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# Anti-historicality of the American Mind: On the Origins of the American Left's and Right's Taste for "General Ideas" and Dislike of History

*Summary*

The purpose of this article is to capture one of the key features of the political thought that developed in the United States of America. Assuming that the USA's political culture is indeed exceptional, the author attempts to find the common denominator that would reflect the singularity of the American political mind. The author states that such a feature is the radical anti-historicality of the American mode of thinking about politics. It is a phenomenon that is deeply-rooted in the political and spiritual past of the United States and seems to be crucial because it never developed to such an extent in other traditions. Furthermore, even today to a large extent it defines both the American left and right. It is also very much present in academic discussion as well as in ordinary political activities. By anti-historicality the author means the rejection of the thesis that politics within a given society depends on that society's past experience. The phenomenon defies simple normative assessments. On the one hand, it protects American politics from the perils of radical historicism; on the other hand, it hinders the USA's contacts with other political bodies. However, the author concludes that

understanding American anti-historicality is crucial when entering into any relations with the USA.

**Keywords**

anti-historicality, historicism, American left and right, neconservatism, pragmatism, transcendentalism, Kantian socialism, Leo Strauss, Alexis de Tocqueville

## ANTYHISTORYCZNOŚĆ UMYSŁU AMERYKAŃSKIEGO O PRZYCZYNACH ZAINTERESOWANIA AMERYKAŃSKIEJ LEWICY I PRAWICY „OGÓLNYMI PROBLEMAMI" ORAZ NIECHĘCI WOBEC HISTORII

*Streszczenie*

Celem artykułu jest uchwycenie jednej z zasadniczych cech myśli politycznej, która rozwinęła się w Stanach Zjednoczonych Ameryki. Przyjmując znaną tezę o amerykańskiej (politycznej) wyjątkowości, autor stara się znaleźć wspólny mianownik, który istotnie byłby odzwierciedleniem odrębności amerykańskiego politycznego umysłu. Autor stwierdza, iż taką cechą jest radykalna antyhistoryczność amerykańskiego myślenia o polityce. Jest to czynnik głęboko zakorzeniony w przeszłości politycznej i duchowej USA. Wydaje się on podstawowy, gdyż nie ma aż tak przemożnego wpływu na rozwój innych tradycji myśli politycznej; co więcej, również dziś definiuje on w dużym stopniu zarówno amerykańską lewicę, jak i prawicę oraz jest obecny w akademickich rozważaniach i w codziennej działalności politycznej. Przez antyhistoryczność autor rozumie odrzucenie tezy o tym, iż polityka uprawiana w danym społeczeństwie jest zależna od jego poprzednich doświadczeń. Cecha ta wymyka się prostym normatywnym ocenom. Z jednej strony chroni ona bowiem amerykańską politykę od antynomii radykalnego historycyzmu, z drugiej jednak utrudnia USA kontakty z innymi ciałami politycznymi, a więc i prowadzenie efektywnej polityki zagranicznej. Tym niemniej, zrozumienie tego czynnika jest zasadnicze dla wejścia w jakiekolwiek polityczne kontakty z USA.

**Słowa kluczowe**

anty-historyczność, historyzm, lewica i prawica amerykańska, neokonserwatyzm, pragmatyzm, transcendentalizm, socjalizm Kanta, Leo Strauss, Alexis de Tocqueville

## INTRODUCTION – ON HISTORICALITY AND HISTORICISM

Historicality in political theory consists in seeing political phenomena as fundamentally path dependent. It has to be stressed that it is different from both the theistic and the modern historicism. Historicism sees history as having a definite, inevitable end, both in the figurative and literal sense. In the Judeo-Christian tradition it is the sole prerogative of the divine authority to steer towards that end. Modern Hegelian or Marxian historicism, however, surrenders to what Voegelin [1987, p. 122-134] calls intellectual Gnosticism and substitutes God with the mind of the intellectual. Both approaches are, however, far more categorical in their understanding of history than the simple historical proposition.

