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Among the Bourgeoisophobes

Why the Europeans and Arabs, each in their own way, hate America and Israel.

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AROUND 1830, a group of French artists and intellectuals looked around and noticed that people who were their spiritual inferiors were running the world. Suddenly a large crowd of merchants, managers, and traders were making lots of money, living in the big houses, and holding the key posts. They had none of the high style of the aristocracy, or even the earthy integrity of the peasants. Instead, they were gross. They were vulgar materialists, shallow conformists, and self-absorbed philistines, who half the time failed even to acknowledge their moral and spiritual inferiority to the artists and intellectuals. What's more, it was their very mediocrity that accounted for their success. Through some screw-up in the great scheme of the universe, their narrow-minded greed had brought them vast wealth, unstoppable power, and growing social prestige.

Naturally, the artists and intellectuals were outraged. Hatred of the bourgeoisie became the official emotion of the French intelligentsia. Stendhal said traders and merchants made him want to "weep and vomit at the same time." Flaubert thought they were "plodding and avaricious." Hatred of the bourgeoisie, he wrote, "is the beginning of all virtue." He signed his letters "Bourgeoisophobus" to show how much he despised "stupid grocers and their ilk."

Of all the great creeds of the 19th century, pretty much the only one still thriving is this one, bourgeoisophobia. Marxism is dead. Freudianism is dead. Social Darwinism is dead, along with all those theories about racial purity that grew up around it. But the emotions and reactions that Flaubert, Stendhal, and all the others articulated in the 1830s are still with us, bigger than ever. In fact, bourgeoisophobia, which has flowered variously and spread to places as diverse as Baghdad, Ramallah, and Beijing, is the major reactionary creed of our age.

This is because today, in much of the world's eyes, two peoples--the Americans and the Jews--have emerged as the great exemplars of undeserved success. Americans and Israelis, in this view, are the money-mad molochs of the earth, the vulgarizers of morals, corrupters of culture, and proselytizers of idolatrous values. These two nations, it is said, practice conquest capitalism, overrunning poorer nations and exploiting weaker neighbors in their endless desire for more and more. These two peoples, the Americans and the Jews, in the view of the bourgeoisophobes, thrive precisely because they are spiritually stunted. It is their obliviousness to the holy things in life, their feverish energy, their injustice, their shallow pursuit of power and gain, that allow them to build fortunes, construct weapons, and play the role of hyperpower.

And so just as the French intellectuals of the 1830s rose up to despise the traders and bankers, certain people today rise up to shock, humiliate, and dream of destroying America and Israel. Today's bourgeoisophobes burn with the same sense of unjust inferiority. They experience the same humiliation because there is nothing they can do to thwart the growing might of their enemies. They rage and rage. Only today's bourgeoisophobes are not just artists and intellectuals. They are as likely to be terrorists and suicide bombers. They teach in madrassas, where they are careful not to instruct their students in the sort of practical knowledge that dominates bourgeois schools. They are Muslim clerics who incite hatred and violence. They are erudite

Europeans who burn with humiliation because they know, deep down, that both America and Israel possess a vitality and heroism that their nations once had but no longer do.

Today the battle lines are forming. The dispute over Palestine, which was once a local conflict about land, has been transformed into a great cultural showdown. The vast array of bourgeoisophobes--Yasser Arafat's guerrilla socialists, Hamas's Islamic fundamentalists, Jose Bove's anti-globalist leftists, America's anti-colonial multiculturalists, and the BBC's Oxbridge mediacrats--focus their diverse rages and resentments on this one conflict.

The bourgeoisophobes have no politburo. There is no bourgeoisophobe central command. They have no plausible strategy for victory. They have only their nihilistic rage, their envy mixed with snobbery, their snide remarks, their newspaper distortions, their conspiracy theories, their suicide bombs and terror attacks--and above all, a burning sense that the rising, vibrant, and powerful peoples of America and Israel must be humiliated and brought low.

