

<http://chronicle.com/free/v50/i22/22b01001.htm>

The Origins of Occidentalism

By IAN BURUMA

When the West is under attack, as it was on September 11, it is often assumed -- not only in America -- that the West means the United States. This goes for those on the left, who believe that U.S. foreign policy (or "imperialism") and U.S. corporate power (or "globalization") have brought the suicide bombers and holy warriors upon America by marginalizing and bullying the millions of people who have failed to benefit from the capitalist world order. But it also goes for conservatives, who think that Islamist radicalism, like Communism before, is an attack on "our values," that is, on the "American way of life."

There is some truth to those claims. The worldwide reach of Wall Street, Hollywood, and the U.S. armed forces invites resentment. And to the extent that those institutions represent the American way of life, they are indeed targets of the Islamist jihad. It is also true that U.S. foreign policy can be misguided, even brutal. And global capitalism can do a great deal of damage as well as good. Finally, the United States, as the only Western superpower, has indeed come to stand for the West as a whole. And countries, such as Israel, that are looked upon as U.S. proxies provoke violent hostility for that reason alone.

However, the kind of violence currently directed at targets associated with the West, from the World Trade Center to a discothèque in Bali, is not just about the United States. Nor can it be reduced to global economics. Even those who have good reason to blame their poverty on harsh forms of U.S.-backed capitalism do not normally blow themselves up in public places to kill the maximum number of unarmed civilians. We do not hear of suicide bombers from the slums of Rio or Bangkok.

Something else is going on, which my co-author, Avishai Margalit, and I call Occidentalism (the title of our new book): a war against a particular idea of the West, which is neither new nor unique to Islamist extremism. The current jihadis see the West as something less than human, to be destroyed, as though it were a cancer. This idea has historical roots that long precede any form of "U.S. imperialism." Similar hostility, though not always as lethal, has been directed in the past against Britain and France as much as against America. What, then, is the Occidental idea of the West?

That is the problem that vexed a group of prominent Japanese intellectuals who gathered for a conference in Kyoto in 1942. The attack on Pearl Harbor was not the ostensible reason for the conference, but the underlying idea was to find an ideological justification for Japan's mission to smash, and in effect replace, the Western empires in Asia. The topic of discussion was "how to overcome the modern." Modernity was associated with the West, and particularly with Western imperialism.

Westernization, one of the scholars said, was like a disease that had infected the Japanese spirit. The "modern thing," said another, was a "European thing." Others believed that "Americanism" was the enemy, and that

Japan should make common cause with the Europeans to defend old civilizations against the New World (there would certainly have been takers in Europe). There was much talk about unhealthy specialization in knowledge, which had fragmented the wholeness of Oriental spiritual culture. Science was to blame. So were capitalism, the absorption into Japanese society of modern technology, and notions of individual freedom and democracy. These had to be "overcome."

All agreed that culture -- that is, traditional Japanese culture -- was spiritual and profound, whereas modern Western civilization was shallow, rootless, and destructive of creative power. The West, particularly the United States, was coldly mechanical, a machine civilization without spirit or soul, a place where people mixed to produce mongrel races. A holistic, traditional Orient united under divine Japanese imperial rule would restore the warm organic Asian community to spiritual health. As one of the participants put it, the struggle was between Japanese blood and Western intellect.

Precisely the same terms had been used by others, in other places, at other times. Blood, soil, and the spirit of the *Volk* were what German romantics in the late 18th and early 19th centuries invoked against the universalist claims of the French Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and Napoleon's invading armies. This notion of national soul was taken over by the Slavophiles in 19th-century Russia, who used it to attack the "Westernizers," that is, Russian advocates of liberal reforms. It came up again and again, in the 1930s, when European fascists and National Socialists sought to smash "Americanism," Anglo-Saxon liberalism, and "rootless cosmopolitanism" (meaning Jews). Aurel Kolnai, the great Hungarian scholar, wrote a book in the 1930s about fascist ideology in Austria and Germany. He called it *War Against the West*. Communism, too, especially under Stalin, although a bastard child of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, was the sworn enemy of Western liberalism and "rootless cosmopolitanism." Many Islamic radicals borrowed their anti-Western concepts from Russia and Germany. The founders of the Ba'ath Party in Syria were keen readers of prewar German race theories. Jalal Al-e Ahmad, an influential Iranian intellectual in the 1960s, coined the phrase "Westoxification" to describe the poisonous influence of Western civilization on other cultures. He, too, was an admirer of German ideas on blood and soil.