This essay will argue that beginning from the 1830's, American political thought steadily abandoned both the old theological historicism and historicality altogether. This and the deeply engrained individualism shielded the American mind from Marxian historicism. However, as a result, the new American conservatives have become curiously similar to the transcendentalists and early progressives. The cultural idea of American newness proposed by the transcendentalists seems to foreshadow the modern political idea of American exceptionalism and its anti-historicality. This concept had already for some time been a part of the ideological repertoire of the American left; recently, however, it became also a part of American conservatism. This phenomenon in itself should not be judged as positive or negative, but merely important; especially for foreigners who want to communicate with the ahistorical Americans and to the Americans who want to communicate with the numerous historical cultures that happen to inhabit the globe.

In a modestly prescriptive manner, one may, however, remark that excessive anti-historicality can make American political thought vulnerable to new forms of historicist encroachments that might attempt to absolutize the visions of future, past and present. It is possible that without the bulwark of historical knowledge, the "general ideas" [Tocqueville 2010, p. 726-749] Tocqueville mentions can have too big a sway over the American mind. It is also difficult to imagine a global anti-historical foreign policy, if such a policy is to be a conscientious one.

## TOWARDS THE AMERICAN NEWNESS

There are many possible theories explaining the notion of American newness that later leads to anti-historicality in the general view of politics. As Daniel Bell [1989, p. 40] observes, "From the start, Americans have believed that destiny has marked their country as different from all others." Naturally, one can point to at least two philosophical sources of that feeling of difference. Firstly, the messianic, theological historicism of the puritans; secondly Hamilton's notion of grand experiment by virtue of which:

> it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country to decide, by their conduct and example, the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not, of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend, for their political constitution, on accident and force [Federalist 2001, p. 1].

The puritan historicism was preoccupied with history as an expression of the divine will. Puritan intellectuals similarly to the Federalists were usually quite well versed in the intricacies of global political history, which is aptly demonstrated in the monumental work of Cotton Mather [1855]. The modern anti-historicality had its roots both in the founding and colonial heritage but did not develop fully at that time; history was still studied as the guide of politics even if some intellectuals already thought of overcoming it.

In spite of their respect for the Puritan tradition, the Founding Fathers, decided to add the classical republicanism and the philosophy of natural right to the alloy from which the principles of the new Constitution were forged. What is startling, however, was the prodigious historical knowledge they had and used during the creation of the *novus ordo seclorum*. Not only Rome, Athens and Sparta but also Germany, Switzerland, Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and last but not least the Lycian Confederation are mentioned many times in *The Federalist Papers*. It is as if in almost every article constantly found a point on which older republics and other states have erred and which the USA could improve on. Benjamin Franklin's historicity is yet another peculiarity of eighteenth century American political thought. Franklin's early writings suggest that in 1751 he

entertained the idea of forming a more tightly knit Anglo-American empire which, with access to both oceans, would be the global Rome [Andrew 2011, p. 81-82]. Washington, over forty years later in his *Farewell Address*, [Washington 2000] sharply disagreed with Franklin's vision and saw continental isolationism as the key to American foreign policy. Steering away from exotic alliances and European wars was of paramount importance to Washington. Such was the first U.S. president's sober and realistic vision based on America's most recent experience. What *The Federalist Papers*, Washington and Franklin all had in common was, however, a historical mode of thinking and historical arguments that they used in spite of some early anti-historical elements of their thought.

Jefferson, who is often quoted by modern anti-historical theorists, did not take part in the Philadelphia convention and during his presidency was quickly forced to abandon his radicalism. Historicality and not the anti-historical Jeffersonian natural-rights philosophy at the end of the day remained the more prominent element of the American founding. It is little wonder that Montesquieu [Lutz 1984, p. 189-197], who rejected the anti-historical, rationalistic natural rights philosophy, was the second most widely quoted author of the American founding. The Bible, however, still remained the most quoted authority on political theory. As for the anti-historicality, Thomas Jefferson was naturally its main champion in that era. However, even Jefferson's ideas did not really compare to the radical anti-historicality of the next generation.