BOURGEOISOPHOBIA is really a hatred of success. It is a hatred held by people who feel they are spiritually superior but who find themselves economically, politically, and socially outranked. They conclude that the world is diseased, that it rewards the wrong values, the wrong people, and the wrong abilities. They become cynical if they are soft inside, violent if they are hard. In the bourgeoisophobe's mind, the people and nations that do succeed are not just slightly vulgar, not just over-compensated, not just undeservedly lucky. They are monsters, non-human beasts who, in extreme cases, can be blamelessly killed. This Manichaean divide between the successful, who are hideous, and the bourgeoisophobes, who are spiritually pristine, was established early in the emergence of the creed. The early 19th-century German poet Holderlin couldn't just ignore the merchant bourgeoisie; he had to declare the middle classes "deeply incapable of every divine emotion." In other words, scarcely human.

Holderlin's countryman Werner Sombart later wrote a quintessential bourgeoisophobe text called "Traders and Heroes," in which he argued that there are two basic human types: "The trader approaches life with the question, what can you give me? . . . The hero approaches life with the question what can I give you?" The trader, then, is the selfish capitalist who lives a meager, artificial life amidst "pocket-watches, newspapers, umbrellas, books, sewage disposal, politics." The hero is the total man, who is selfless, vital, spiritual, and free. An honest person might ascribe another's success to a superior work ethic, self-discipline, or luck--just being in the right place at the right time and possessing the right skills. A normal person might look at a rich and powerful country and try to locate the source of its vitality, to measure its human and natural resources, its freedom, its institutions and social norms. But for the bourgeoisophobe, other people's success is never legitimate or deserved. To him, success comes to those who worship the golden calf, the idol, the Satanic corrupter, gold.

When bourgeoisophobes describe their enemies, they almost always portray them as money-mad, as crazed commercialists. And this vulgar materialism, in their view, has not only corrupted the soul of the bourgeoisie, but through them threatens to debase civilization itself and the whole world. It threatens, in the words of the supreme bourgeoisophobe, Karl Marx, to take all that is holy and make it profane.

Some of the more pessimistic bourgeoisophobes come to believe that the worst is already at hand. "Our poor country lies in Roman decadence," the French conservative poet Arthur de Gobineau lamented in 1840. "We are without fiber or moral energy. I no longer believe in anything. . . . MONEY HAS KILLED EVERYTHING." (A great place to read bourgeoisophobe writing is Arthur Herman's "The Idea of Decline in Western History." Bourgeoisophobia is not Herman's theme, but his book does such a magnificent job of surveying two centuries of pessimistic thought that most of the key bourgeoisophobes are quoted.)

And once the bourgeoisophobes had experienced the basic spasm of reaction, they soon settled on the Americans and Jews as two of the chief objects of their ire. Because, as Henry Steele Commager once noted, no country in the world ever succeeded like America, and everybody knew it. And no people in the European experience ever achieved such sustained success as the Jews.

So the Jews were quickly established in the bourgeoisophobe imagination as the ultimate commercial people. They were the bankers, the traders, the soulless and sharp dealmakers who crawled through the cellars of honest and noble cultures and infected them with their habits and practices. The 19th-century Teutonic philosopher Houston Chamberlain said of the Jews that "their existence is a crime against the holy laws of life." The Jewish religion, he said, is "rigid," "scanty," and "sterile."

The American bourgeoisophobe family, the Adamses, contained more than its share of anti-Semites. Brooks Adams lamented that "England is as much governed by the Jews of Berlin, Paris and New York as the native growth." Adams compared the Jews to a vast syndicate and declared simply, "They control the world." Henry Adams protested against the interlocked power of "Wall Street, State Street and Jerusalem." Later, the English historian Arnold Toynbee argued that the Jews, with their "consummate virtuosity in commerce and finance," had infected Western civilization with a crass materialism. Through their arrogance and viciousness, they were responsible for capitalism, godless communism, and the Holocaust, and so had contributed to Europe's decline.

