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The Other Exceptionalism: A Transnational Perspective on Atheism in America

Abstract: The United States constitutes an exceptional case in the complex discourse of unbelief in the Western world. Its providential founding myth of being "God's own country" established an idiosyncratically American social imaginary molded by what Robert Bellah has defined as the "American civil religion": a pervasive ideological nexus between the narratives of religion and national identity. This essay shows, on the one hand, how a transnational perspective can contribute to an understanding of the development of this idiosyncrasy. On the other hand, it retraces the distinctly transnational trajectory of some early manifestations of atheist thought in the United States.

Keywords: Atheism, Transnationalism, Social Imaginary, Civil Religion, Ernestine L. Rose, Emma Goldman, Robert N. Bellah, Cornelius Castoriadis, Thomas Paine

Anti-God is Anti-American
Anti-American is Treason
Traitors lead to Civil War
—Billboard in Monongah,
West Virginia[1]

and I am waiting for them to prove
that God is really American
—Lawrence Ferlinghetti, "I Am Waiting"

From the transnational vantage point of an observer who has been socialized in a highly secularized Western European society in which questions of religious faith (and the lack thereof) are usually relegated to the private sphere and mostly excluded from public political or cultural debates, the United States is an exceptional case regarding the prominent status of religion in the realm of the social. Yet, despite that circumstance, the following essay does not—at least not primarily—aim to be a contribution to the ongoing discussion of religion in America but rather focuses on its largely underresearched dialectical Other—atheism.

The reflections to follow are based on the premise that American culture constitutes an idiosyncrasy within the complex discourse of unbelief in the so-called

1 https://www.alternet.org/belief/10-most-absurd-right-wing-christian-billboards

Western world. The United States' providential founding myth of being "God's own country" established a unique socio-cultural imaginary molded by what Robert Bellah has famously defined as the "American civil religion": a pervasive ideological nexus between the narratives of religion and national identity that exceeds the traditional framework of institutionalized churches, specific religious beliefs, denominations and congregations by establishing a cultural semantics in which "'[g]od' has clearly been the central symbol... from the beginning and remains so today" (37). Although seldom expressed explicitly, the question of the "Death of God" has hence always been at the center of the debates about cultural membership and the label "atheist" (as a discursive marker for "otherness") has been frequently employed as an ideological tool to exclude, control, denounce, and oppress undesired forms of cultural, ethnic, gender-based, sexual or political difference.

In the following essay, I want to argue that the normative power of the dominant civil religious social imaginary stifled the development of a pronounced and distinctly American philosophical tradition that could be compared to the rich European tradition of radical advocates of the "Death of God" such as Percy Bysshe Shelley, Charles Baudelaire (at least for most of his lifetime), Ludwig Feuerbach, Arthur Schopenhauer, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, or Bertrand Russell. I will further argue that a transnational perspective provides a useful critical lens for an analysis of this phenomenon—in spite of the problematic elusiveness of the concept which is, as Donald Pease has pointed out, "[e]ndowed with minimal analytic consistency [and] devoid of semantic coherence as it is of social existence" (4). However, in spite of—or maybe also because of—this indefinability, it has often been remarked that transnational approaches in American Studies have contributed valuable insights to the understanding of the United States. An external and comparative perspective allows for a critical interrogation of the manifold manifestations of American exceptionalism, for putting a spotlight on diaspora and minority positions—and atheists certainly belong to this category—that are otherwise overlooked and enables us to analyze cross-cultural interdependencies. If we define "the transnational" through these qualities, the concept offers a useful template for the discussion of the question of atheism and its status in American culture. Following Pease's assertion that "[t]he transnational can designate factual states as well as the interpretative framework through which to make sense of them" (4), this approach allows us not only to discern the distinctiveness of the United States' cultural history with regard to the status of atheist thought (as compared to the European tradition) but also to reflect upon its etiology. Secondly, such an approach enables us to discuss the decidedly transnational character of those sparse manifestations of unbelief that had an (albeit limited) effect in the country's intellectual history.

