

What They Think of Us: International Perceptions of the United States Since 9/11

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It is an odd business to have opinions about whole nations. Even if it makes sense at all, the epistemological problem remains: how to know what country X ostensibly feels about country Y? The Pew Global Attitudes Project conducts surveys regularly in many countries. Anecdotes (I have my own) are good for *something* – texture and vividness, though not conclusiveness. If you're Thomas Friedman, there are always cabdrivers to chat up. And there are also the recorded opinions of the media's 'opinion-makers,' which have the virtue of being collectable at a distance, but whose representativeness and capacity to make opinions is variable and hard to ascertain. But curious onlookers don't know exactly how to evaluate any of these sources.

Still, we wonder, muse, and worry, and for good reason. Had there had been opinion polls two millennia ago, the Caesars and their successors and entourages might have studied attitudes toward Rome among the Celts, Goths, Greeks, and Palestinian tribes, and had there been an internet, legions of hits would have been recorded at www.rome-global.com. There's anxiety as well as narcissism that attaches to great power, tinged as it is with built-in insecurity about its losses, actual and possible, and you don't even need to be a hyperpower to play, judging from the French fascination with this same question: What do they think of us?

Well, what do they think of the US? Overall, not so much, according to the scholars who contribute these seven sobering, informative and often depressing essays on opinions in Iraq, Indonesia, Turkey, China, Russia, Mexico, and Western Europe toward the United States, its government, economy, civilisation, policies, and people.

In the summary by Editor David Farber, Professor of History at Temple University:

In so many parts of the world in which large majorities are appalled by American policy, people remain remarkably friendly to individual Americans. They find much about the United States – and the American

GITLIN | Anti-Americanism Today

people – appealing, entertaining, and even worthy of emulation. But as the essays in this book demonstrate, that goodwill is at risk.

The question, in Farber’s words, is whether people ‘hate (or at least disrespect) America for what it is and not only for what it does.’ It can be taken as a given that ‘many more are agitated or even infuriated by American policies and what they consider insulting behaviour by the American government.’

Farber reminds us that such essays are not mere résumé-stuffers. To write as these authors write, for publication rather than the drawer, may require, as Farber writes, ‘great courage.’ He adds: ‘At least two potential contributors decided, if I understood their carefully phrased expressions, that the risks were too high.’ The authors are border-crossers – at least one author of each essay is a citizen of the country about whom he or she writes. This does not make them automatically right, but does acquaint them with the territory about which they write and permit them to weigh what people mean when they say what they say. They are, insofar as I can judge, sceptics about what Fernando Escalante-Gonzalbo and Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo call ‘the smug generalities of anti-Americanism,’ and they have ideas about what ought to be done to improve the reputation of the U. S. For example, those two scholars make no bones about saying that Mexicans and Spaniards tend to be ignorant of the actually existing United States – as opposed to the historical bogeyman and the myth – because ‘almost no one studies the United States. In Mexico no undergraduate or graduate programs or research centers exist for the rigorous study of the “monster.”’

The writers inventory the opinions they find in the respective countries and try to account for them in terms of cultures and histories. These are, of course, comparatively brief essays, so the reader will not find genealogies or analyses comparable in sophistication to Andrei Markovits’ *Uncouth Nation* (reviewed in *Demokratiya 9* by Thomas Cushman). But the book at hand is still useful and there is plenty here to reflect on. There are various compounds of indignation, projection, and compensation at work to single out the United States for condemnation in a world of damnable states. And there are rational and blind anti-Americanisms, and they fluctuate with events. Lurking just beneath the surface of the essays are the questions: To what degree is anti-Americanism attributable to the ruinous preoccupations of the occupant of the White House for the last seven years, and to what degree is it susceptible to imaginable policy changes?

No American should read these essays complacently or simply defensively, although there is redeeming news in some interesting convergences. The Italian Federico Romero writes that West Europeans ‘claim a sort of moral superiority of Europe over the United States’ although public opinion on the two sides of the Atlantic is united on the environment and a market economy, as well as ‘a contempt for, and sometimes fear of, the threat that consumerism and commercialism represent for their cultures.’ Americans are more welcoming toward immigrants and nuclear families, Europeans toward gays and the welfare state. Younger Europeans especially like the idea of the ‘less harsh and more “humane” society’ they see in Europe. Romero doesn’t note that younger Americans are trending that way, too. The America they disdain is an uglier America – an America that, if we’re lucky, may be going the way of George W. Bush and the whole conservative movement.

