

Exploring the roots of anti-Americanism among European elites.

Exploring the roots of anti-Americanism among European elites.

By [Jonathan Yardley](#)

Sunday, March 4, 2007; Page BW15

UNCOUTH NATION

Why Europe Dislikes America

By *Andrei S. Markovits*

Princeton Univ. 275 pp. \$24.95

The subtitle of this otherwise interesting and provocative book shouldn't be taken literally. Europe per se may have qualms about the United States, but by and large its view of this country is favorable, if not wildly enthusiastic. "As routine surveys in West European countries since the beginning of the 1950s have brought to light," Andrei S. Markovits writes, "a solid majority of Europeans were constantly expressing positive attitudes toward America; only 30 percent on average had a negative opinion." But that 30 percent, or at least a substantial part of it, is what interests Markovits. Within that substantial minority are the European elites, and to say that they loathe America is no understatement.

Right away you'll say that this is because of the style and policies of George W. Bush, and to a limited degree you'll be right: "By his policies, habits, demeanor, and entire being, Bush represents to [elite] Europeans the quintessential ugly American: arrogant, uncouth, uncultured, ignorant, inconsiderate, and aggressive."

Markovits -- a native of Romania who came to the United States in 1960, now teaches politics and German studies at the University of Michigan, and by his own ready admission has "a life-long affinity with the democratic left in Europe and the United States" -- claims, somewhat unconvincingly, that "Bush and his administration's policies have made America into the most hated country of all time," but he also argues that the history of anti-Americanism among West European elites is long. He writes:

"Ambivalence, antipathy, and resentment toward and about the United States have comprised an important component of European culture since the American Revolution at the latest, thus way before America became the world's 'Mr. Big' -- the proverbial eight-hundred-pound gorilla -- and a credible rival to Europe's main powers, particularly Britain and France . . . While the politics, style, and discourse of the Bush administration -- and of George W. Bush as a person -- have undoubtedly exacerbated anti-American sentiment among Europeans and fostered a heretofore unmatched degree of unity between elite and mass opinion in Europe, they are not anti-Americanism's

cause. Indeed, a change to a center-left administration in Washington, led by a Democratic president, would not bring about its abatement, let alone disappearance."

At this point, a couple of points need to be emphasized. The first is that Markovits is talking only about Western Europe; by contrast, "Eastern Europeans' overwhelmingly positive views of America stem largely from their having perceived the United States as their sole ally against the much-despised Soviet Union." The second, as mentioned above, is that although he persistently refers to "Europeans," his subject is in fact a minority: academics and intellectuals on the left, old-guard traditionalists on the right. It's easy, while reading *Uncouth Nation*, to be seduced into believing that Markovits is writing about sentiments shared by the majority of Europeans. He isn't.

Certainly, though, these sentiments *are* passionately held. Here's the British novelist Margaret Drabble: "My anti-Americanism has become almost uncontrollable. It has possessed me like a disease. It rises in my throat like acid reflux" -- evidence that Drabble is as unspeakable as she is unreadable. She and others who are similarly inclined detest Americans, Markovits correctly points out, more for what we are than what we *do*. Yes, they hate many of our foreign adventures, often with plenty of reason, and our *use* of capital punishment (ditto), and other things we do, but what they really hate is, well, us. Markovits sees these people's anti-Americanism "as a generalized and comprehensive normative dislike of America and things American that often lacks distinct reasons or concrete causes." In other words, it's almost entirely irrational, though it focuses on identifiable (at least in the minds of those doing the identifying) American traits. Here's part of the list, dating back to the founding of the republic:

"To this day, one encounters the widely held view in Europe that Americans are like children, implying they are immature, impressionable, without sound judgment, anchorless, lacking tradition or history. Moreover, to this day as well, there exists the fear that Europe's masses -- childlike in their own way -- also succumb to America's superficial veneer that woos innocents to do something worthless at best, at worst well-nigh deadly. Thus to this day, Europe's elite discourse often depicts America not as proletarian, which at least to leftist Europeans has the connotation of authenticity, but rather as commodified, commercial, vulgar -- values that exude inauthenticity, plasticity, and heteronomy. European elites' image of America as 'Las Vegas,' 'Disneyland,' basically as 'white trash' -- or what the British call 'chav' -- has a distinguished pedigree: gaudy jewelry, expensive-but-tacky clothes, garish makeup, platinum blond hair, tattoos, vulgar demeanor, in short inauthentic and kitschy glitter best captured by the term 'uncouth.' "

There's more. The Spanish intellectual José Ortega y Gasset, speaking for countless others, sneered at the United States because, as Markovits summarizes his view, it "cannot claim any greatness because it has no history, has little experience, and it has not yet truly suffered." So much for the Civil War. As Markovits says, we're damned if we do and damned if we don't: "too religious, too secular; too idealistic, too materialistic; too elitist, too populist; too prudish, too pornographic; too individualistic, too conformist; too anarchic, too controlling; too obsessed with history, not having any history; too

concerned with culture, not having any culture; too dominated by women, too controlling of women. America, in the view of some Europeans, is so obsessed with freedom and individualism that this obsession impedes genuine individuality." Then there are American golfers and the British Open: "When the Americans don't come, they exhibit arrogance by their aloofness. When they do come and win too much, they exhibit arrogance by their domination."

If much of this strikes you as having the same utter irrationality as anti-Semitism, that's what Markovits thinks, too. He finds an "increasingly strong overlap between anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism." In the late 19th century, he writes, "it was the fear and critique of capitalist modernity that brought these two resentments together. America and the Jews were seen as paragons of modernity: money-driven, profit-hungry, urban, universalistic, individualistic, mobile, rootless, and hostile to established traditions and values." Obviously, anti-Americanism has never taken the calamitous turns in Europe that anti-Semitism has, but the two hatreds grow out of the same resentments, fears and stereotypes. In his very long chapter about anti-Semitism, Markovits drifts away from his main subject and devotes too much space to European hostility toward Israel -- another subject, for another book -- but the basic argument he makes about the connection between the two prejudices is correct.

European elites don't just dislike the United States, they fear it. Memories of two world wars in which American soldiers helped save Europe from totalitarianism and of the Marshall Plan that restored it to prosperity faded long ago; indeed, Markovits argues that there was scarcely a pause after both wars before old anti-American sentiments sprang back to the fore. Possibly, Europeans fear that a nation that can rescue one's country can also conquer it; possibly, it's that American power is simply too great and too capable of being misused. Europeans also fear what they glibly and reflexively call "Americanization," which embraces everything from language to food to movies to etiquette. They "bemoan a loss of agency, a seeming self-incapacitation vis-à-vis America's cunning and compelling ways, which are clearly experienced as dangerous and undesirable but against which one appears to be helpless." To put it another way, they're afraid that the temptations of America are so great that they -- the intellectual, artistic, political, journalistic, social elite -- will not be strong enough to resist. This probably says more about the European elite than it does about America.

Whether any of this matters very much is far from clear. Elite European anti-Americanism is more a state of mind than of policy or action. The European nations that whine most loudly about us are usually on our side in a crisis, however reluctantly at times. Heaven knows there are plenty of things about this country -- not just what it does but what it is -- that are fair game for criticism. But the phenomenon Markovits so tellingly describes has nothing to do with criticism. It's just knee-jerk bloviating and deserves nobody's attention or respect. .

Jonathan Yardley's e-mail address is yardleyj@washpost.com.