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Among the Bourgeoisophobes, Part 2

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THE BRUTALIST bourgeoisophobia of the Islamic extremists is pretty straightforward. The attitudes of European etherealists are quite a bit more complicated. Europeans, of course, are bourgeois themselves, even more so in some ways than Americans and Israelis. What they distrust about America and Israel is that these countries represent a particularly aggressive and, to them, unbalanced strain of bourgeois ambition. No European would ever acknowledge the category, but America and Israel are heroic bourgeois nations. The Israelis are driven by passionate Zionism to build their homeland and make it rich and powerful. Americans are driven by our Puritan sense of calling, the deeply held belief that we Americans have a special mission to spread our way of life around the globe. It is precisely this heroic element of ordinary life that Europeans lack and distrust.

So the Europeans are all ambivalence. The British historian J.H. Plumb once declared that he loved America (and he was indeed a great defender of the United States), but even his admiration for the country "was entangled with anger, anxiety and at times flashes of hate." In his infuriatingly condescending and ultimately appreciative portrait "America," the French modernist Jean Baudrillard wrote, "America is powerful and original; America is violent and abominable. We should not seek to deny either of these aspects, nor reconcile them."

But Europeans do seek to deny them--because they simply can't remember what it's like to be imperially confident, to feel the forces of history blowing at one's back, to have heroic and even eschatological aspirations. Their passions have been quieted. Their intellectual guides have taught them that business is ignoble and striving is vulgar. Their history has caused them to renounce military valor (good thing, too) and to regard their own relative decline as a sign of greater maturity and wisdom. The European Union has a larger population than the United States, and a larger GDP--and its political class has tried to construct an institutional architecture that will enable it to rival America. But the imperial confidence is gone, along with the youthful sense of limitless possibility and the unselfconscious embrace of ordinary striving.

So their internal engine is calibrated differently. They look with disdain upon our work ethic (the average American works 350 hours a year--nearly nine weeks--longer than the average European). They look with disdain upon what they see as our lack of social services, our relatively small welfare state, which rewards mobility and effort but less gracefully cushions misfortune. They look with distaste upon our commercial culture, which favors the consumer but does not ease the rigors of competition for producers. And they look with fear upon our popular culture, which like some relentless machine seems designed to crush the local cultures that stand in its way.

To European bourgeoisophobes, America is the radioactive core of what Ignacio Ramonet, editor and publisher of Le Monde Diplomatique, recently called "The Other Axis of Evil" in a front-page essay. It controls the IMF and the World Bank, the institutions that reward the rich and punish the poor, Ramonet claimed. American institutions such as the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Cato Institute promulgate the ideology that justifies exploitation, he continued. The American military provides the muscle to force-feed economic liberalism to the world.

They look at us uncomprehendingly when our leaders declare a global assault on terror and evil. They see us as a mindless Rambo, a Mike Tyson with rippling muscles and no brain. Where the Islamists see us as a decadent slut, the European etherealists see us as a gun-slinging cowboy. The Islamists think we are too spoiled and comfortable, the Europeans think we are too violent and impulsive. Each side's view of us is a mix of Hollywood images (Marilyn Monroe for the Islamists, John Wayne for the Europeans), mass-media distortions, envy-driven stereotypes, and self-justifying delusions. But each side's vision springs from a deeper bourgeoisophobia--the prejudice that people who succeed in worldly affairs must be morally and intellectually backward. This article of faith governs the way even many sophisticated Europeans and Muslims react to us.

AFTER SEPTEMBER 11, there was a widespread fear in Europe and in certain American circles that the United States would lash out violently and pointlessly. In fact, the United States has never behaved this way. It was slow to respond to Pearl Harbor; it was too timid in its responses to the USS Cole and other attacks. But to many Europeans, who must believe in our mindless immaturity in order to look themselves in the mirror each morning, it was obvious that the United States would shoot first and think afterwards.

These Europeans have assigned themselves the self-flattering role of being Athens to our Rome. That's what all the talk about coalition-building is about; the mindless American car dealer with the big guns should allow himself to be guided by the thoughtful European statesman, who is better able to think through the unintended consequences of any action, and to understand the darker complexities. Much European commentary about America since September 11 has had a zoological tone. The American beast did not know that he was vulnerable to attack (we Europeans have long understood this). The American was traumatized by this discovery. The American was overcompensating with an arms build-up that was pointless since, with his gigantisme militaire, he already had more weapons than he could ever need.

Furthermore, the American doesn't see the deeper causes of terrorism, the poverty, the hopelessness. America should really be spending more money on foreign aid (it's interesting that Europeans, who are supposed to be less materialistic than we are, inevitably think more money can solve the world's problems, while Americans tend to point to religion or ideas).

