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An Un-American Introduction

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There have, hitherto, been no sustained scholarly analyses of un-Americanism.[1] That is despite the fact that the term has been ever-present in American political, social, and cultural life from its coining in the late eighteenth century to its ongoing development in the twenty-first. Such analytical neglect is perplexing for a number of reasons, not least because there are few scholars working on the United States who could not, if they so desired, find meaningful ways of linking their work to ideas of un-Americanism, but also because as a word and as a term "un-American" is so extraordinary. Morphologically, it is as ugly as many of the deeds that it has been used to describe, and those who choose it as a label rarely do so by mistake. Its selection has long been deliberate, and the result of an active rather than reflexive choice, in no small part because of the many other options available: an individual so described might otherwise have been "subversive" or "alien," an organization "unpatriotic" or "seditious," an action "illicit" or "unconstitutional."

Within the United States, "un-American" has become sufficiently ubiquitous to have become normalized, yet to many who were not brought

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[1] Frank J. Donner's *The Un-Americans* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1961) is one of a number of studies that suggest a full historical treatment of the idea of un-Americanism, but deliver far less: Donner's study, for example, is narrowly focussed on HUAC, and is most concerned with proving that "the Committee is not a legislative investigating committee but an illegal law-enforcement body with a dominant purpose of punishment and exposure" (308). There remains no single study of un-Americanism as a concept, whereas related yet nonetheless distinctly different phenomena, such as anticommunism and even "fear," have fared considerably better in terms of both specific studies and the *longue durée*. For an example of the former see M. J. Heale, *McCarthy's Americans: Red Scare Politics in State and Nation, 1935–1965* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998); and for the latter see David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear: The American Far Right from Nativism to the Militia Movement* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998). In this context, it is telling that the most recent academic study of HUAC remains Robert K. Carr, *The House Committee on Un-American Activities*, Cornell Studies in Civil Liberty (New York: Cornell University Press, 1955), which appeared fourteen years before the committee was finally disbanded.

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up within US borders and the nation's political system it remains cumbersome and peculiar. The presence of parallel traditions in other countries has ensured that the existence of what might be described as a "national negative" is not, of itself, exceptional, for Germany's National Socialists attempted to revive notions of *undeutsche* behaviour for a brief spell in the 1930s, for example, and, on the other side of the globe, Pauline Hansen's One Nation Party sought electoral success through the development of "un-Australian" tropes in the late 1990s.[2] What remains exceptional is un-Americanism's longevity and breadth of use, which stand in stark contrast to the fortunes of the two parallel examples cited here, each of which faded with the fortunes of the particular political parties that had sought to revivify and popularize them.

Attempting to find a single, succinct definition of "un-American" is fraught with difficulties, but also to a great extent misconstrues the often complex nature of the term's importance and appeal. Indeed, it is largely because no single static definition of what constitutes un-American behaviour has been satisfactorily agreed upon that its longevity has been assured, for it has allowed competing interpretations to evolve and remain open to contest. Even during the heyday of un-American witch hunts, when impugning federal investigatory committees' interpretations of un-American activities carried significant personal and political risk, there were voices who denounced the federalized view of what constituted un-Americanism, and sought to challenge and replace it with their own. When, for example, the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) chased down what its constituent members subjectively described as un-American targets within the labour movement, so unions affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations went after HUAC itself as un-Americanism incarnate, claiming that the committee rode roughshod over the constitutional rights of those that it subpoenaed.[3]

That process of contestation has imbued un-Americanism with a rich and richly freighted history, which, in turn, has increased the popularity of its use and the reasons for its continued active selection. At the same time, it has created a tension that needs to be explored in any meaningful study of the ideas and actions that have been variously described as un-American, or

[2] Transcripts of Hansen's maiden speech to the Australian parliament are still a mainstay of right-wing websites, for example www.ourcivilisation.com/decline/example/hansonp.htm. The term's meaning has broadened as it has entered the lexicon, and now refers more loosely to inconsiderate behaviour. See, for example, "Australia's Undoing," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 March 2005; and Hugh Mackay, "Just Who Is Un-Australian?", *The Age*, 20 June 2005, accessed at www.theage.com.au/news/hugh-mackay/just-who-is-unaustralian/2005/06/19/1119119722702.html. For *undeutsche* see Felicity J. Rash, *The Language of Violence: Adolf Hitler's Mein Kampf* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006) 178.

