

# *Uncouth Nation: Why Europe Dislikes America*

by Andrei Markovits, Princeton University Press, 2007, 275 pp.

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## Introduction

Most Americans, who have travelled to Europe, regardless of their political sympathies, race, class or gender, will be all too familiar with the topic of this wonderfully readable, sociologically powerful, and courageous new book by Andrei Markovits. The following scenario might be familiar to some readers: you are at a conference in Europe and you are sitting in a café with your European colleagues. The topic of America comes up. It could be politics, or culture, the behaviour of the Bush administration or the recent successes of a string of very bad movies. Or, it could be praise of someone or something, a political leader or a very bad movie which is critical of the United States. Based on past experience, you sense beneath the veneer of civility what is to come. You pre-emptively opine that you don't speak for all Americans and that in general you most likely share the perspective of your liberal-minded interlocutors.

To no avail, though. Soon the delivery of the questions ramps up, each member of the group sustaining and supporting each other member's lines of attack. Why is your president prosecuting a foolish war? Why won't the US sign the Treaty of Rome? Why does America not realise the dangers of global warming and sign the Kyoto protocols? Why does America consider itself exceptional and resist civilised European ideas of cosmopolitan citizenship? Soon, such seemingly reasonable questions descend into more general and even essentialist forms: why are Americans so violent? Why does America insist on war when the rest of the 'world community' dreams of perpetual peace? Why are Americans so stupid so as to elect George Bush as president not once but twice? A German whose father was an SS officer, a Frenchman whose uncle was a Nazi collaborator, or a Briton whose grandfather massacred Boers in South Africa might ask these questions, incidentally. And they might be asked on European soil, of which George Orwell once said that not one grain was unstained by blood.

Soon, you feel as if you are on trial, and you have become, despite all efforts to the contrary, the totem of your 'people' around which those present have now

become a collective 'other,' united if even for a brief moment by the evil spirits they have conjured for the occasion. You either profusely apologise to your colleagues for being an American and express shame, regret or self-loathing and in this case you may maintain some of your standing among them. Or you just go quiet and hope that the whole set of issues will just go away, in which case you are guilty of complicity *qui tacit consentit* – 'he who is silent consents.' Or you fight back, acknowledging the criticisms of your country, but defending other aspects of your own society. And if you choose this latter course, you will invariably be labelled as that which your European interlocutors need for their own sense of self-identity more than anything else: an ugly, uncouth American.

Anti-Americanism, with its infinitude of ethnographic mutations, is omnipresent in Europe: in the high halls of academia, in the corridors of power, on the channels of the mass media, street and marketplace, cafes and barrooms, and in the home. As Markovits notes, it is 'a generalized and comprehensive normative dislike of America and things American that often lacks distinct reasons or concrete causes. Anti-Americanism has all the tropes of a classic prejudice.' (p. 17). What is most important about anti-Americanism, for Markovits, is that it is an undifferentiated feeling (or what Todd Gitlin refers to as 'an emotion masquerading as an analysis') which may be related in some vague way to what America does, but is actually quite independent of that: it is an essentialist discourse which, at its very core, seeks to fix the meaning of 'America' and its society and culture in a negative way. Although Markovits doesn't exactly put it this way, it might be said that, conceptually, America is a kind of vessel which is engorged with socially constructed myths of evil. And it is this shared appreciation of these myths of American evil – its impurity and dangerousness – which acts as a cultural integument holding Europeans together in spite of their quite radical differences and their savage and bloody past.

This is the underlying theme of this important new book. Markovits provides us with an in-depth examination of this most enduring and important cultural phenomenon. While it is a global phenomenon, Markovits focuses primarily on anti-Americanism in the countries of Western Europe, in particular in Great Britain, Germany, and France. His task is a contrarian one, since most intellectuals and scholars share a certain proclivity toward anti-Americanism, ranging from a weak form of distaste for America and its culture to a hatred which is unequivocally and unabashedly essentialist and even racist. Among global liberal elites, an attitude of disdain of America is *de rigueur* and even necessary for admission to the status groups of the cultural elite. And so to write critically of anti-Americanism is, in

## CUSHMAN | Anti-Americanism as Totem

a sense, at least from the standpoint of the intellectuals, subversive. In this light, Markovits's book is a welcome breath of fresh air, for rather than subject himself to the stultifying and conformist force of anti-Americanism, a force which leads many American anti-Americans into a position of isolated self-loathing and cynical bitterness, Markovits goes on the offensive. The result is a powerful critical historical analysis of Europe's most deep-seated prejudice.