Politically, Western Europeans, even before the massacres of September 11, 2001, were inclined to go their own way – as Romero points out, after the Cold War, they are not impeded by any great need for the U. S. and the feeling of independence, warranted or not, is mutual. Mars and Venus, and all that. Europeans, especially intellectuals, tend to look at America and see it as something like Brecht’s Mahagonny, or Lars von Trier’s Dogville, a desolate place where harsh capitalism goes unmellowed. (Brecht never set foot on actual American soil until he decided that wartime Los Angeles was preferable to the Stalinist Russia where he left his lover to rot; von Trier is said not to have paid his visit at all.) At the very thought of America, Harold Pinter reduces himself to doggerel, like one of his stammering characters though more hysterically.

Europeans and Americans, both peoples and governments, are rivals as well as allies, allies as well as rivals, and so it is likely to go even after George W. Bush evacuates the White House. It is no small part of the current configuration of opinion in Europe that Bush’s policies make him easily likened to Joe McCarthy, except, of course, that McCarthy was not president. ‘Most West Europeans believe that “the United States is overreacting to the threat of terrorism.”’ In France and Germany in particular,

there are majorities or vast pluralities (49 percent in Germany) who agree with the view (most typical in Muslim countries) that ‘America is exaggerating the terrorist threat.’ Thus, the explanation favoured by vast majorities in both countries is that ‘the U. S. is conducting the war on terrorism in order to control Mideast oil and dominate the world.’

GITLIN | Anti-Americanism Today

About Americans and the American nation, it turns out, the Chinese and Russians are awash in ambivalence. The Chinese, write Yufan Hao and Lin Su, react most strongly toward American government policies vis-à-vis China. They surveyed a sample of Chinese college students and midlevel bureaucrats, members of China's 'emerging foreign policy elite,' and found 47.5 percent possessed of 'an unalloyed favourable opinion of the United States, while 41 percent stated they had a mixed feeling of love and hate. Only 5.5 percent...stated that they simply disliked America.' (When nearly one half of any sample have an 'unalloyed favourable opinion' of *any* nation, it suggests more credulity and herd instinct than knowledge.) They find the Chinese unpersuaded by xenophobia, and their future elite 'not simply pawns of government information campaigns.' For their part, Russians affirm America as a land of self-reliance, but Russian journalists, write Eric Shiraev and Olga Makhovskaya, now resort to 'images [that] are not much different from those Soviet citizens saw regularly at the height of the Cold War.'

For this reader, the most troubling news, not surprisingly, comes from Turkey and Indonesia, and this is obviously a function of the unremarked elephant in this volume, which is the Muslim one.

When the international relations professor Nur Bilge Criss writes that Turks 'from across the political spectrum fear that the United States...has lost its moral authority as it dispenses its own unacceptable brand of vigilante justice,' she uses the word 'fear' advisedly. She is not talking about inveterate America haters, but rather people who could only be disappointed because they had once been appointed – they had admired America and Americans for both geopolitical and cultural reasons. She now finds Turks repelled by American triumphalism. Criss's observations reinforce my own far more superficial ones. In the course of three weeks in Ankara, Istanbul, and Bursa, in the spring of 2004, speaking to academics and students, businessmen and journalists of varying political and religious persuasions, along with some plain people, I heard not one good word for George W. Bush and a good deal of disappointment on the part of people who had once admired America and Americans as an exceptionalist nation, and who revered Bill Clinton in that vein. I met one disabused and demoralised Turk who worked in the American Embassy, then run by Ambassador Eric Edelman, a former staff member of Vice President Cheney who was later returned to Washington and appointed Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, replacing another fervent neoconservative, Douglas Feith. (It was Edelman who broke into the papers in July 2007 for writing to Senator Hillary Clinton: 'Premature and public discussion of the withdrawal of U.S. forces from

Iraq reinforces enemy propaganda that the United States will abandon its allies in Iraq, much as we are perceived to have done in Vietnam, Lebanon and Somalia.) No doubt Edelman was shocked, in 2003, when the Turkish Parliament (against Prime Minister Erdogan's desires) refused Washington's request to base American troops there in to open an invasion route through Northern Iraq. Criss does not seem to have been surprised.

Indonesia, writes Melani Budianta, is inclined toward hostility, for there, the U. S. is seen not just as a continuing Empire but an agent of violence against Muslims worldwide. Impressed by the Islamists with their calls for economic justice, their anti-modernist moralism, and the appeals of the Palestinians, students are particularly inclined toward 'Zionist-Christian anti-Islam conspiracy theory' and the belief that there is 'a deliberate campaign by American-commanded Western forces to destroy the Islamic world.' Still, she cautions against conflating Islamic fundamentalism, 'growing in popularity and influence,' with support for terrorist activity. In the longer run, and when push comes to shove, however, the former is the recruitment ground for the latter.