## THE JACKSONIAN ERA AND THE DEMOCRATIC REJECTION OF HISTORY

The definite shift in the American view of history came only with the westward expansions and the rapid democratization. However, historians are still unable to fully explain the phenomenon of the Jacksonian era's rapid break away from the past. What is clear is that three events that are crucial for the development of the American political thought all coincide between 1829 and 1837. Those events are: the election of Andrew Jackson, who was the first populist, self-made man in office; Emerson's giving of the famous *American Scholar*

lecture, which was called by Oliver Wendell Holmes "the intellectual declaration of independence" [Cheever 2006, p. 80]; and Alexis de Tocqueville's trip to America, which led to him writing the timeless classic of political thought, *Democracy in America*. Importantly, it was also in this period that with the words of Irving Howe the "refusal of history" was made into "the first principle" [Howe 1986, p. 4] of American intellectual life and retained that position in spite of the dissenting voices coming mainly from authors of fiction such as Nathaniel Hawthorn, Henry James and Mark Twain.

Adumbrating some of the reasons for this shift one may note that history understood as collective memory is not merely an art of remembering but also of collectively forgetting [Anderson 1991, p. 6]. America at the time needed an identity that was wide enough to encompass its growing, diverse immigrant population, and shallow enough to prevent conflicts with the already settled groups. The raw democratic sentiment triumphed over the more restrained, republican vision of the founders; Americans were creating a "new society outside of history, beyond the reach of tradition and unrestrained by collective memory" [McAlister 2011, p. 71] Rather than stressing the importance of common history American society wanted and needed to embrace a philosophy that is unifying, Kantian, universalistic and anti-historical. Such a philosophy was quickly provided by Ralph Waldo Emerson and other transcendentalists. "What have I to do with the sacredness of tradition, if I live whole from within?.. No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature" [Emerson 2009a, eBook] – declares Emerson. "A man will not need to study history to find out what is best for his own culture" – proclaims David Thoreau [Thoreau 1995, p. 200]. In the *American Scholar* Emerson describes the old, historical method of acquiring the philosophical and political acumen with condescending spite. He writes that "Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it is their duty to the views, which Cicero, which Locke and Bacon, have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries, when they wrote these books" [Emerson 2009b, eBook]

Emerson's anti-historicity was, however, not a form of theologically unbound natural rights theory that one encounters in the works of some of the contemporary, American political theorists, especially those from the Straussian school. What Emerson embraced was at

least partly a reorganization of the old theological historicism. The difference was that according to the Emersonian version of the old creed man has gained direct access to the mind of God and thus no longer needed to remain in his hands. For Emerson humans were simply no longer the sinners depicted in the famous sermon of Jonathan Edwards [2007]. Moreover, unlike the earlier, American theologians and thinkers Emerson prioritized the moment of transcendental insight over any form of learning. "Books are for the scholar's idle times. When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings," [Emerson 2009b, eBook] he boldly proclaimed. One is obliged to agree with Irving Howe that "if you believe, as Emerson wrote, that man, indeed all being, is 'pervaded by the nerves of god,' you can dispense with the historical method" [Howe 1986, p. 30].

Walt Whitman, the great poet of the generation went even further, becoming a democratic man-god he wrote, "And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,/ And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own…And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is" [Whitman 2008, eBook]. In total, in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* the word "God" appears more than 90 times usually in context similar to the lines quoted above. As far as politics is concerned, Whitman powerfully proclaims: "Democracy! near at hand to you a throat is now inflating itself and joyfully singing" [Whitman 2008, eBook] Elsewhere he calls American democracy "athletic."

Indeed, in the second-half of the nineteenth century the USA's politics after the period of the first, aristocratic and history-savvy presidents, became the domain of political "athletes." Chief executives of the new era were men of strong personalities, populists gaining wide support, often-former military leaders or militant politicians heading prodigious party machines. We thus encounter men like Andrew Jakson, Zachary Taylor, Jams K. Polk, Martin VanBuren. Later comes Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses Grant and then history finally moves towards presidents like Martin Van Buren and Theodore Roosevelt. In short, politics of the era became a curious mixture of strong ideological preference for democracy and equally strong plutocratic tendencies.