### **America: The Antonymous Other**

In an opening chapter, Markovits explores the history of European anti-Americanism and notes that 'an era never existed [in European history] in which European intellectuals and European elites – viewed the United States without a solid base of resentment or better, resentment. Accompanying this resentment, one will usually find envy, jealousy, hatred, denigration, as well as a sense of impotence and repressed revenge. Add to this the ingredient of *schadenfreude*, and this resentment becomes part of a potent mixture of simultaneous feelings of inferiority and superiority.' (pp. 18-19). The value of Markovits's account is that he demonstrates an unbroken line of anti-Americanism which has existed since the colonisation of America, intensified during and after the foundation of the republic, and reached its current apogee with the development of the global American empire. From the very beginning, especially among the cultural elites of the countries which were carving up the new continent, America was constructed as a dark and savage place – in Markovits's terms, an 'antonymous other' used as a constant measure of European cultural superiority. Markovits is keen to show us throughout the book that America has constantly served the function of the cultural 'other,' the profane force against which a sacred and superior ideology of Europeanism was hammered out.

Markovits skilfully excavates the historical discourse of anti-Americanism and shows convincingly that a sense of America as savage, barbaric, vapid, hollow, degenerate and completely lacking in virtue was a fundamental staple of the most prominent European intellectuals and spilled over into European societies at large. Markovits's archaeology of European anti-Americanism is indispensable to understanding contemporary patterns of anti-Americanism. Sociologically, the data which Markovits presents make an excellent case for taking cultural continuities seriously. Cultures, especially those as strong as the culture of anti-Americanism, persist over the *longue duree* of history, embedded even within rapidly changing societies, providing the tools which people use to forge and legitimate their own projects

and agendas. One would imagine that the almost atavistic tribalism of Europeans, crystallised in an ideology of 'Europeanism,' ought to have dissipated with the advent of modernity and the recognition that, despite their differences, Western liberal democracies were united by a common culture. Nothing could be further from the truth. Long after the fascists were defeated, anti-Americanism remains alive and well – a deep vein of sentiment and an extremely powerful independent force shaping social outcomes.

### **Run! The Americans are Coming!**

Perhaps the most interesting chapter in the book is Chapter Three, provocatively entitled 'The Perceived "Americanization" of All Aspects of European Lives: A Discourse of Irritation and Condescension.' In this chapter, Markovits notes that anti-Americanism is not in any meaningful sense an analytical discourse but an independent force which 'serves the purpose of confirming and mobilising pre-existing [European] prejudices.' While American actions can bring about spikes in the expression of anti-Americanism, what Markovits wants us to know is that these actions do less to produce anti-Americanism than to mobilise a deep-seated and obdurate cultural discourse which is latent within European culture and which functions to forge the very cultural dispositions of Europeans themselves.

In this chapter, Markovits outlines the discourse of the threat of Americanization in Europe. He notes that the term 'Americanization,' throughout western Europe, is always a negative one, to use a German word, a '*Schimpfort* (swear word), used frequently by the Right, Left, Center in economics, politics, culture, the social world...' (p. 85). This chapter brilliantly illustrates just how pervasive negative sentiments about America are in the countries of Western Europe. With his intimate knowledge of European affairs, Markovits is able to extract out the best and most telling examples. My personal favorite, not in the book, is Harold Pinter's 'poem,' *God Bless America*.

Here they go again,  
The Yanks in their armoured parade  
Chanting their ballads of joy  
As they gallop across the big world  
Praising America's God.

## CUSHMAN | Anti-Americanism as Totem

The gutters are clogged with the dead  
The ones who couldn't join in  
The others refusing to sing  
The ones who are losing their voice  
The ones who've forgotten the tune.

The riders have whips which cut.  
Your head rolls onto the sand  
Your head is a pool in the dirt  
Your head is a stain in the dust  
Your eyes have gone out and your nose  
Sniffs only the pong of the dead  
And all the dead air is alive  
With the smell of America's God.