While it is certainly true that every non-Native American worldview—including the Christian faith—owes its presence in U.S. culture to transnational migration, the status of unbelief demands special scholarly attention from a cross-cultural perspective that allows us to point out a specifically American paradox: on

the one hand the United States emerged out of the ideas of the Enlightenment as the first nation in modern history with a decidedly secular constitution which erected "a wall of separation between church and state" as Thomas Jefferson famously put it in his Letter to the Danbury Baptists on Jan. 1, 1802—at a time when Europe's monarchs still derived their political legitimacy of their rule from the "divine right." On the other hand, however, there seems to be no other country in the so-called Western hemisphere in which all levels of politics, culture, and society have been and still are similarly saturated with religious (by far not only Christian) rhetoric, symbolism, and thought. Even today, after the triumph of the cultural model of the "postmodern" allegedly ended the rule of overriding master narratives and increased the acceptance of a broad variety of world views within American culture, the non-believer is still considered to be a disturbance, a manifestation of a fundamental difference. To give just one example: in their article "Atheists As 'Other': Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society" (2006) the sociologists Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis, and Douglas Hartman note that

> out of a long list of ethnic and cultural minorities, Americans are less willing to accept intermarriage with atheists than with any other group, and less likely to imagine that atheists share their vision of American society.… We argue that atheists provide an important limiting case to the general narrative of increasing tolerance of religious pluralism in the United States, and that this exception is a useful lens through which to understand Americans' assumptions about the appropriate role of religion in both public and private life. (216)

Until the present day, an open commitment to disbelief can still cause a great level of irritation in the United States. As James A. Haught comments: "Today, sceptics remain misfits in much of American society. No politician could be elected if he admitted atheism. Newspapers and mainstream magazines rarely print agnostic articles. Television programs seldom contain direct denials of God" (14). At the same time, forms of religious rhetoric that may seem irritating from the European perspective are widely accepted even in the most secular spheres of American society. Moreover, public discussions on controversial topics like abortion, creationism, or gay marriage are always tinged with religion, and the debate on the "New Atheists"[2] about a decade ago was conducted with an amount of ferocity that might astonish any non-American observer. This perception has historically been shared by men of letters with a transnational perspective: in his travelogue *What I Saw in America* (1922), Gilbert

2 I am referring to Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel C. Dennett, whose critical books on religion caused a lot of controversy especially in America about a decade ago. See: Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror* (2004); Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, (2006); Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2006); Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: The Case against Religion* (2006).

Keith Chesterton formulated the much-quoted witticism that "America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed" (7), whereas Vladimir Nabokov once claimed that the story of a "total atheist who lives a happy and useful life, and dies in his sleep at the age of 106" (314) is one of the few utter taboos in American literature.

The Genesis of a Social Imaginary

How can we make sense of this idiosyncratically American peculiarity regarding the cultural status of atheism and how can a transnational perspective help us to explain its emergence and dynamics? Donald Pease remarks that in the versatile discourses within the field of American studies—before as well as after the so-called transnational turn

> American exceptionalism has been said to refer to clusters of *elements absent*—the absence of feudal hierarchies, class conflicts, a socialist labor party, trade unionism, and divisive ideological passions—and *present*—the presence of a predominant middle class, tolerance for diversity, upward mobility, hospitality toward immigrants as shared constitutional faith, and liberal individualism—that putatively set America apart from other national cultures. (20, emphases added)

The exceptional status of atheism in American culture is equally marked by an absence and a presence: the *absence* of a pronounced and genuinely American philosophical tradition of atheism in the light of the *presence* of a pervasive ideological nexus between the narratives of religion and national identity.

