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Why Do Europeans Hate America? Jean-Francois Revel Explains

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“Democracy tends to ignore, even deny, threats to its existence because it loathes doing what is needed to counter them,” explained Revel. “It awakens only when the danger becomes deadly, imminent, evident. By then, either there is too little time left for it to save itself, or the price of survival has become crushingly high.”

To any insightful observer of the European scene in the early 1980s, Revel’s analysis was prophetic. Leftist intellectuals were pointing to the United States as the source of all oppression in the world, while praising the Soviet Union as the liberator of human kind. In *How Democracies Perish*, Revel aimed his sights at the self-destructive hypocrisies of liberal thought. As he knew, the very intellectuals who should have been supporting the United States were instead hoping for its downfall. “What we end up with in what is conventionally called Western society is a topsy-turvy situation in which those seeking to destroy democracy appear to be fighting for legitimate aims, while its defenders are pictured as repressive reactionaries.”

As Revel lamented, at times the democracies seemed to find strange comfort in calls for their own destruction. As he observed, “Democratic civilization is the first in history to blame itself because another is power is working to destroy it.” Were democracies doomed to self-destruct?

Jean-Francois Revel is well known as a shining light of reason in the French academy. Long a columnist, editor, and director of *L’Express*, Revel is also the author of a multi-volume history of philosophy. He sprang to Western attention with the publication of his controversial book, *Without Marx or Jesus*. Revel’s later volumes would include *The Totalitarian Temptation* and *Democracy Against Itself*.

Throughout his career, Revel has been known as a stalwart defender of democracy. He does not take this matter lightly, for he understands all too well that the basic structure of government determines the achievement or loss of human freedom within a society. In *Democracy Against Itself*, Revel argued that “every society which has worked more or less well, which achieved any sort of viability, and which produced civilizations men found tolerable, have been—or are—societies that in some sense are democratic.”

Of course, the alarm sounded by Revel in *How Democracies Perish* was overtaken by history with the fall of the Soviet Union and the remarkable events of 1989 and 1990. As Revel later reflected, the good news revealed in the fall of the Soviet Union was the fact that its internal weaknesses were even greater than the self-hatred of the secular left in

Western democracies.

Now, twenty years after *How Democracies Perish*, Revel looks to the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorists attacks and asks the fundamental question: Why do so many Europeans hate America?

This is not a question of merely academic interest. Revel senses that something fundamental is revealed in the way the European Left has responded to America's status as the world's only super power.

Revel is blunt. The ascendancy of the United States, set over against the relative decline of Europe, has given birth to an intense hatred in some European corridors. Most particularly, Revel locates the root of this poisonous anti-Americanism in France. As he comments, "It is in France that this loss—real or imaginary—of great-power status engenders the most bitterness."

The virulent anti-Americanism that erupted on the streets of Europe in the aftermath of America's military action in Afghanistan and Iraq did not emerge from a vacuum. Revel's interest in anti-Americanism is rooted in his own experience as a French intellectual who actually visited the United States. When Revel first visited America in 1969, he discovered a land very different from what he expected. Having planned to write a book on the problems of the United States, Revel instead wrote a treatise criticizing the irrational anti-Americanism of the European Left. Now, he has done it again—and this new book may be even more important.

In *Anti-Americanism*, just released by Encounter Books, Revel considers this toxic pattern of European hatred towards the United States. He identifies one core issue as a sense of European loss. Revel cites Hubert Vedrine, the French minister of foreign affairs, who rejected the word "superpower", and instead substituted a term of his own invention: "hyperpower."

As Revel notes, since the Greek prefix "hyper" has exactly the same meaning as the Latin "super," Mr. Vedrine is merely seeking to score political capital in his own nation and in the larger European neighborhood. As Vedrine stated, "We cannot except a politically unipolar and culturally homogenized world, any more than the unilateralism of the single hyperpower." Exactly what Mr. Vedrine meant by this, no one seems to know. Nevertheless, it is an example of French hyperventilation posing as foreign policy.

Revel sees the problem as much worse than hyperbole. If America is dominant, Revel asks, then why is this so? He will not allow Europeans off the hook. "Europeans in particular should force themselves to examine how they have contributed to that preponderance. It was they, after all, who made the twenty century the darkest in history; it was they who brought about the two unprecedented cataclysms of the World Wars; and it was they who invented and put into place the two most criminal regimes ever inflicted on the human race—pinnacles of evil and imbecility achieved in a space of less than thirty years."

The United States is far from perfect, Revel acknowledges. Nevertheless, he suggests that any criticisms should be directed at real problems, and should not take the form of irrational rantings.

According to Revel, the European Left enjoys its fantasy of America as "the worst society that ever was." According to this cartoon of reality, America is a society that is entirely under the control of money-grubbing plutocrats. Everything is for sale and the entire culture has been commodified. The problem is not just George W. Bush, for the European Left is convinced that every recent American president "has been in the pockets of the oil companies, the military-industrial complex, the agricultural lobby or the financial manipulators of Wall Street." But, in the French view, George W. Bush is just the worst of the lot—at least as yet.

The European Left is also convinced that America is primarily marked by poverty. As Revel describes the Leftist fantasy: "Hordes of famished indigents are everywhere, while luxurious chauffeured limousines with darkened windows glide through the urban wilderness." These same thinkers are convinced that violence reigns throughout the United States, and that gunshots commonly ring through even the most peaceable neighborhoods. As Revel acknowledges, European rants about America's lax gun laws would have more credibility if the same weapons were not easily available for purchase through the black market in virtually every European city.

If this picture of America is true, the pattern of immigration from Europe to the United States throughout the twentieth

century was absolutely irrational. "If the picture of American society drawn everyday by the European press is accurate, then we must believe that those tens of millions of immigrants from all parts of the world, and especially those who came from Europe between 1850 and 1924, were all deluded fools. Otherwise, why did they insist on staying in the American capitalist jungle with all its evils and not return to the lands of peace, plenty, and liberty they came from? Lost in a hellish cultural wasteland, why at least didn't they write to their families and relations basking in the paradises of Ukraine, Calabria and Greece warning them not to come to America?" Clearly, Revel does not mince words.

This virulent anti-Americanism is not a matter of mere sociological interest. As Revel understands, this explains why the United Nations Security Council has become so ineffectual and why the United States has been forced to act unilaterally. As he explains, "Europeans' voluntary blindness with regard to these radical changes renders any American attempts at dialogue fruitless; as a result, America has no other option but to make unilateral decisions. How can you discuss a problem with people who deny its very existence?"

Jean-Francois Revel is a brave man who has lived through some of the most tumultuous decades of human history. Though a realist, he is not without hope. He has sounded the alarm more than once, only to have the Left ignore his cries. Anti-Americanism is Revel's latest attempt to call the trendsetting intellectuals of Europe back to sanity. Good luck, Professor Revel. This is no easy task.

Revel's prescient warning to the European Left should also serve to educate thoughtful Americans about the challenge we face in Europe, which may be as daunting a challenge as that posed by Islamic terrorism. Something sick lies at the heart of Western civilization. The democracies that will surely perish will be those who cannot tell the difference between good and evil, survival and ruin, freedom and tyranny. Or, perhaps more to the point, the greatest danger faced by democracy are those who deny that there is any real difference after all.