Later an informal balance between the traditionally elitist congress and populist presidents was established; but during the Jacksonian

period, with its spoils system and the deconstruction of the central bank, the athletic democracy of the executives seemed to dominate. Even the radicals of the bygone era were baffled by their own creation. As Gordon S. Wood remarks, "Jefferson was frightened by the popularity of Adrew Jackson, regarding him as a man of violent passion and unfit for presidency. He felt overwhelmed by the new paper-money business sweeping through the culture and never appreciated how much his democratic and egalitarian principles had contributed to its rise" [Wood 1991, p. 367]. The far less radical, aging Madison likewise "spent much of his old age bewailing the results of the Revolution … 'Where is now, the progress of the human Mind? … How is the present chaos to be arranged into order?' he asked" [Wood 1991, p. 365-366].

## THE POST-KANTIAN AND POST-HEGELIAN SOCIALISM

Alexis de Tocqueville, who visited American in 1831 at the onset of the Jacksonian era is famed for his acute perceptiveness of the intellectual features of the new-born democratic societies. According to the great Frenchmen, practical, business-oriented calculations and the general postulate of egalitarianism led democracies in two seemingly opposite directions: towards individualistic pragmatism that neglects the abstract, theoretical and historical inquiry [Tocqueville 2010, p. 780-804] and towards collectivistic thinking that attributes historical agency only to the masses [Tocqueville 2010, p. 853-860]. Those tendencies are only seemingly opposite, for they have a common origin in the rejection of history as a source of knowledge about life, and it is very likely that they ultimately may lead to similar political outcomes. It was, however, still too early for Tocqueville to fully perceive the typically twentieth-century difference between the collective, historicist, post-Hegelian socialism of the Old Continent, and the rational, individualistic, post-Kantian, "liberalism" of the American left. However, in the 1830s Tocqueville had already seen certain interesting features that seem to be conducive to the rise of both trends in modern political thought. Writing about the perception of history among democratic peoples, he stated that

> …most of them attribute to the individual almost no influence on the destiny of the species, or to citizens on the fate of the people. But, in return, they give great general causes to all small particular facts. [In their eyes, all events are linked by a tight necessary chain and therefore they sometimes end up by denying nations control over themselves and by contesting the liberty of having been able to do what they did [Tocqueville 2010, p. 853-854].

One clearly sees the criticism of early sociology in the above quote. The sociological "taste for general ideas" [Tocqueville 2010, p. 722-730] is another recurring theme in Tocqueville's work, as is the individualism of ordinary Americans. The French thinker, however, did not manage to clearly show the connection between the teleological determinism of the democratic thinkers and the manifested individualism of the society. He, naturally, did recognize that both tendencies coexist in the same place and time. One is inclined to conclude that sweeping generalizations are, according to Tocqueville, typical of all forms of the modern (i.e. democratic) social thought. Only did it become apparent that Europe remained more historical in its generalizations, while America generalized on the basis of the ahistorical individualism and pragmatism.

In line with some Tocquevillian insights James T. Kloppenberg suggest that both William James – the father of pragmatism, American progressives and the European revisionists or social-democrats were essentially members of the same school of political thought [Kloppenberg 1986, p. 6-11]. Kloppenberg, however, fails to notice that James's own philosophy was an obvious case of transcendental anti-historicality, whereas European socialism was a case of historicism. He also does not mention that even those among American progressives, who like Herbert Croly at times cited Marx almost word by word [Croly 2005, p. 14] still had to pay lip-service to American individualism and avoid making historical or overtly Marxist references.

With its class struggle described as the motor of history and the vision of a timeline that start with a Rousseauesque lone savage, collectivistic socialism was a perversion of the old European historical mind, and that is why it was so appealing to the intellectuals of the Old Continent. One must, however, clearly have an overdeveloped historical mind in order to suffer from its possible perversions.

The anti-historical Americans for this reason remained immune to all the possible Hegelian influences.

In the USA of the progressive and New Deal era, the political elites and intellectuals remained faithful to Jacksonian individualism that was deeply ingrained in the culture thanks to the work of authors such as Emerson and Whitman. Only fringe movements such the Industrial Workers of the World dissented. Nothing came of the hopes of Croly and Roosevelt for the future rise of collectivism in America. Anti-historicality and individualism ultimately trumped historicism. What developed instead of socialism was a somewhat socially sensitive universalistic philosophy that came into maturity with James's pragmatism. Importantly, William James does not see his pragmatism or "common sense" as a result of some sort of historical development but rather an ahistorical backbone connecting all periods and all minds; this is a deeply Katian understanding of reason. Kant's atemporal, non-spatial and anti-historical reason in its homeland was, however, defeated by the historians and historicists. In the USA it triumphed and enabled James go even further by writing,