[3] See, for example, *Who's Un-American?* (Philadelphia: Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union of America, 1947).

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ascribed to un-Americanism. Put simply, it is a tension between public memory and popular use. In terms of memory, un-Americanism has often been compressed and confined into a particular Cold War epoch, when those federal investigatory committees were mandated to uncover un-American activities wherever they could find them – and however they chose to define them – and individual groups and associations found that they could make significant capital from associating themselves with a very public battle against un-American ideologies and activities. That period is one that has become synonymous with the actions of a junior Senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy, who embarked upon a campaign of increasingly reckless red-baiting whilst HUAC invited the press into increasingly theatrical hearings.[4]

Viewed through such a prism, un-Americanism remains anachronistic and irreconcilably tied to one particular historical moment to such an extent that it is of limited historical significance and appeal. As the essays collected here so clearly attest, however, such a view is myopic in the extreme: McCarthy's anticommunist crusade was halted after just four years, for example, whilst American citizens have been describing a wealth of objects, activities, individuals and ideologies as un-American for 230 years. Thus the Senator from Wisconsin had little more than a brief, anaesthetizing effect on the lively history of un-Americanism, and to think otherwise is to misrepresent the term's breadth, depth and wider significance.[5]

Such a view also fails to explain why un-Americanism retains political capital in the twenty-first century. Congress finally decided to cease appropriations for standing committees with the sole remit of investigating un-American activities in 1969, and it is often presumed that the idea of tangible un-Americanism lay moribund thereafter. Any such assumption is clearly misplaced. It is readily apparent from its many continued iterations that un-Americanism remains actively selected and deployed, which is the product of both the richness of the term's past associations and its own malleability,

[4] The introduction of the Patriot Act in 2001 offers an excellent example of the American public's close and often glib association of that which is deemed un-American with McCarthyism. See, for example, Adam Burke, "Revisiting McCarthyism in the Patriot Act Era," 26 Oct. 2005, NPR Radio, available at www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4975529; Ziauddin Sardar, "A New McCarthy Era Dawns in America," *New Statesman*, 13 Nov. 2006, available at www.law.virginia.edu/html/news/2004_spr/mccarthy.htm; Leslie Liddell, "Striking Similarity between McCarthyism and George Bush's USA Patriot Act," *Cape Times* (South Africa), 10 Jan. 2005, redistributed online at www.commondreams.org/views05/0110-21.htm.

[5] See, for example, the reference to "un-American feelings and sentiments" in a letter from "A Farmer" to "Mr Rhoades," 25 July 1799, *Independent Chronicle*, Boston, MA. It is an indication of the lack of historical treatment that the term has received that the *OED* reports the initial coining of the term taking place in 1818.

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allowing it to be immersed simultaneously in those historical concerns and the contemporary moment.

The increasingly bitter partisanship surrounding presidential politics has provided a particularly fertile ground for its ongoing development. Amidst apprehension that the architects of the Bush administration's "War on Terror" were becoming overly zealous in their labelling of any dissent to their foreign policy as un-American, 2004 Democratic vice presidential nominee John Edwards accused Bush's vice president, Dick Cheney, of an "un-American" attack on the record of Democratic presidential hopeful John Kerry – Cheney had claimed that a Kerry victory would increase the probability of a successful terrorist attack on American soil.[6] As an exemplar of one of the key tropes of un-Americanism's longer history, the main battlefield of the 2004 campaign swiftly produced a side-skirmish which saw both rival camps fighting to establish themselves as the key public diviners of un-American behaviour. Potential First Ladies were sucked in: when Kerry's wife, Teresa Heinz Kerry, was asked by a newspaper reporter to clarify a description that she was alleged to have made of certain unspecified activities in Philadelphia as "un-American" during that same campaign, for example, she vainly attempted to refute the evidence, despite the fact that it existed on tape. "You said something I didn't say," Heinz Kerry admonished the reporter, before suggesting that the reporter "now shove it." Her husband's campaign team was forced to initiate a series of interviews on network television that allowed her to run through choreographed exercises of damage limitation which included carefully worded praise for that most American of First Ladies, Abigail Adams.[7] Such political battles neither waned with the phased withdrawal of US troops from the Middle East, nor remained confined to partisan boundaries: it was a former Democratic vice president who referred to the "secret blanket surveillance" enabled by a Republican administration's legislative act as "obscenely outrageous" in June 2013, but a Republican Senator who labelled it "excessive and un-American."[8]

[6] "A Kerry Win Would Mean More Terror, Says Cheney," *The Times*, 9 Sept. 2004, 18.

