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CULTURAL POLITICS
Blame America . . . and oh yeah, the Jews

JEFFREY KOPSTEIN

Uncouth Nation:

Why Europe Dislikes America

By Andrei S. Markovits

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After decades of writing scholarly books sympathetic to the European left, U.S. political scientist Andrei Markovits is fed up with the anti-Americanism of Europe's intellectual and political elites. Anti-Americanism, Markovits writes, "is unifying West Europeans more than any other political emotion -- with the exception of hostility to Israel. In today's Western Europe, these two closely related antipathies and resentments are now considered proper etiquette. They are present in polite company and acceptable in the discourse of the political classes." I think it is safe to say that Markovits is going to lose some of his European friends with this book.

Markovits sensibly distinguishes between disapproval of the United States for what it does and dislike of the United States for what it is. The former is not anti-Americanism; the latter is. In practice, however, the line isn't so easy to draw. Some people find fault with the United States no matter what it does. It is bad for intervening militarily to stop a genocide in Kosovo but equally bad for failing to intervene to stop a genocide in Rwanda. It is wrong for promoting free trade and globalization but equally wrong for raising tariffs to protect its industries. It is this damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't approach of Europe's elite critics of the United States that bothers Markovits.

George Bush and the war in Iraq have fuelled anti-Americanism among Europe's masses, but Markovits impressively documents the long history of anti-Americanism among Europe's elites going back to the settlement of the New World. It's an ironic antipathy, because the United States was a European creation. Even so, a long line of European cranks -- from the French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc (better known as the Comte de Buffon), who took the sparse body hair of the U.S. native population as proof of its sexual degeneracy, to the German pulp fiction novelist Karl May, who wrote book after book about the relationship of the "redmen" to the "whitemen" without having ever visited North America -- attempted to fashion an image of America and

Americans as unhealthy and corrupt.

More respectable European intellectuals played their part, too. Germany's great philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, viewed the U.S. political order as immature and chaotic. Heinrich Heine lamented that "there are no princes or nobles there; all men are equal -- equal dolts." Sigmund Freud considered the United States to be hopelessly materialist, a place with "no time for libido" and "a gigantic mistake." According to Markovits, "a strong negative assessment of things American has far outweighed any positive views of the United States on the part of German intellectuals and elites."

And it's not just the German-speakers. Britain's Frances Trollope reproached the United States, in her 1832 bestseller *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, for its vulgar materialism, its food culture (Americans eat, they don't dine) and its obsession with efficiency. Charles Dickens, in his 1842 *American Notes*, bemoans the heterogeneity of the country: too many immigrants, too dirty, too corrupt, too individualistic and too brutal. Renowned 19th-century journalist Frédéric Gaillardet educated the French Republic on American women who "dominated their husbands" and ran the country.

The list goes on. A broad array of Spaniards, Italians, Russians and even Norwegians (including Nobel Prize-winning novelist and Nazi sympathizer Knut Hamsun) have found the United States distasteful not for anything it did but for what it is and what it stands for.

In a fascinating twist, Markovits highlights the gradual transformation of European anti-Americanism after the Second World War from an ideology of the discredited right to one of the anti-imperialist left. As magnanimous as the Americans were in Europe after the war, cultural dependence on the United States elicited a deep and abiding resentment. It became the source of all of modernity's evils. Longer working hours, "publish or perish" at French universities, the dramatic increase in lawsuits and the prestige of "L.A. Law" lawyers in Great Britain, reality TV (which, in fact, originated in Europe), even the dominance of black over brown squirrels in German parks, are seen as evidence of a pernicious "Americanization."

And then there is the anti-Semitism. In what is surely his most controversial chapter, Markovits draws the connection between European anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism. He maintains that the old and discredited anti-Semitism of the European right has migrated to a new anti-Semitism of the left. In some ways, of course, this should not surprise anyone. Many early socialists -- most famously Karl Marx -- shared the romantic right's prejudice of Jews as embodying everything that was bad about capitalist modernity.