> On a map I can distinctly see the relation of London, Constantinople, and Peking to the place where I am; in reality I utterly fail to FEEL the facts which the map symbolizes. The directions and distances are vague, confused and mixed. Cosmic space and cosmic time, so far from being the intuitions that Kant said they were, are constructions as patently artificial as any that science can show ... [James 1975, p. 87]

Politically James ultimately triumphed over the covertly Hegelian socialism. The most prominent modern, American socialists like John Rawls and Richard Rorty (in later works) were to be Kantian and not Hegelian socialists. The ultimate fruit of this philosophical tradition is Rawls's famous original proposition [Rawls 2003, p. 80-132] where anonymous agents who have no past, no features and no homeland meet to devise a society whose goal is to offer the poor the best possible life.

Let us stress once again, European socialism and social-democracy is ideologically a modification of Hegel's historicistic mind, American social liberalism is a modification of the Kantian ahistorical mind. The reason for this divergence rests in culture defined by history and is

partly reflected in the fact that in the USA left-wing politicians and public intellectuals are still referred to as liberals rather than socialists or social-democrats.

## LEO STRAUSS AND THE NEW AMERICAN CONSERVATISM

It is unclear whether Leo Strauss, who was a European-educated intellectual, originally had intended to become as anti-historical as he did in the USA. Perhaps, he was merely reacting to the visible sentiments and demands of the Americans? It remains, however, a fact that his disciples along with the neoconservative politicians, soon became one of the dominant forces of the American, intellectual right and easily marginalized the Madisonian and Burkian conservatives, who insisted on grounding their tradition in a clear historical context.

Strauss famously constructed his ahistorical political reason based on a set of thinkers that he saw as almost completely devoid of historical impurities. As a classist, Strauss clearly had a preference for the Greek and Roman authors. Later, under his influence Harry Jaffa [2009, p. 183-236] added Lincoln to the mix. Michael Zuckert, yet another Straussian, set out to prove how the whole American political thought from its very beginning differed from European historicism [Zuckert 1996, p. 102]. American understanding of what is right according to Zuckert is based mainly on the concept of ahistorical and universal natural rights. James Ceasar defending a similar claim boldly wrote that "what passes today for 'public philosophy' is a haphazard mix of musings, undisciplined by an overall concept of what constitutes the relevant field of ideas" [Ceaser et al. 2006, p. 83].[1] He also remarks that "political science has yet to supply an account of the categories that need to be addressed and major options that exists within each category" [Ceaser et al. 2006, p. 83]. Finally, he gladly admits that the study of politics in historical context is extremely frustrating because from the point of view of modern scholars it

1 The main part of the book is an essay written by James Ceaser; Rakove and Rosenblum are only authors of critical responses that are published in the second part, and they are not quoted in this work.

has reached a "point of diminishing intellectual returns" [Ceaser et al. 2006, p. 82] To increase those returns Ceaser proposes replacing the study of politics as a historical phenomenon with the study of foundations of politics.

Again this turn away from meddlesome historical facts that "diminish intellectual returns" [Ceaser et al. 2006, p. 83] to inspiring, fundamental, general ideas is something well foreseen by Alexis de Tocqueville who wrote on the democratic historians:

> The historian soon becomes tired of such [piecing together the facts] work; his mind becomes lost in the labyrinth, and, not able to succeed in seeing clearly and in bringing sufficiently to light individual influences, he denies them. He prefers to speak to us about nature of races, about the physical constitution of the country, or about the spirit of civilization. (great words that I cannot hear said without involuntary recalling the abhorrence of a vacuum that was attributed to nature before the heaviness of air was discovered.)[2] That shortens his work, and at less cost better satisfies the reader. M de Lafayette said somewhere in his *Memoirs* that the exaggerated system of general causes brought marvelous consolations to mediocre public men. [Tocqueville 2010, p. 855].