"What America never takes a moment to consider is that, despite its mightiness, it is a young country with much to learn. It had no real direct experience of the First and Second World Wars," declared a writer in the New Statesman, echoing a sentiment that one heard across the Continent as well. America, many Europeans feel, has no experience with the Red Brigades, the IRA, the Basque terrorists. Americans have no experience with Afghanistan. The dim boobies have no idea what sort of instability they are about to cause. They will go marching off as they always do, naively confident of themselves, yet inevitably unaware of the harm they shall do. Much of the reaction, in short, has been straight out of Graham Greene's novel "The Quiet American." The hero of that book, Alden Pyle, is a well-intentioned, naive, earnest manchild who dreams of spreading democracy but only stirs up chaos. "I never knew a man who had better motives for all the trouble he caused," one of the characters says about him. Much of the European intellectual response to the American war has less to do with actual evidence than with figures from literature and the mass media. Sometimes you get the impression that the only people who took the images of Rambo, the Lone Ranger, and Superman seriously were the European bourgeoisophobes who needed cliches to hate.

When the etherealized bourgeoisophobe goes to practice politics, he instinctively dons the pinstripes of the diplomat. Diplomacy fits his temperament. It demands subtlety instead of clarity, self-control instead of power, patience instead of energy, nuance instead of restlessness. Diplomacy is highly formal, highly elitist, highly civilized. Most of all, it is complex. Complexity is catnip to the etherealized bourgeoisophobe. It paralyzes brute action, and justifies subtle and basically immobile gestures, calibrations, and modalities. Bourgeoisophobes have a

simple-minded faith that whatever the problem is, the solution requires complexity. Any decisive effort to change the status quo--to topple Saddam, to give up on Arafat, to foment democracy in the Arab world--will only make things worse.

We Americans have our own bourgeoisophobes, of course. If I pulled from my shelves all the books about the moral backwardness of the enterprising middle classes, I could stack them to the ceiling. I could start with the works of the Transcendentalists, then move through Dreiser, Mencken, Sherwood Anderson, and Sinclair Lewis. Then we could skim swiftly through all the books that bemoan the moral, cultural, and intellectual vapidity of suburbanites, students, middle managers, and middle Americans: "Babbitt," "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit," "The Souls of Black Folk," "The Lonely Crowd," "The Organization Man," "The Catcher in the Rye," "The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism," "The Affluent Society," "Death of a Salesman," "Soul on Ice," "The Culture of Narcissism," "Habits of the Heart," "The Closing of the American Mind," "Earth in the Balance," "Slouching Towards Gomorrah," "Jihad vs. McWorld," just about every word ever written by Kevin Phillips and Michael Moore, and just about every novel of the last quarter century, from "Rabbit is Rich" through "The Corrections." It's a Mississippi flood of pessimism. As Catherine Jurca recently wrote in "White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel," "As a body of work, the suburban novel asserts that one unhappy family is a lot like the next, and there is no such thing as a happy family."

The pessimism falls into several categories. There is straightforward, left-wing bourgeoisophobia from writers who think commercial culture has ravaged our souls. Then there is the right-wing variant that says it has made us spiritually flat, and so turned us into comfort-loving Last Men. Then there is the conservative pessimism that purports to be a defense of the heroic bourgeois culture America embodies while actually showing little faith in it. Writers of this school argue that the solid capitalist values America once possessed have been corrupted by intellectual currents coming out of the universities--as if the meritocratic capitalist virtues were such delicate flowers that they could be dissolved by the acid influence of Paul de Man.

It all adds up to a lot of dark foreboding, and after September 11, it doesn't look that impressive. The events of the past several months have cast doubt on a century of mostly bourgeoisophobe cultural pessimism. Somehow the firemen in New York and the passengers on Flight 93 behaved like heroes even though they no doubt lived in bourgeois homes, liked Oprah, shopped at Wal-Mart, watched MTV, enjoyed their Barcaloungers, and occasionally glanced through Playboy. Even more than that, it has become abundantly clear since September 11 that America has ascended to unprecedented economic and military heights, and it really is not easy to explain how a country so corrupt to the core can remain for so long so apparently successful on the surface. If we're so rotten, how can we be so great?

It could be, as the bourgeoisophobes say, that America thrives because it is spiritually stunted. It's hard to know, since most of us lack the soul-o-meter by which the cultural pessimists apparently measure the depth of other people's souls. But we do know that despite the alleged savagery, decadence, and materialism of American life, Americans still continue to react to events in ways that suggest there is more to this country than "Survivor," Self magazine, and T.G.I. Friday's.