[7] For a transcript of Heinz Kerry's clash with reporter Colin McNickle see http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/NotedNow/story?id=120443&page=1. For her later attempts at damage limitation, see www.nbcnews.com/id/5528578/ns/nightly_news/t/heinz-kerry-all-i-have-offer-my-integrity. For a transcript of Heinz Kerry's initial remarks see http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/NotedNow/story?id=120443&page=1; for her later defence see www.msnbc.msn.com/id/5528578/ns/nightly_news/t/heinz-kerry-all-i-have-offer-my-integrity.

[8] Former vice president Al Gore made his comments on the surveillance that had been carried out under the aegis of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, which had itself been amended by the Bush Administration's Patriot Act of 2001, via his twitter feed at https://twitter.com/algore/status/342455655057211393. Republican Senator Jim Sensenbrenner, who was one of the authors of the Patriot Act, referred to the un-American nature of

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It is clear, too, that "un-American" continues to be a useful term for those outside the rarefied air of national politics. In the legal sphere, for example, when Attorney Eric Lewis stood before reporters in Washington, DC to announce that he would act as lead counsel for four clients, each of whom was intending to sue the United States government, he was unequivocal in his use of the term. In a case that alleged not only that the four had been the victims of torture while detained at the US government's Guantánamo Bay naval base, but also that their ordeals had taken place under the direction of that government, Lewis argued forcefully, "It is un-American to torture people. It is un-American to hold people indefinitely without access to counsel, courts or family. It is un-American to flout international treaty obligations."[9]

In popular culture, comedian and television entertainer Bill Maher, actors Susan Sarandon and Alec Baldwin, film director Robert Altman, and country music's Dixie Chicks have all become embroiled in controversies which, collectively, reflected wider national unease over the exact point at which American freedom of speech and patriotic dissent slide into un-American treachery.[10] In a collision of the traditions of Americana, the quintessential elements of American sport, the increasing use of social media, and a populist approach to aspects of the presidency, Barack Obama's delivery of the ceremonial first pitch of the Major League All Star baseball game in 2009 – with its high, gently looping trajectory – was contrasted unfavourably with the more efficient, workmanlike effort of his predecessor, George W. Bush. For the blogosphere, of course, there was only one word that could encapsulate Obama's perceived slight on America's national pastime: his pitch was un-American.[11]

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the surveillance. See www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jun/06/obama-administration-nsa-verizon-records.

[9] Reuters press release, "Ex-Guantanamo Detainees from Britain Sue Rumsfeld," 2:04PM (ET), 27 Oct. 2004, available at http://newsmine.org/content.php?ol=security/terror-suspects/guantanamo/british-ex-inmates-sue-rumsfeld-for-torture.txt, and www.uslaboragainstwar.org/article.php?id=6917.

[10] See, for example, "Anti-war Celebrities Count the Cost of Speaking Their Minds," *The Times*, 10 May 2003, 16; Jonah Goldberg, "Hollywood Fools," *National Review Online*, 18 Sept. 2000, accessed at www.nationalreview.com/articles/204727/hollywood-fools/jonah-goldberg; and John Patterson, "Enemy of the States," *The Guardian*, 8 March 2002, accessed at http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,,663572,00.html.

[11] An arch-conservative web store, Right Wing Stuff, conflated Obama's baseball frailties with the right's perception of the United Nations as an un-American agency of "one-world government" by designing a baseball shirt with "U.N. American" as the logo: www.cafepress.com/rightwingstuff.5174109. See also "St Louis, Missouri, 14 July 2009 ," *The Observer*, 19 July 2009, 24; and Marylou Tousignant, "No Ball Park for Obama Today," and ensuing blog, *Politico*, 31 March 2011, accessible at www.politico.com/click/stories/1103/no_ballpark_for_obama_today.html.

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The essays assembled here showcase the extent to which the historical evolution of the contestation over un-Americanism's meanings and many uses has had a telling impact on the lives of generations of Americans, and has done so across themes and categories that include – but are not confined to – gender, politics, sociology, identity, exceptionalism, labour relations, religion, race, and intellectual history, and across a time span that runs from the Jeffersonian age to the new millennium. Un-Americanism has been understood in different ways and has carried different connotations at different times, many of which serve to reflect the most pressing concerns of contemporaneous American life.