Pinter, presumably not on the strength of this effort, was awarded the 2005 Nobel Prize for Literature and his Nobel Lecture was nothing but a prolonged and vicious attack on the US and the UK. The most telling thing about this sordid political spectacle is not to be found in the ramblings of Pinter himself, but in his selection as the Nobel Laureate by the Nobel Committee, the *crème de la crème* of the European cultural elite. It was a deliberate act of resistance against the 'evil' empire and its crassness was only matched by the sheer banality of Pinter's utterances.

There is no sphere of society that European cultural elites have not identified as being overtly threatened by the insidious process of Americanization. Markovits focuses on such spheres as language, sports, law, crime, mass media and shows how cultural elites define a 'European' identity for these spheres *not* by celebrating the positive European qualities which would inflect these spheres with 'European-ness,' but by stressing the negative American qualities which have an almost magical power to pollute and destroy authentic European values and ways of life. In each case, whether it be the purity of the French language or the integrity of British soccer (excuse me, football), the quality of the workplace in Germany, or the value of higher education, American culture is an omnipresent and omnipotent force which possesses the capability to rend asunder anything that it comes into contact with. As an American, I found myself quite impressed by my nation's power to wreak havoc on the world. Nothing is safe from us, it seems. Markovits notes that when he was in Europe in the summer of 2003 there was a great heat wave. He heard

constantly that the hot weather was a result of the American refusal to sign the Kyoto protocol. So, he notes, even the weather is corrupted by American culture.

**Twin Brothers: Anti-Semitism and Anti-Americanism**

One of the most welcome chapters in the book is Chapter 5, in which Markovits discusses the relationship between anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism. This is an especially important chapter given the present demonisation of Jews and specific actions against Jews in Europe, especially in France. Markovits concurs with André Glucksmann that the two cultural forces are actually 'twin brothers.' Anti-Semitism has a much longer history than anti-Americanism, but what it shares is its quality as a powerful cultural force which remains latent within cultures, waiting, as we see with anti-Americanism, to be activated for a variety of purposes. This argument, which gives culture its due as a causative force in history, is reminiscent of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's argument about the power of eliminationist anti-Semitism in German culture which drove Germans to commit mass murder of the Jews.

Markovits outlines the long and sordid history of anti-Semitism in Europe, and one comes away from this sophisticated and original chapter (perhaps the most original chapter in the book) with the knowledge that Europe – the supposed guardian of the Enlightenment and civility – has more often than not served up the most violent and hateful episodes in human history. Later on in the book, Markovits presciently observes that the history of European hate, violence, squalor, injustice, and genocide is rendered invisible to the anti-American ideologists of Europeanism by transposing that very history on America and Americans. Thus, anti-Americanism involves not just a deceptive social construction of the other, but a self-deceptive social construction of European identity and self-hood as well. While anti-Americanism has certainly not had the same outcomes in terms of suffering and mass death as anti-Semitism, Markovits convincingly demonstrates that there is an enduring linkage between the two. The durability and intensity of these 'twin brothers' is an indication that one of Europe's great flaws is its ability to hate and to hate unequivocally and absolutely. Ironically, I can think of no corollary sentiment in America toward Europe: with the exception of the occasional 'Fuck France' bumper sticker from the early days of the Iraq war, my ethnographic sense tells me that Americans are more or less indifferent to Europe, and if anything rather well disposed to travel there and celebrate its charms. This indifference, of course, most likely serves to fuel further anti-Americanism, for nothing breeds resentment

## CUSHMAN | Anti-Americanism as Totem

so much as when the most powerful pay little attention to those who think they are the most important.

### European Totem and Civic Religion

Markovits primary explanation for the deep and enduring anti-Americanism he has uncovered is that it provides a basis for a common identity among a diverse group of nations which constitute Europe. While anti-Americanism always existed in individual countries, it is now even more useful as Europe seeks to define itself as a supranational entity. America is, in Markovits's terms, Europe's 'antonymous other' which is absolutely crucial for the formation of a European 'self.' Interestingly enough, those Europeans who define their societies and their selves in relation to it, notes Markovits, rely on the same kind of logic displayed by Samuel Huntington in his clash of civilisations theory (and they do this at the same time that they decry the latter for its lack of complexity, say, in understanding relations between the West and Islam). In the last chapter, Markovits draws on Hannah Arendt's powerful critique of the dangers of post-war pan-European nationalism, which she quite rightly predicted would rely on the development of 'Europeanism' built to a large extent on a socially constructed edifice of anti-Americanism. Arendt, according to Markovits, very early on in the post-war period recognised that European identity would come at the expense of America.