One of the most prominent approaches to explain this link can be found in Sacvan Bercovitch's classic study *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975), which argues that the conflation between these two discourses predates the actual formation of the United States as a political entity. It can be traced back to the Winthropian foundational myth of reading the Puritan colonization of the continent as a divinely ordained mission to erect an exemplary "city upon a hill." As this project was, from its outset, simultaneously political as well as spiritual, it paved the way for the subcutaneous, quasi-theological cultural fabric of the secular republic:

> In retrospect, it seems clear that the Puritan myth prepared for the re-vision of God's Country from the 'New England of the type' into the United States of America. Founded as it was on prophecy, the colonists' view of the New World not only facilitated but dictated the emergence of different forms of expression. It depended for its verification upon more heavenly generations to follow, with ampler terms of exegesis, and a more illustrious American text to interpret.… Early New England rhetoric provided a ready framework for inverting later secular values—human perfectibility, technological progress, democracy, Christian socialism, or simply (and comprehensively) the American Way—into the mold of sacred teleology. (136)

Philip S. Gorski therefore aptly speaks of a conjunction of the "covenant theology of the New England Puritans... and the classical republicanism of the Founding Fathers" (4) as the spark that started the process of the formation of a national identity in the United States. Bellah has termed this phenomenon the American Civil Religion, a concept that, as Charles Taylor has noted, "is understandably and rightly contested today, because some of the conditions of this religion are now being challenged, but there is no doubt that Bellah has captured something essential about American society, both in its inception, and for about two centuries thereafter" (447). The alliance of these two traditions has always been ridden by implicit contradictions and also become manifest in contemporary cultural conflicts in American culture such as the debates on intelligent design, gay marriage, reproductive rights etc., but at the heart the reasons of these clashes lie in a fundamental impasse ingrained in the American Civil Religion. "The confusion today," Taylor notes,

> arises from the fact that there is both continuity and discontinuity. What continues is the importance of some form of the modern idea of moral order. It is this which gives the sense that Americans are still operating on the same principles as the Founders. The rift comes from the fact that what makes this order the right one is, for many though not by any means for all, no longer God's Providence; the order is grounded in nature alone, or in some concept of civilization, or even in supposedly unchallengeable a priori principles, often inspired by Kant. So that some Americans want to rescue the Constitution from God, whereas others, with deeper historical roots, see this as doing violence to it. Hence the contemporary American Kulturkampf. (448)

The civil religion has to be understood as a somewhat paradoxical socio-cultural matrix which is, on the one hand, entrenched in constitutional secularism while at the same time drawing heavily form the religious doctrine:

> Although matters of personal religious belief, worship, and association are considered to be strictly private affairs, there are, at the same time, certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share. These have played a crucial role in the development of American institutions and still provide *a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life*, including the political sphere. This public religious dimension is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that I am calling the American civil religion. (Bellah 24, emphasis added)

Following Bellah's above-quoted claim, according to which "God" is the central signifier of America's cultural identity, we can assert that the civil religion constitutes a *social imaginary,* understood along the lines of Cornelius Castoriadis's definition as that particular element

> which gives a specific orientation to every institutional system, which overdetermines the choice and the connections of symbolic networks, which is the creation of each historical period, its singular manner of living, of seeing and of conducting its own existence, its world, and its relations with this world, this originary structuring component, this central signifying-signified, the source of that which presents itself in every instance as an indisputable and undisputed meaning, the basis for articulating what does matter and what does not, the origin of the surplus of being of the objects of practical, affective and intellectual investment, whether individual or collective[.] (145)

Taylor argues that this civil religious social imaginary is the prime integrative force that was able to unite the various social and ethnic groups that comprise the *United* States of America: "That means that a way that Americans can understand their fitting together in society although of different faiths, is through these faiths themselves being seen as in this consensual relation to the common civil religion. Go to your church, but go" (524).[3] In consequence, the individual who does not go to church (or synagogue, mosque, temple etc.) purportedly refuses to enter the social contract of *E pluribus Unum*. In a society in which "one can be integrated as an American *through* one's faith or religious identity" (Taylor 524), the question of the "Death of God" extends beyond debates on metaphysics and moves to the center of the debates of cultural membership. Therefore, the cultural hegemony of the civil religious social imaginary was a tremendous obstacle for the evolution of atheist ideas and is responsible for the aforementioned absence of a decidedly American philosophical tradition of atheism.

Which Atheism?