Confronted with the events of September 11, Americans have not sought to retreat as soon as possible to the easy comfort of their great-rooms (on the contrary, it's been others around the world who have sought to close the parenthesis on these events). President Bush, a man derided as a typical philistine cowboy, has framed the challenge in the most ambitious possible terms: as a moral confrontation with an Axis of Evil. He has chosen the most arduous course. And the American people have supported him, embraced his vision every step of the way--even the people who fiercely opposed his election.

This is not the predictable reaction of a decadent, commercial people. This is not the reaction you would have predicted if you had based your knowledge of America on the extensive literature of cultural decline. Nor would you have been able to predict the American reaction to recent events in the Middle East, which also differs

markedly from the European one. Just as the French anti-globalist activist Jose Bove, heretofore most famous for smashing up a McDonald's, senses that he has something in common with Yasser Arafat (whom he visited in Ramallah on March 31), most Americans sense that they have something in common with Israel in this fight. Most Americans can see the difference between nihilistic terrorism and a democracy trying fitfully to defend itself. And most Americans seem willing to defend the principles that are at stake here, even in the face of global criticism and obloquy. In this, as in so much else, George Bush reflects the meritocratic capitalist culture of which he is a product. While the rest of the world was lost in a moral fog, going on about the "cycle of violence" as if bombs set themselves off and the language of human agency and moral judgment didn't apply, the Bush administration, by and large, has been clear.

IN THIS and many other aspects of the war on terrorism, the American leaders and the American people have been stubborn and steadfast. Just as the American people patiently persevered through a century of fighting fascism and communism, there is every sign they will patiently persevere in the conflict against terrorism, which is really a struggle against people who despise our way of life.

Maybe the bourgeoisophobes were wrong from the first. Maybe they were wrong to think that 90 percent of humanity is mad to seek money. Maybe they were wrong to think that wealth inevitably corrupts. Maybe they were wrong to regard themselves as the spiritual superiors of middle-class bankers, lawyers, and traders. Maybe they were wrong to think that America is predominantly about gain and the bitch-goddess success. Maybe they were wrong to think that power and wealth are a sign of spiritual stuntedness. Maybe they were wrong to treasure the ecstatic gestures of rebellion, martyrdom, and liberation over the deeper satisfactions of ordinary life.

And if they weren't wrong, how does one explain the fact that almost all their predictions turned out to be false? For two centuries America has been on the verge of exhaustion or collapse, but it never has been exhausted or collapsed. For two centuries capitalism has been in crisis, but it never has succumbed. For two centuries the youth/the artists/the workers/the oppressed minorities were going to overthrow the staid conformism of the suburbs, but in the end they never did. Instead they moved to the suburbs and found happiness there.

For two centuries there has been this relentless pattern. Some new bourgeoisophobe movement or figure emerges--Lenin, Hitler, Sartre, Che Guevara, Woodstock, the Sandinistas, Arafat. The new movement is embraced. It is romanticized. It is heralded as the wave of the future. But then it collapses, and the never-finally-disillusioned bourgeoisophobes go off in search of the next anti-bourgeois movement that will inspire the next chapter in their ever-disappointed Perils of Pauline journey.

Perhaps, on the other hand, September 11 will cause more Americans to come to the stunning and revolutionary conclusion that we are right to live the way we do, to be the way we are. Maybe it is now time to put intellectual meat on the bones of our instinctive pride, to acknowledge that the American way of life is not only successful, but also character-building. It inculcates virtues that account for American success: a certain ability to see problems clearly, to react to setbacks energetically, to accomplish the essential tasks, to use force without succumbing to savagery. Perhaps ordinary American life mobilizes individual initiative, and the highest, not just the crassest aspirations. Maybe Baudrillard, that infuriatingly appreciative Frenchman, had it right when he wrote about America, "We [Europeans] philosophize about a whole host of things, but it is here that they take shape. . . . It is the American mode of life, that we judge naive or devoid of culture, that gives us the completed picture of the object of our values."

Because the striking thing is that, for all their contempt, the bourgeoisophobes cannot ignore us. They can't just dismiss us with a wave and get on with their lives. The entire Arab world, and much of the rest of the world, is obsessed with Israel. Many people in many lands define themselves in opposition to the United States. This is because deep down they know that we possess a vitality that is impressive. The Europeans regard us as simplistic cowboys, and in a backhanded way they are

acknowledging the pioneering spirit that motivates America--the heroic spirit that they, in the comfort of their welfare states, lack. The Islamic extremists regard us as lascivious hedonists, and in a backhanded way they are acknowledging both our freedom and our happiness.

Maybe in their hatred we can better discern our strengths. Because if the tide of conflict is rising, then we had better be able to articulate, not least to ourselves, who we are, why we arouse such passions, and why we are absolutely right to defend ourselves.

David Brooks is a senior editor at The Weekly Standard.

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