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Markovits, however, is saying something different and far more

volatile: The issue is not capitalism but ethnic identity. The left accepts Jews, but only on the condition that they shed their Jewishness. In a moment at once self-revelatory and accusatory, Markovits writes, "Indeed, the Left always reserved its universalism for the Jews while applying the legitimacy of its identity politics to all other nationalities." Anti-Zionism and the demonization of Israel have become vehicles for the reintroduction of anti-Semitism into respectable European conversation, especially since the Six Day War in 1967. The syllogisms are simple enough: Israel commits atrocities. Why? Because the United States lets it. Why? Because guess who controls the United States? You got it: the Jews.

What is disturbing for Markovits is that this is not simply the nutty left but his old buddies, the Social Democrats and the Greens. He notes that "all the historical ingredients used to demonize Jews are simply transferred to the state of Israel, which -- in the standard diction of anti-Semitism -- behaves Jew-like by grasping for global power, exhibiting Old Testament-like (pre-Christian) vengefulness. It bamboozles the world, as cunning Jews are wont to do, extorts money from hapless victims who have been fooled into seeing the Jews as victims, exhibits capitalist greed and, of course, indulges in constant brutality toward the weak. Israel thus becomes a sort of new Jew, a collective Jew among the world's nations."

The book offers a great deal of convincing evidence for these assertions, some of it based on survey research, but most of it based on Markovits's deep familiarity with Europe's left-wing scene. Whether it is Jews being beaten up at anti-war demonstrations in Paris in 2003 or respectable left-wing publications in Europe deploying Nazi-like imagery of Israeli leaders with spindly legs and hooked noses, or the repeated superimposition of a swastika on the Star of David (itself now a European symbol for "Israeli aggression"), example after example, from the profound to the trivial, makes for painful reading.

"By constantly bringing up the truly warped and ill-willed analogy of the Israelis with the Nazis," Markovits tells us, "Europeans absolve themselves from any remorse and thus experience a sense of liberation."

Uncouth Nation also raises the crucial question of whether it is possible to build a European identity without demonizing the United States. For the most part, European anti-Americanism has been an elite phenomenon. George Bush, however, has made it possible to close the gap between a "separatist" European elite that wants to break away from the tutelage of the United States and the broad masses who still see themselves as part of the "West." It is no accident that Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Derrida and other European intellectuals celebrated the anti-war demonstrations that took place on Feb. 15, 2003, in London, Rome, Paris, Madrid, Helsinki and Athens as the birthday of a united Europe. Although these same intellectuals hailed the now-50-year-old project of European integration as a "post-national" exercise, the temptation to use the traditional tools of nation-building in the service of a new pan-European nationalism -- including demonizing the "other" -- has been irresistible.

Of course, Canadians are well acquainted this dilemma. Can one be a

good Canadian without being anti-American? Five years after I returned to Canada, my conclusion is that it's not easy. As the torturous conversations over what it means to be Canadian have shown, the efforts often yield modest results that promise little in the way of shoring up the Canadian nation-building project, at least in the short run. It's much simpler to say, "Whatever else we may be, one thing we can agree upon is that we are not those silly Americans."

But this is lazy nation-building and works only at the expense of sustaining the community of free nations of the West. Perhaps none of this would really matter if the Americans didn't care about what others thought of them. But they do and always have. As Alexis de Tocqueville noted in 1835: "The Americans, in their intercourse with strangers, appear impatient of the smallest censure and insatiable of praise."

At stake here, however, is much more than mere vanity. The Americans don't really have much else besides that for which they stand. Part of being rich and powerful is to put up with a certain amount of criticism from others. But if we wish to sustain the West into the future, it is probably best if we all construct our political identities based on our highest ideals rather than on our deepest loathing.

Jeffrey Kopstein is director of the Centre for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies and professor of political science at the University of Toronto. His book *Growing Apart? America and Europe in the 21st Century* will appear this year.