Atheism is, however, also an elusive concept. It is an essential part of its nature to have, as the English poet Horace Smith once wrote, a "Hydra head" (101) and if one wants to talk about its history in a general and as well as a specifically American context, one has to choose which of its faces to tackle. As the term itself comprises a multiplicity of "isms" rather than representing one coherent philosophical position, Stephen Bullivant suggests to make a distinction between "'positive' (or 'strong'/'hard')

3 Taylor also uses the concept of the social imaginary in his book on secularism but he frames it—without referring to Castoriadis' original definition—somewhat differently by differentiating it from social theory: "I speak of 'imaginary' (i) because I'm talking about the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, it is carried in images, stories, legends etc. But it is also the case that (ii) theory is often the possession of a small minority, whereas what is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. Which leads to a third difference: (iii) the social imaginary is that common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (171-172).

and 'negative' ('weak'/'soft') varieties of atheism" (15). The "negative" manifestations would include philosophical positions such as agnosticism or skepticism, whereas "positive" atheism would denote any *explicit* affirmation of the conviction that metaphysical deities do not and cannot exist (cf. 15-16).

Examined against the backdrop of this distinction, the history of atheism in America seems largely to be a history of *soft or negative atheism*, which manifested itself especially in the form of "freethought," an umbrella term that encompasses deist, agnostic, or otherwise skeptic positions whose adherents "shared, regardless of their views on the existence or nonexistence of a divinity, ... a rationalist approach to fundamental questions of earthly existence—a conviction that the affairs of human beings should be governed not by faith in the supernatural but by a reliance on reason and evidence adduced from the natural world" (Jacoby 4-5). However, although many freethinkers were highly critical of religious doctrine and some of fiercely opposed Christian orthodoxy, they usually shied away from the ultimate act of iconoclasm. This is of a particular significance, since the first generation of American freethinkers during the revolutionary and the founding period of the republic—Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson being the most prominent representatives—played an important part in laying out the coordinates of what would soon develop into the civil religious paradigm. For a discussion of atheism through the lens of "the transnational," Paine is an equally obvious as interesting case, not only because his biography has a transatlantic component.[4] On the one hand, he was one of the most effective propagators of the British brand of Deism in America. Although his radical deconstruction of the alleged veracity of the biblical scriptures and rancorous indictment of institutionalized religion in *The Age of Reason* earned him multiple accusations of being, as Theodore Roosevelt notoriously put it, a "filthy little atheist" (qtd. in Jacoby 107), Paine always insisted on his belief in "one God and no more" (*Complete Writings* 464) and even wrote a pamphlet with the telling title *Atheism Refuted; in a Discourse to Prove the Existence of a God* (1798), in which he stressed his conviction that "God is the power or first cause, nature is the law, and matter is the subject acted upon" (12). In that, his invocation of the boogeyman of atheism is in the service of defending his Deist brand of natural philosophy, which he saw under threat by currents in Enlightenment philosophy that were strongly moving towards a scientific world view that would even exclude the idea of the deist "watchmaker God": "The evil that has resulted from the error of the schools, in teaching natural philosophy as an accomplishment only, has been that of generating in the pupils a species of Atheism. Instead of looking through the works of Creation to the Creator himself, they stop short, and employ the knowledge they acquire to create doubts of his existence" (8).

Like his opus magnum *The Age of Reason*, this little tract was not only a contribution to the debate on natural philosophy but also an argumentative assault

4 Since Paine's first emigration to the new world in 1774 precedes the formal foundation of the United States of America, it cannot be aptly called trans*national*.

directed at France, a nation shaken by revolutionary turmoil in which, as Paine notes in the preface of *Atheism Refuted*, "atheistical doctrines… are extending themselves" (4).

