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Mindless Meld

Book Review

By Fred Siegel

UNCOUTH NATION: Why Europe Dislikes America

by Andrei S. Markovits

Princeton University Press, 302 pp., \$24.95

Anti-Americanism, explains Andrei Markovits in his new book *Uncouth Nation: Why Europe Dislikes America*, "has been promoted to the status of Western Europe's lingua franca." President George W. Bush's persona and policies, he argues, based on extensive polling and an intimate knowledge of European cultural and political life, have shifted the European Union's standard-issue anti-Americanism into "overdrive." As an example, he cites the left-wing British novelist Margaret Drabble, a long time America-hater who recently exclaimed: "My anti- Americanism has become uncontrollable. ... It rises in my throat like acid reflux."

The breadth and intensity of the hatred is new. But "ambivalence, antipathy, and resentment toward and about the United States," notes Markovits, a man of the moderate left, "have made up an important component of European culture since the American Revolution at the latest, long before the United States became 'Mr. Big.'" The hostility, Markovits demonstrates, is driven far more by what misinformed Europeans think America *is* as opposed to what it *does*. "As of October 2001," he explains, "weeks after 9/11 and just before the U.S. war against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, a massive Europe-wide resentment of America commenced that reached well beyond American policies, American politics, and the American government."

Reading *Uncouth Nation*, I was reminded of my experiences teaching at the Sorbonne in the early 1980s. There, I heard a supposedly learned professor of American studies lecture to a packed audience on how American senior citizens were so badly treated that they had been forced *en masse* to eat dog food. When I pointed out to him that American senior citizens had, as a cohort, reached unprecedented levels of affluence, and that his account of dog-food eating was based on unconfirmed anecdotes, he didn't bother to rebut the concrete points. He replied instead that as an American saddled with "simple-minded empiricism," I had missed the "larger truth" of what he said.



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Markovits, who holds a named chair in German studies at the University of Michigan, is at home on both sides of the Atlantic. Born in Rumania, his family came to the United States by way of Vienna in 1960, when he was a teenager. But then, for business reasons, the family returned to Vienna. Moving back and forth across the Atlantic since, he has a native's sense of how Europeans talk about Americans and vice versa.

In recent years there have been a number of excellent books on European anti-Americanism, including Philippe Roger's *The American Enemy* on France; *Understanding Anti-Americanism*, a collection of essays edited by Paul Hollander; and Barry Rubin's *Hating America: A History*, which looks at the similarities between the anti-Americanism in Europe and the Middle East. But, even with all these well-done studies, Markovits adds so much that this book is essential reading.

Take the social location of anti- Americanism. Traditionally, it has been located in the left and right wings of the political class. But after the fall of the Soviet Union, when the Europeans no longer needed the United States to risk destruction on their behalf, and before the war in Iraq, the anti-Americanism of the sort long propagated by the BBC and *Le Monde* took hold among ordinary Europeans who had hitherto been friendly to America.

Traditional anti-Americanism was an obvious vehicle for those attempting to create the shared identity needed for a unified Europe. The European Union's bloated and undemocratic institutions inspire more derision than loyalty. At the same time, many Europeans have relatively little in common with each other. The Dutch and the Germans, for instance, are far more likely to read American novels or see American movies than those of France. The United States, at once too religious and too materialistic, too individualistic and too collectively power-hungry, provided a common enemy against which the new European identity could be created.

At the same time, Markovits shows that a new set of fears, including the fear of global competition, which Europe was unprepared to meet, reactivated the always important strain of European anti-modernism. The Americans were accused of spreading "freedom Bolshevism" when what was supposedly needed was a shelter from the cold winds emanating from a dynamic America and a rising Asia. The idea that America was run by and for Jewish capitalists, a standard trope of both left and right, in remission since the 1930s, was revived -- as was the notion that the United States and Israel were actual fascist states, so that Europeans need not feel guilty either about having received American protection or about the Holocaust. Anti-Semitism and anti- Americanism have melded seamlessly in the new preening Europe. This is the Europe that sees itself as moral model for the world, even as it recapitulates the standard trope of 19th century nationalism, which it has supposedly transcended. It tries to achieve its own identity by demonizing its rivals.

Some of the best sections of the book come when Markovits moves away from his big themes and explores the little-known byways. The Germans, for instance, are famously indignant about the American use of the death penalty. But, as Markovits explains, the death penalty was abolished in West Germany, not as a humanitarian measure, but in order to protect the lives of convicted Nazi war criminals.

The resentment of the United States, he shows, has spread far beyond politics, penetrating deep into the pores of everyday European life. In German, the terms "*Amerikanisierung*" (Americanization) and "*amerikanische Verhältnisse*" (American conditions) almost invariably refer to something at once negative and threatening. Even the growth in the relative percentage of black, as opposed to brown, squirrels in German parks is blamed on Americanization. More broadly across Europe, "American" is used as a common pejorative to mean shoddy, overworked, uncouth, greedy, contemptible, inauthentic, and thuggish.

On the subject of thuggery, consider soccer. *The Guardian* has complained that British stadiums refurbished with comfortable seats and restaurants had been Americanized and thus degraded. For the usually hard-left British newspaper *The Guardian*, notes Markovits, "abolishing those infamous standing-room sections, or "terraces," where nearly 100 people lost their lives in riots at Hillsborough in Sheffield, has made the sport too 'nice.'" And when the 1994 World Cup was played in the United States without the riots, murders, and hooliganism customary when it is played in Europe, "the European media chalked it up to the stupidity and ignorance of Americans."

The book's one false note comes when the author attributes to Americans warm feelings toward Europe. Here, his own trans-Atlantic heritage may have served him ill. Most Americans think little about Europe -- who was the last European novelist to make a splash here? Many view it as something of a museum and are less than amused by its anti- American antics.

In an argument Democrats in particular need to hear, Markovits concludes soberly that European hostility is unlikely to be substantially abated in a post-Bush America because Europe's animosities will remain central to both combating globalization and creating a European identity. Until now, European anti-Americanism has not had widespread consequences. As a practical matter, Europeans have needed to compartmentalize their feelings. But that can change.

Fred Siegel's book, The Prince of the City: Giuliani, New York and the Genius of American Life, is out in a paperback edition.