Indeed, the great success of Leo Strauss's method of approaching the "history" of political concepts lies precisely in this merging of all the great philosophers into "the philosopher," one rational mind that tacitly operates beneath all the superficial difference that are allegedly caused only by the pressure coming from the ignorant society. The thought that there is a deeper structure at work in all of literature is not as new as one may think. Russian formalism developed between 1910 and 1930 had a similar critical approach to reading texts in which the postulates of rational coherence trampled all apparently non-cohesive idiosyncrasies and historical peculiarities. This is of course incompatible with the old Anglo-Saxon common sense and the Burkian notion of conservatism. As a consequence, Burke along with Locke became an object of moral and philosophical criticism of the Straussians. As Andrea Radasanu remarks from a typically Straussian point of view:

2 The text in brackets comes from Tocqueville's unpublished notes.

> Burke wants to temper or ennoble Lockean politics by inspiring sublime attachment to the political community and its traditions, but he shies away from stating universal standards according to which the traditions of political communities ought to be judged. This respect for reason in history without moorings in transcendent standards of reason or revelation leaves his conservatism on precarious ground [Radasanu 2011, p. 1].

In contrast to Burke in his study of persecution Leo Strauss seems to use the notion of double speech precisely to underline the "universal standards" and prove the existence of the anti-historical community of all great minds. As a matter of fact, he criticizes even the normal biographical contextualizing by stating that it is a mistake to solve the inconsistencies in a given set of writings by "having recourse to the genesis of author's work or even of his thought" [Strauss 1952, p. 30-31].

## NEOCONSERVATIVE LACK OF PERSUASION

The rise of Strauss's anti-historical rationalism coincided and sometimes blended with another anti-historical movement. The neoconservatives were former leftish intellectuals, very often Trotskyites [Lipset 1997, p. 188-197] who in the 1950's became ready to accept liberal democracy as the most effective form of government but not necessarily to accept that it is a long path-dependent process. Thus for them, the natural rights were "plants" which naturally grow after the "draining of the swaps" of past, despotic regimes as Norman Podhoretz puts it [2004]. The source of the strength of the neoconservative anti-historical argument was that in some cases it led to correct predictions. The fall of the Soviet Union and the support of Ronald Reagan's administration for transformation in Central and Eastern Europe did bring astonishing democratic changes.

However, comparing the Czech or Polish road to democratization to the possible democratization of Iraq and Afghanistan [Podhoretz 2004] is a glaring example of historical ignorance. In 1939. Czechoslovakia, indeed, was one of the last Central European democracies standing. Poles, Lithuanians, Latvian and Estonians, on the other hand, once lived under a federal Commonwealth, which had parliamentary traditions much older than those of the USA.

Naturally, as Francis Fukuyama[3] puts it, "culture is not destiny" [Fukuyama 2004, p. 57-68], but it, nevertheless, matters to large extent That is why externally sponsored democratization of polities that either have no democratic traditions or whose members have *en mass,* out of their own free will, rejected democracy is possible, but unfortunately generates exorbitantly high costs and some very unfavorable tradeoffs. Permanent regime change in Japan, for instance, took about 0.5 million troops in occupation, 3 million dead and 1 million wounded; the statistics for Nazi Germany were similar [Helprin 2011, p. 11]. Let us stress that in contrast to all previous democratizing efforts of the USA, the events of 1989 in Central Eastern Europe did not take a single American life. Without the knowledge of global history this difference in costs and tradeoffs is incomprehensible, and thus one is free to walk in the Neoconservative wonderland of instant regime changes or like president Obama talk of a miraculous reset in the relations with Russia. Both American left and right too often forget that the history of the Arab world and its relations with the West seems to strongly suggest that creating stable democracies instantly, even after the Arab Spring, is almost impossible without great sacrifices.

## CONCLUSIONS

This essay was a modest and very brief attempt to depict anti-historicality as a persistent trait of American political thought. There is ample evidence to support the thesis that, at least in comparison to Europe, the American political mind is extremely anti-historical. It refuses to see politics, culture and philosophy in terms of outcomes of divergent political developments, and being faced with a choice between the Kantian and the Hegelian approach, it invariably chooses Kant. This is a mixed blessing, in the past it shielded the American intellectual life from Marxism and fostered national unity without unnecessary dissent. In more recent times this approach, however, cannot be reconciled with the position of a global superpower.

3 A rare case of a member of the American Hegelian right.

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