Although Paine wrote this indictment before his return to the United States, the text helped to establish the nexus between the idea of the nation and religion. His line of argument—somewhat surprisingly in the light of his rejection of conservative dogmatism—accords with many orthodox religious expressions of the fear of an infiltration of America by French post-revolutionary atheistic radicalism, which was widely considered a major threat to the newly emerged national identity. A short pamphlet by the theologian Leonhard Woods, based on a commencement speech delivered at Harvard in 1799, may serve as a striking example here. He tells his American readers that "[a] LIVELIER picture of the genuine spirit and fruits of atheism can no where be found than in the character and conduct of the FRENCH" (emphases in the original) (11). After an inventory of the atrocities committed during the *Terreur* and a denouncement of the "ridiculous nonsense, that comes from the mouth of those crazy-headed Jacobins" (12), Woods warns his fellow countrymen: "If you will, Oh, Americans, do all this and more.—But if your hearts are not yet hard enough, nor your hands bloody enough to commit such deeds of darkness, then, *call upon the French and they will help you*" (15). That kind of rhetoric, highly popular among late eighteenth-century conservatives, established a clear-cut dichotomy which establishes the atheist as the epitome of the "un-American Other" a—dialectical motion that has been a constant throughout the country's cultural history and that had a significant effect on the atrophic development of atheist thought in the United States.

Ironically, Paine became a victim of this newly emerging paradigm. His fall from grace—once hailed as the embodiment of the American patriot (as the author of *Common Sense*), later (as the author of *The Age of Reason*) a "perfect target for social and religious conservatives as his writings combined associations with religious heresy, economic radicalism, and the French Revolution" (Jacoby 58)—was primarily rooted in a philosophical-theological conflict with the conservatives. From their perspective, Deism, as it is represented by Paine and others,[5] represents

> a drift away from orthodox Christian conceptions of God as an agent interacting with humans and intervening in human history; and towards God as architect of a universe operating by unchanging laws, which

5 Eighteenth-century Deism was evidently not a monolithic doctrine. According to James Turner, it "ranged from the strident anti-clericalism of Thomas Paine and Ethan Allen through the quiet, socially conservative moralism of Franklin and Jefferson until it merged imperceptibly with the vaguely skeptical of Christianity of Washington and the waveringly Deistic speculations of John Adams. Deism reached its zenith in the 1790s, when, as Lyman Beecher remembered, farm boys 'read Tom Paine and believed him' and Yale students 'called each other Voltaire, Rousseau, D'Alembert, etc. etc.' Enthusiasm for French radicalism even encouraged some feeble efforts to institutionalize Paine's variety of Deism. But the result never amounted to much" (52-53).

> humans have to conform to or suffer the consequences. In wider perspective, this can be seen as a move along a continuum from a view of the supreme being with powers analogous to what we know as agency and personality, and exercising them continually in relation to us, to a view of this being as related to us only through the law-governed structure he has created, and ending with a view of our condition as at grips with an indifferent universe, with God either indifferent or non-existent. From this perspective, Deism can be seen as a half-way house on the road to contemporary atheism. (Taylor 270)

American culture, cumbered by the yoke of the religion-identity nexus, has however never gone down that road all the way. In the intellectual history of the United States, the tradition of positive atheism in the sense of an affirmative claim of the non-existence of deities is rather weak when compared to Europe. This does, however, not mean that the U.S. remained untouched by the positive or strong variety of atheism but it is telling that its manifestations have strikingly often a transnational trajectory.

The Transnational Trajectories of Radical Unbelief

In the light of the religious grammar of the American social imaginary, it is not surprising that the first manifestations of strong or positive atheism did not emerge out of a domestic intellectual tradition but as the result of the appropriation and reworking of European ideas in a process that we could, borrowing a term from Shelley Fisher Fishkin, label as transnational "cross-fertilization" (37), a form of reciprocal interaction of discourses and texts from both sides of the Atlantic.