It's actually amazing how early America, too, was stereotyped as a money-grubbing commercial land and Americans a money-grubbing people. Francois La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, who traveled in the United States in the 1790s, declared, "The desire for riches is their ruling passion." In 1805, a British visitor observed, "All men there make [money] their pursuit." "Gain! Gain! Gain! Gain! Gain!" is how the English philosopher Morris Birbeck summarized the American spirit a few years later. In 1823 William Faux wrote that "two selfish gods, pleasure and gain, enslave the Americans." Fourteen years after that, the disillusioned Russian writer Mikhail Pogodin lamented, "America, on which our contemporaries have pinned their hopes for a time, has meanwhile clearly revealed the vices of her illegitimate birth. She is not a state, but rather a trading company."

Each wave of foreign observers reinforced the prejudice. Charles Dickens described a country of uncouth vulgarians frantically chasing, as he first put it, "the almighty dollar." Oswald Spengler worried that Germany would devolve into "soulless America," with its worship of "technical skill, money and an eye for facts." Matthew Arnold worried that global forces would Americanize England. "They will rule [Britain] by their energy but they will deteriorate it by their low ideas and want of culture." By 1904, people around the world were worrying about American cultural hegemony. In that year the German writer Paul Dehns wrote an influential essay called "The Americanization of the World." "What is Americanization?" Dehns asked. "Americanization in its widest sense, including the societal and political, means the uninterrupted, exclusive, and relentless striving after gain, riches and influence."

In the 20th century the Americans' aggressive commercialism was symbolized by the unstoppable spread of jeans, Coca-Cola, McDonald's, Disney, and Microsoft. America, in the bourgeoisophobes' eyes, is the land of Bart Simpson, boy bands, boob jobs, and "Baywatch." The land of money and guns. Of insincere smiles and love handles. So by the time Osama bin Laden came along, hatred of America was well rehearsed, a finished product just waiting for him to pick it up. In 1998 bin Laden declared war on "the crusader-Jewish alliance, led by the United States and Israel." He added, "Since I was a boy I have been at war with and harboring hatred towards the Americans." He was only echoing Toynbee, who 30 years earlier said, "The United States and Israel must be today the two most dangerous of the 125 sovereign states among which the land surface of this planet is at present partitioned."

FOR THE bourgeoisophobe, then, the question becomes, how does one confront this menace? And on this, the bourgeoisophobes split into two schools. One, which might be called the brutalist school, seeks to reclaim the raw, masculine vitality that still lies buried at the virile heart of human nature. The other, which might be called the ethereal school, holds that a creative minority can rise above prosaic bourgeois life into a realm of contemplation, feeling, art, sensibility, and spiritual grace.

The brutalist school started in Germany, more or less with Nietzsche. In "Thus Spake Zarathustra," Nietzsche has a character declare that he is turning his back on the whole world of degenerate "flea-beetles," the ones who spend their lives "higgling and haggling for power with the rabble." Salvation instead is found in the will to power. The Ubermensch possesses force of will. He can thus be "a mighty . . . hammer" who will smash, "break and remove degenerate and decaying races to make way for a new order of life."

The brutalists urged sons--"the explosive ones"--to revolt against their fathers. They romanticized insanity as a rebellion against convention. They looked back nostalgically to the crude, savage, and proud men of Homeric legend, Germanic history, and Norse myth. They looked for another such hero to emerge today, a virile warrior who would demolish the stale encrustations of an overcivilized world and revive the raw energy of the species. "We do not need ideologues anymore," Oswald Spengler argued, "we need hardness, we need fearless skepticism, we need a class of socialist master men." This, of course, was the path that led to Mussolini, Hitler, Saddam Hussein, and bin Laden.

Meanwhile, the ethereal bourgeoisophobes were emerging in Paris and later London and the United States. They argued that people in decaying cultures should not try to reclaim their former economic and military power. It was wiser to accept the decline of their worldly power and embrace the contemplative virtues. Toynbee acknowledged that Europe's virile, self-assertive days were over. Europeans would have to choose between spending their money on comfortable welfare states and spending it on militaristic "war-making states." They could not afford both. He predicted (in 1926) that they would choose welfare states--and be forced to accept being "dwarfed by the overseas world which [Europe] herself had called into existence."

