11 opened up a new phase in anti-Americanism studies by generating a worldwide discussion on its causes and possible remedies. Increased dialogue among scholars across disciplines and regions has been positive, said McPherson. Nonetheless, just as anti-Communism messages distorted the understanding of anti-Americanism in the 1960s and 70s, the fear of terrorism threatens to derail serious scholarship in the new century.

McPherson also warned against ideological polarization among scholars. Works on the right tends to focus on irrational expressions of anti-Americanism and mostly hatred towards America and its free, democratic character and its wealth, and ignore rational or less extreme ones. They argue that anti-Americanism has little to do with evidence and more to do with emotions.

On the other hand, those on the left tend to view such resentment as justified in the light of U.S. policies around the world. They perceive little or no hatred of America for what it is, and only for what it does.

But McPherson finds either side of these analyses to be unsatisfactory because they rarely analyze the criticism of these deeds. Such works either oppose or side with the critiques, and hence fail to engage different manifestations of anti-American discourse.
McPherson believes that despite this political polarization, the post-9/11 era has allowed more moderate scholars to delve into the complexity of anti-Americanism. His main point is that the burgeoning set of more detached, rigorous, and comprehensive studies exists today and is the promising wave of scholarship. It is more balanced between domestic and foreign sources, more quantitative, realistic, and involves more personal narratives. This body of work is also more sensitive to anti-Americanism’s various social meanings and articulations. This is particularly important given that most polls on the subject have found such feelings to be always ambivalent rather than clear-cut.

Finally, McPherson argued that the future of anti-Americanism studies lies not just in questioning the specifics of feelings of resentment, envy or hatred, but also using additional sources and perspectives and providing better theoretical underpinnings. There are possibly six fruitful directions such studies could take. They could examine the intellectual construction of anti-Americanism and study the context in which it arises. One could focus on the history of institutions and how they organize opposition to US power. A third way is to undertake generational studies and examine the roots of differences in their approach to US policies. Social movements and the role of civil society in constructing an anti-American discourse may be studied. A fifth way is to examine the psychological component and not just acknowledge emotions, but rather study how they emerge and are promoted. Finally, anti-Americanism of the poor could be a promising avenue of research. Scholars should examine those groups whose political opinions are rarely heard because their implications may be strong. Whichever path is chosen, however, anti-Americanism should not be taken as granted as an intuitive
phenomenon, but rather as one which is worthy of serious, systematic study that is complex, multi-faceted and subject to change.