This first exemplary case to prove this is that of the women's rights activist, abolitionist and freethinker Ernestine L. Rose (1810-1892), whose personal as well as intellectual biography reads like the embodiment of "the transnational." Born into a Jewish family as Potowska in Piotrków Trybunalski (Poland) in 1810, Rose fled her home country at an early age to live in Germany[6] and later in England—where she came into contact with Robert Owen's utopian socialist ideas—and finally came to the United States in 1836 where she became one of the most prominent abolitionist and feminist activists of her time. Rose's biography is in several ways of great significance for a discussion of the transnational element in American atheism. As Jacoby notes, "the combination of Rose's atheism, her Jewishness, and the early timing of her immigration" gave her a status of a "threefold 'outsiderness'" (101).[7] It is

6 In her introduction to Roses speeches and letters, Paula Doress-Worters speculates that Rose could have attended the progressive salons of Rahel Varnhagen and Dorothea Schlegel (cf. Doress-Worters in Rose 4).

7 Jacoby points out that "early-nineteenth-century American Jews were rightly convinced that the legal equality granted by the Constitution… offered them a freedom from persecution and a degree of personal liberty only dreamed of by most of their European contemporaries" (101). While this is undoubtedly true on the level of institutionalized

important to note that Rose was not an outspoken atheist from the outset. Although she quickly developed an inner autonomy from the religious element of her Jewish heritage and had embraced the Owenite rejection of organized religion, she was basically a freethinker in the Paineian tradition throughout the first part of her career as activist and public speaker. On April 10, 1861, she finally "comes out proudly as an atheist" (Doress-Worters in Rose 295) in a speech entitled "A Defence of Atheism."[8] Here she shows herself aware of the taboo she is touching upon as the "inquiry of the existence of a God, … produces in most minds a feeling of awe, as if stepping on forbidden ground, too holy and sacred for mortals to approach" (295). Rose ventures into this prohibited territory, following the path paved by Enlightenment natural philosophy, by promoting the explanatory powers of geology, natural history, physiology, mathematics, chemistry and astronomy (cf. 296-297).

Rose's initially Deistic worldview had, by the time she gave this seminal lecture, matured towards a purely scientific cosmology that rejects the Deistic assumption according to which the "watchmaker God" manifests itself in the law of nature. She had outgrown her idol Paine by affirmatively rendering *any* notion of a deity a man-made fiction:

> Ascend into the heavens, and enter the 'milky way,' go from planet to planet to the remotest star, and ask the eternally revolving systems, Where is God? and Echo answers. Where? The Universe of Matter gives us no record of his existence. Where next shall we search? Enter the Universe of Mind, read the millions of volumes written on the subject, and in all the speculations, the assertions, the assumptions, the theories, and the creeds, you can only find Man stamped in an indelible impress his own mind on every page. In describing his God, he delineated his own character: the picture he drew represents in living and ineffaceable colors the epoch of his existence—the period he lived in. (297)

By dethroning God from his transcendental position and by relocating this "supreme being" in the sphere of immanence, specifically in history and culture, Rose's philosophy went far beyond the American freethought tradition's project of scrutinizing the truthfulness and proving the historicity of the holy scriptures. It rather shows a close kinship with Ludwig Feuerbach's notion of God as an anthropomorphic projection, according to which "God did not, as the Bible says, make man in His image; on the contrary man… made God in his image" (Feuerbach 187).

The biography of Emma Goldman (1869-1940) bears some notable resemblances to that of Rose one generation earlier with regard to their transnational

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politics, Jacoby stresses that on the socio-cultural level "Jews had, since American Enlightenment-bashing began in the 1790s, often been lumped with other religious 'infidels' as well as with the French revolutionary brand of atheism" (101).

8 This talk held in Boston is—according the current state of my research—the earliest outspoken manifestation of positive atheism in the public discourse of the United States.

itinerary—not only geographical, but also intellectual. Also born into an Eastern European Jewish background, Goldman—"an outspoken atheist and feminist as well as an anarchist who would come to occupy a unique position in the history of both American political radicalism and secularism" (Jacoby 234)—left her native Imperial Russia to migrate to the United States in 1885. Unlike in the case of Rose, Goldman's fame and notoriety outlasted her lifetime, and she continued to be a point of reference for both activists and scholars.[9] She is also indispensable for a transnational discussion of atheism as "[h]er love for 'the other America' nurtured in a prison library on Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, enabled her to bridge the gap… between the native American individualist and rationalist traditions and the European radical sentiment so alien to mainstream American sensibilities" (Jacoby 234). For her as an activist, philosophy was always a practical tool in her political struggles. Her points of reference were, not least because of the lack of American equivalents, the most uncompromising voices of European "positive" atheism of her time: Karl Marx, Mikhail Bakunin, and Friedrich Nietzsche.