The essays are presented in an order that, in context and chronology, begin with un-Americanism's deployment in the post-Revolutionary era and end with twenty-first-century concerns, investigating many of the key shifts in the meanings and deployment of the term throughout its – and American – life. They demonstrate that any attempt to come to a single, stand-alone definition of the term, free from its contemporary milieu, is deeply problematic. In one sense, un-Americanism might simply be taken as a descriptor for those who do not fall within Americanism's embrace, but it is here that the term's intricacies and complexities first become apparent, for the un-American must not be confused with the non-American or the anti-American: not even its most ardent advocates would consider labelling a communist peasant in Laos, or a jihadist from Somalia, as un-American. To be an un-American, it would seem, one must first either be American or, at the very least, be in a position to take up American citizenship.

Equally, it might be thought that a clear definition could be derived from taking a simple oppositional negative from Americanism. That cannot be assured either, however, not least because the most commonly used identifiers of Americanism are often as much in conflict with themselves as they are with the un-American. Most definitions of Americanism – especially from the political right – at some stage feature reference to the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, the rule of law, a fetishistic take on the Founding Fathers, and regular religious observance. Yet one of those Founding Fathers and a notable drafter of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, was a Deist, and it was that final arbiter of constitutional law, the US Supreme Court, that declared mandatory regular prayer in the nation's schools "wholly inconsistent" with the constitutionally mandated separation of church and state.[12]

The essays collected here offer a range of case studies, each of which serves to exemplify specific, contextualized aspects of un-Americanism's development. Taken together, they reveal many of the central themes that are key to

[12] *Engel* v. *Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962).

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understanding the term itself and the reasons that have lain behind its repeated deployment. Alex Goodall's dissection of the idea of un-Americanism in the period between the end of the First World War and the onset of the Great Depression uses intellectual history to offer a rationale for its durability, even though, as he notes, its long life span was beset by uneven health. Playing upon Isaiah Berlin's two concepts of liberty, Goodall points to simultaneous, parallel histories of un-Americanism which have often been in contrast and conflict with each other, and which are based around what he defines as "positive" and "negative" definitions of the term. In this configuration, un-Americanism in all its forms must be understood as an ongoing process, rather than as a singular concept. It is clear from Brian Steele's scholarship that such tensions were in evidence from the time of the early republic onwards, for he identifies a rolling dialectic in Thomas Jefferson's work that weighed competing visions of American republicans against un-American "Anglomen," and which formed a major part of Jefferson's search for a definition of American identity. Similarly, George Lewis uses the prism of Congressional investigations of the Ku Klux Klan across a fifty-year period to gain a view of the seismic shifts that meanings of un-Americanism could undergo through five decades, as well as to establish the differences in the ways in which un-American activities were deemed to differ from other similar categories of behaviour, such as the criminal or felonious. As Simon Hall's gendered perspective on un-Americanism unequivocally shows, that contestation between un-Americanism and patriotism is still at large in the contemporary United States. Using the gay rights movement as a listening post, Hall analyses the rhetoric of un-Americanism as being core to such pertinent twenty-first-century debates as those over gay marriage and the repeal of the US military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" provision. Both sides of those particular disputes have sought to position their opponents as rigorously un-American, in a bid to secure the fundamentally "American" ground for their own arguments. Similarly, Simon Wendt's focus on the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) uncovers what he terms the "heavily gendered" nature of 1920s antiradicalism, a period in which self-styled "patriotic groups" such as the DAR engaged in self-proclaimed "investigations" of radicals in the era before the establishment of federalized un-American activities committees, in a bid to ferret out those that they subjectively considered to be beyond the pale of acceptable Americanism.

Given the extent to which the idea of un-Americanism has continued to elude tight definition, many Americans have looked to those federal officials and bodies tasked with investigating "un-American activities" for clarity, assuming – not unfairly – that those activities would have to be defined before they could be proficiently investigated. A number of the essays presented here are therefore centred around such investigatory bodies, but again seek to further our understanding of the long history of un-Americanism by