About miserable Iraq – where the consequences of an anti-Americanism that America itself engendered in a fit of executive fanaticism are all too plain – Ibrahim Al-Marashi and Abdul Hadi al-Khalili write, "The image of the United States as a brutal, even murderous neo-colonial power has already led many Iraqis to become ardent anti-Americans." No wonder more Improvised Explosive Devices have been strewn than flowers. But the problem of assessing opinion is particularly stark in this chapter for Iraq is the country where, not surprisingly, opinions on all manner of things are most difficult to collect. When I read of editorials in what the authors call 'independent' political dailies, what am I to make of them? How many readers do they have, and to what degree are they influential? When they write that 'an Iraqi wrote of Bush's appearing on American television with "a striking Hollywood smile," how am I to assess the opinion of this particular Iraqi? Who is it, and what are his or her views on all manner of things? In other words, where is he or she coming from? And what is to made of the counter-evidence that some Iraqis still think Americans are preferable to their absence? The authors are regrettably silent.

The book has an occasion, obviously: not the abstract question of what 'they' think of 'us' but the question of what Muslims and Muslim-dominant nations think of us. I say this is obvious but this is not a point that Farber makes in so many words.

GITLIN | Anti-Americanism Today

Strikingly he fails to call attention at all to the great divide that is at work when the world thinks about America. A certain delicacy, perhaps?

People always have opinions in response to other people but ordinarily these are not of great moment – not until they crystallise into receptivity toward violence. It is a mark of excessive sensitivity to care so much about what people think of you – unless the cost of animosity is potentially lethal. And here it ought to be faced that American, British, and the broader European civilisation are and have been at risk not from the Chinese, the Russians, the Mexicans, or the Spaniards – either from their people or from their governments. It is certainly grotesque, as a matter of moral perspicacity, that Mexican journalists and a minority of Russians expressed themselves hatefully about American (and not only American, but that's another matter) suffering on September 11, 2001, or felt cavalier about it, thinking – as Escalante-Conzalbo and Tenorio-Trillo write about many Mexican intellectuals in the immediate aftermath to the massacres – ‘that their first duty was to find a rational justification for such irrational violence.’ (So did Noam Chomsky, the world's favorite American expert.) It is certainly chastening as well.

But it is not dangerous. It is annoying to tourists, and sometimes funny, to be hated as proxies. (I remember a weirdly irate Dutch tourist mouthing off in a Cretan restaurant back in 1984, ‘What are you doing such a very long way from home?’) It is a bigger deal when an Empire whose policies are sometimes preferable to the alternatives surrenders its moral authority. What is a bigger deal still is when people organise in such hatred of strangers that they are willing to slaughter anyone within range of a bomb or a missile; or finance them; or shelter them from the police.

Insofar as this very big deal is at issue, how much control does the United States have over ‘what they think of us,’ anyway? No negligible amount. There are matters of policy and there are also matters of institutional stupidity. When America's ‘public diplomacy’ is run by political hacks and ignoramuses, when the Voice of America is reduced to a White House briefing office run by political hacks, and probably worst of all, when the U. S. government in a red-alert mood imposes onerous obligations on students who wish to study here (and I am not talking about flight schools), and on asylum-seekers, and even on ordinary visa-holders, it sabotages the advantages it has held and sometimes still holds in the battle for minds. Still, bear in mind that hospitality is not necessarily an effective propaganda of the deed. The Egyptian who came to the U. S. to study its educational system, Sayyid Qutb, was so freaked out by its soullessness, especially by the alluring women at a 1949 Greeley, Colorado,

dance, that on his return to Egypt he became a central inspiration to generations of Islamist murderers.

If, inshallah, a viable Palestine state should ever emerge alongside Israel, will the Muslim students of Indonesia change their view that the worst of all crimes committed by any nation-state anywhere are the crimes committed by Israel? Will the Indonesian intellectual interviewed by Melanie Budianta reconsider this peculiar statement of his:

As a Moslem in Indonesia, I have been observing what happened in Bosnia, Palestine, and Iraq. I find the facts disturbing....

Palestine and Iraq, yes. But this man, whose 'sense of humanity is hurt,' and who was 'trained in American pragmatism,' and 'feels himself emotionally torn by American foreign policy,' includes Bosnia in his list – Bosnia, where the Chomskyites still refuse to see the allied intervention as anything other than an assault on decent socialists? One wonders what it would take for the selective haters to recognise that the United States intervened in behalf of the Muslim oppressed in Bosnia and Kosovo. Are those who mention Sudan as one 'proof positive of American hypocrisy, militaristic bullying, and xenophobia toward the Moslem population' open to evidence that the Sudanese regime is not gracious to Darfur, or that a history of slavery is not a monopoly of Western regimes?

When George W. Bush has returned for good to clear brush on his patch of ground in Texas, the question of what becomes of attitudes toward the United States will remain, but will thankfully be more empirical, less metaphysical. Here is a good pragmatic argument for regime change in the US: let's change the government, and the policies, and see 'what they think of us' then.

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