Goldman's attack on the idea of the existence of a god and on the religious fabric of the American social imaginary has to be read in the context of what she considered a multilayered pan-revolutionary project that would liberate the working classes, women, people of color and other disenfranchised segments of the United States' population alike: "Whoever sincerely aims at a radical change in society, whoever strives to free humanity from the scourge of dependence and misery, must turn his back on Christianity, on the old as well as the present form of the same" (Goldman 234). The Puritan heritage of American culture was consequently one of the main targets of her polemic indictments. Against the backdrop of her transatlantic experience, she bemoans the sanctimony of "America, the stronghold of the Puritanic eunuchs" where "the only day of recreation left to the masses, Sunday, has been made hideous and utterly impossible" because, for the lower classes, "the sociability and fun of European outdoor life is... exchanged for the gloom of the church, the stuffy, germ-saturated country parlor, or the brutalizing atmosphere of the back-room saloon" (156-157).

Goldman's ideological counter-agent against this oppressive and alienating tradition is what she calls a "philosophy of atheism" that rejects the "God idea" as "a sort of spiritualistic stimulus to satisfy the fads and fancies of every shade of human weakness" (241) and conceives of a notion of atheism that should serve as a viable base of fundamental empowerment on both the individual as well as the

9 Over the past decades, a substantial number of biographies have appeared on her life: Richard Drinnon, *Rebel in Paradise: A Biography of Emma Goldman* (1961); Alix Kates Shulman, *To the Barricades: The Anarchist Life of Emma Goldman* (1971); Alice Wexler, *Emma Goldman: An Intimate Life* (1984); Martha Solomon, *Emma Goldman* (1987); Candace Falk, *Love, Anarchy, and Emma Goldman. A Biography* (1990); John Chalberg, *Emma Goldman: American Individualist* (1991); Theresa Moritz, *The World's Most Dangerous Woman: A New Biography of Emma Goldman* (2001).

collective level: "The philosophy of Atheism represents a concept of life without any metaphysical Beyond or Divine Regulator. It is the concept of an actual, real world with its liberating, expanding and beautifying possibilities, as against an unreal world, which, with its spirits, oracles, and mean contentment has kept humanity in helpless degradation" (246).

During the First Red Scare of the early 1920s, Goldman's blending of anarchism, atheism, and feminism (as well as her at times militant activism) triggered the established reflex of fear of ideological contagion with foreign ideas threatening to the American social imaginary. Along with many other foreign-born alleged radicals, Goldman was deported from the United States.

As we have seen, the term "the transnational" carries two meanings with regards to the question of atheism in American culture: it denotes a methodological perspective as well as a socio-cultural reality. The former aspect allows us to retrace the emergence of a paradigm that—in different historic variations and figurations—has become (and still is) a supporting pillar of the narrative of U.S. culture and to analyze the enduring significance of religious semantics for the hegemonic narratives of American identity. But is also helps us to understand why almost all manifestations of atheist thinking are a product transnational reciprocities, especially with regard to the affirmative variety of atheism, a philosophical position that is clearly underdeveloped in American culture. The transatlantic and transcultural biographies of Goldman and Rose are exemplary cases for this transfer of ideas but also the reaction of dominant American culture to it. As advocates the 'Death of God' they have been "othered" and marginalized in several ways: as women, as feminists, as former European citizens, as Jews, as political radicals, and as non-believers. Although the limited scope of this essay does not allow for an inquiry into further manifestations of transnational atheism—one could continue this genealogy to the so-called "New Atheists" such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens—the benefits of a transnational approach become evident: It contributes to a deeper understanding of the cultural dynamics that are the reason for the fact that the United States still lacks a full-fledged *cultural* secularization that many European societies already have undergone throughout the twentieth century.

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