The Europeans should therefore turn inward. As Arthur Herman notes, the human ideal Toynbee described looks a lot like Toynbee himself: "diffident, sensitive, religious in a contemplative and otherworldly sense, a man who shuns the world of violence and barbarism to pursue the 'etherealization' of himself and society." Toynbee denounced patriotism, commercial striving, and the martial spirit. Artists and intellectuals, the "creative minority," should lead until "the majority is drilled into following the minority's lead mechanically."

Though Toynbee despised the United States, his books sold well here. His lecture tours were lucrative, and his picture was on the cover of Time magazine. When Hitler came along, Toynbee was an enthusiastic appeaser. He met Hitler in 1936 and came away deeply impressed (the two men hated some of the same things). He told his countrymen that Hitler sincerely desired peace. For, just as the brutalist school of bourgeoisophobia led to Hitler and Saddam, the ethereal school led to Neville Chamberlain and some of the European reaction to George Bush's Axis of Evil.

SINCE SEPTEMBER 11, there has been a great deal of analysis of the roots of Muslim rage. But to anybody familiar with the history of bourgeoisophobia, it is striking how comfortably Muslim rage meshes with traditional rage against meritocratic capitalism. The Islamist fanatic and the bourgeoisophobe hate the same things. They use the same words, they utter the same protests. In an essay in the New York Review of Books called "Occidentalism," Avishai Margalit and Ian Buruma listed the traits that enrage al Qaeda and other Third World anti-Americans and anti-Westerners. First, they hate the city. Cities stand for commerce, mixed populations, artistic freedom, and sexual license. Second, they hate the mass media: advertising, television, pop music, and videos. Third, they hate science and

technology--the progress of technical reason, mechanical efficiency, and material know-how. Fourth, they hate prudence, the desire to live safely rather than court death and heroically flirt with violence. Fifth, they hate liberty, the freedom extended even to mediocre people. Sixth, they despise the emancipation of women. As Margalit and Buruma note, "Female emancipation leads to bourgeois decadence." Women are supposed to stay home and breed heroic men. When women go out into the world, they deprive men of their manhood and weaken their virility.

If you put these six traits together, you have pretty much the pillars of meritocratic capitalist society, practiced most assertively in countries like America and Israel. Contemporary Muslim rage is further inflamed by two additional passions. One is a sense of sexual shame. A rite of passage for any bourgeoisophobe of this type is the youthful trip to America or to the West, where the writer is nearly seduced by the vulgar hedonism of capitalist life, but heroically spurns it. Sayyid Qutb, who is one of the intellectual heroes of the Islamic extremists, toured America between 1948 and 1950. He found a world of jazz, football, movies, cars, and people obsessed with lawn maintenance. It was a land, he wrote, "hollow and full of contradictions, defects and evils." At one point Qutb found himself at a church social. The disc jockey put on "Baby, It's Cold Outside." As Qutb wrote, "The dancing intensified. . . . The hall swarmed with legs. . . . Arms circled arms, lips met lips, chests met chests, and the atmosphere was full of love." This was at a church social. You can imagine how the September 11 al Qaeda hijackers must have felt during the visit they made to a Florida strip club shortly before going off to their purifying martyrdom.

The second inflaming passion is humiliation--humiliation caused by the fact that in the 1960s and 1970s, many Arab and Muslim nations tried to join this bourgeois world. They tried to modernize, and they failed. Some Arab countries continue to pursue the low and dirty modernizing path, continue to ape the sordid commercialists and even to accept the presence of American troops on Arabian soil. And this drives the hard-core Islamic bourgeoisophobes to even higher states of rage. As bin Laden himself notably put it, protesting the presence of American troops on Saudi land: "By God, Muslim women refuse to be defended by these American and Jewish prostitutes." The Islamist response to humiliation has been worship of the Muslim man of force. Islamist extremists romanticize the brutal warrior, just as the German bourgeoisophobes did, only the Islamists wear robes and clutch Korans. Like European and Japanese brutalists before them, the Islamists celebrate violence and build a cult of suicide and death. "The Americans love Pepsi-Cola, we love death," declared al Qaeda's Mualana Inyadullah after September11. Jews "love life more than any other people, and they prefer not to die," declared Hamas official Ismail Haniya on March 28 amidst a rash of suicide bombings.

Part 2

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