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concentrating their focus on a fifty-year epoch, rather than simply upon the 1950s. Thus, for example, Goodall's analysis of the idea of un-Americanism in the 1920s uses the clash between that inveterate "red" investigator, US Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, and Democratic Senator Thomas Walsh, to examine the first generation of such formalized investigations, while Ruth Martin looks to the final ten years of HUAC's existence, beginning in the mid-1960s. There she establishes that Congressional investigators were openly investigating un-Americanism whilst simultaneously voicing their own private concerns as to what, precisely, the term entailed, echoing Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren's rhetorical question from the *Watkins* decision, "Who can define the meaning of 'un-American'?"[13] As both Martin's and Lewis's essays reveal, contemporaries remained aware that the nebulous nature of the term left it open for negotiation and contestation, whether among committee members themselves, as in Lewis's analysis, or among the dissenting voices of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee (ECLC), respectively, in Martin's. In Kate Dossett's interdisciplinary view of Congressional investigations into un-Americanism in the 1930s, there was more theatricality involved in the daily machinations of Martin Dies's Special House Committee for the Investigation of Un-American Activities than there was among the members of the Federal Theatre Project that Dies and his team chose to investigate. Certain of the female "friendly witnesses" called by Dies performed the version of femininity that was expected of them, whilst others, most notably Hallie Flanagan and Ellen Woodward, refused, resulting in a "reordering of gender roles" that saw Dies's committee attempting to portray itself as an emasculated victim of a communist conspiracy of un-American, masculine women.

The examination of the changing parameters and uses of the un-American label has also been crucial to an understanding of the evolution of American ideas of race, rights, commerce and religion across time and space. As Cheryl Hudson's essay shows, although free-market capitalism has long been posited as the truly American way of doing business, strong dissenting voices contested such a view as early as the late nineteenth century. Looking at Pullman, Illinois as an un-American place, where George Pullman constructed a factory town to house his growing industrial workforce, Hudson uses a close reading of contemporary critiques of Pullman to establish that the charge of un-Americanism in the context of working practices was as flexible and contested as it was in terms of identity, gender and politics, and was applied as frequently to capitalist free-marketeers as to pro-union strikers. Using the Pullman strike of 1894 as a fulcrum of debates over un-American working models, Hudson

[13] *Watkins* v. *United States*, 354 U.S. 178 (1957).

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draws upon the writings of Jane Addams and William Carwardine to suggest that the contested nature of un-Americanism also had key relevance to labour and working-class identity. In terms of race, Dossett chronicles what she refers to as the "startling" assumptions that Dies and his committee made of the link between nonwhiteness and un-Americanism, just as Lewis traces signal changes to the position of openly avowed white supremacist groups within the un-American and American spectrums. In Ieva Zake's sociological study, the interplay of particular ideas on the nature of un-Americanism played out differently within specific ethnic immigrant groups, forming a "rhetorical bridge" between those groups and their choice of national political alliance, as part of a process through which they sought to inveigle themselves within an Americanism that cast others – rather than themselves – as un-Americans.

Un-Americanism's pertinence to the idea of an American religion was most keenly felt during the Cold War, and the battle against that which Western propaganda routinely defined as an atheist foe. In such a context, Markku Ruotsila's study argues that many of the most virulent religious arguments of the Cold War era were not simply attempts to create a bipolar world in which Christianity was postulated as the American way and atheism as its un-American equivalent, but rather took place within and between American churches themselves. Fundamentalist Christian organizations strove to portray other, more ecumenical worshippers as un-American, with a particular emphasis on the alterity of the Social Gospel. Indeed, Ruotsila situates the origins of the contemporary religious right in that Cold War drive for ascendancy by fundamentalist Christians, and views the battle over faith as a site for disseminating religious ideas of un-Americanism. In spite of such fundamentalists' attempts to position those Americans who did not buy into their particular intellectual and ideological approach as un-American, Zoe Knox's research shows unequivocally that some Americans, and, indeed, some Christian Americans, remained unmoved by such a designation. Jehovah's Witnesses, the focus of Knox's study, have routinely been cast as un-American for their refusal to enact a subjective view of American citizenship, as they concentrated instead upon fighting for their own constitutional freedoms. Intriguingly, the particularities of the battle for legal freedoms waged by a group routinely cast as un-American by certain sections of society, in this case the Jehovah's Witnesses, served to benefit society more widely. It serves as testament to the intricacies associated with such a complex and evolving idea as un-Americanism, and to the extent to which the ideas of un-Americanism have to be contextualized to be fully understood, that, while Witnesses have long thought of themselves as models of good citizenship in the face of public declarations of their alterity and un-Americanism, it was that most American of institutions, the United States Supreme Court, that ultimately chose to side with the Witnesses' self-ascription.

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