In the last chapter, Markovits offers a functionalist explanation of anti-Americanism, and it is, indeed, worthwhile to think of this phenomenon in Durkheimian terms as a kind of 'civil religion' with its own myths, rituals, high priests and worshippers. Markovits astutely notes that the mass demonstrations in Europe which took place in the days preceding the Iraq war were mass rituals of a new identity, a European identity. These collective rituals took place, however, within a Europe in which most heads of European states supported the coalition war in spite of, and in direct contradiction to, the wishes of their people. In Western Europe, only the leaders of France, Germany, Belgium, Greece and Luxembourg opposed the war, a fact which, when told, generally flummoxes those who insist that the entire 'world community' was against the war and, therefore, against America. Interestingly enough, only Jose Maria Aznar of Spain could be said to have lost his job over the war and the same people who had been part of the collective apoplexy over the war regularly returned their pro-American leader-poodles to power in popular votes. So while it is right to specify, as Markovits does, that anti-Americanism is a kind of 'independent

variable' which affects and shapes social outcomes, one has to be a bit wary about attributing it more power than it actually has.

Markovits's functional theory of anti-Americanism is an excellent starting point, but does not exhaust the theoretical possibilities for thinking about why anti-Americanism persists as it does in the modern world. This is not a criticism, per se, since the book opens the way for a wide range of new interpretations and future research. Among the most important questions that are not raised, but ought to be explored in future works are: how is anti-Americanism transmitted across time and space in Europe seemingly outside of the influence of any specific historical events (that is, how does it reproduce itself as a cultural discourse)? While it is tempting to rely on the most parsimonious explanation, the kind of functionalist explanation offered by Markovits, one of the most striking characteristics of anti-Americanism appears to be its 'autopoietic' quality. At times, it appears as a self-reproducing, self-contained cultural system of myths, values, and ideas which does not rely on the specific actions of individuals or historical events, but is, rather, a juggernaut-like *Ding an Sich* to which even those Europeans who revel in it are ultimately held hostage. Also, one of the most curious aspects of anti-Americanism is not addressed by Markovits, that is the coexistence of negative anti-American sentiment with positive pro-American sentiment. It appears that most of the world is not strictly anti-American (although the negative sentiment may win out), but has a kind of schizoid relationship to America, sometimes hating it, sometimes loving it, but in any case conflicted about it. Everyone likes to bash America, but everyone wants to go there as well. Everyone disdains the influence of American culture, but only the most puritanical of Europeanists can actually resist its charms. It is vitally necessary to understand this dualistic love-hate relationship of the rest of the world with America.

Markovits' stellar, finely researched and written account will take its place in the emergent canon of important works by other prominent intellectuals on the phenomenon of anti-Americanism. It is on par with the path-breaking works by Russell Berman, professor at Stanford University and editor of *Telos*, and Paul Hollander, the Hungarian émigré scholar who has devoted his entire life to the study of the fundamentally irrational forces of political pieties and whose foundational works on anti-Americanism have become classics in that subject. Markovits deserves praise and support for daring to take on the topic of anti-Americanism, for challenging the orthodoxy of anti-Americanism and exposing its irrationality, cultural essentialism, and raw reductionisms. Like other dissidents on the left who



## CUSHMAN | Anti-Americanism as Totem

criticise the left, Markovits will be labelled an ‘American apologist’ (even though he takes pains to distinguish a rational critique of certain aspects of American culture and politics from an irrational one) and will be accused of ‘moving to the right’ for daring to expose the vicissitudes of this most elemental of left-wing pieties. Yet, such outcomes are the price of challenging orthodoxy, and the real value of Markovits book lies not in its appeal to traditional, conservative, patriotic American critics of Europe, but in its appeal to thinking and reflective people who have generally considered themselves left of center, but who no longer wish to hide their own prejudices, biases, and hypocrisy from themselves.

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