Clearly, the idea of the West as a malign force is not some Eastern or Middle Eastern idea, but has deep roots in European soil. Defining it in historical terms is not a simple matter. Occidentalism was part of the counter-Enlightenment, to be sure, but also of the reaction against industrialization. Some Marxists have been attracted to it, but so, of course, have their enemies on the far right. Occidentalism is a revolt against rationalism (the cold, mechanical West, the machine civilization) and secularism, but also against individualism. European colonialism provoked Occidentalism, and so does global capitalism today. But one can speak of Occidentalism only when the revolt against the West becomes a form of pure destruction, when the West is depicted as less than human, when rebellion means murder.

Wherever it occurs, Occidentalism is fed by a sense of humiliation, of defeat. Isaiah Berlin once described the German revolt against Napoleon as "the original exemplar of the reaction of many a backward, exploited, or at any rate patronized society, which, resentful of the apparent inferiority of its status, reacted by turning to real or imaginary triumphs and glories in its past, or enviable attributes of its own national or cultural character."

The same thing might be said about Japan in the 1930s, after almost a century of feeling snubbed and patronized by the West, whose achievements it so fervently tried to emulate. It has been true of the Russians, who have often slipped into the role of inferior upstarts, stuck in the outer reaches of Asia and Europe. But nothing matches the sense of failure and humiliation that afflicts the Arab world, a once glorious civilization left behind in every respect by the post-Enlightenment West.

Humiliation can easily turn into a cult of the pure and the authentic. Among the most resented attributes of the hated Occident are its claims to universalism. Christianity is a universalist faith, but so is the Enlightenment

belief in reason. Napoleon was a universalist who believed in a common civil code for all his conquered subjects. The conviction that the United States represents universal values and has the God-given duty to spread democracy in the benighted world belongs to the same universalist tradition. Some of these values may indeed be universal. One would like to think that all people could benefit from democracy or the use of reason. The *Code Napoleon* brought many benefits. But when universal solutions are imposed by force, or when people feel threatened or humiliated or unable to compete with the powers that promote such solutions, that is when we see the dangerous retreat into dreams of purity.

Not all dreams of local authenticity and cultural uniqueness are noxious, or even wrong. As Isaiah Berlin also pointed out, the crooked timber of humanity cannot be forcibly straightened along universal standards with impunity. The experiments on the human soul by Communism showed how bloody universalist dreams can be. And the poetic romanticism of 19th-century German idealists was often a welcome antidote to the dogmatic rationalism that came with the Enlightenment.

It is when purity or authenticity, of faith or race, leads to purges of the supposedly inauthentic, of the allegedly impure, that mass murder begins. The fact that anti-Americanism, anti-Zionism, anti-Semitism, and a general hostility to the West often overlap is surely no coincidence. Even in Japan, where Jews play no part in national life, one of the participants at the 1942 Kyoto conference suggested that the war against the West was a war against the "poisonous materialist civilization" built on Jewish financial capitalist power. At the same time, European anti-Semites, not only in Nazi Germany, were blaming the Jews for Bolshevism.

Both Bolshevism and capitalism are universalist systems in the sense that they do not recognize national, racial, or cultural borders. Since Jews are traditionally regarded by the defenders of purity as the congenital outsiders, the archetypal "rootless cosmopolitans," it is no wonder that they are also seen as the main carriers of the universalist virus. To be sure, Jews had sound reasons to be attracted to such notions as equality before the law, secular politics, and internationalism, whether of a socialist or capitalist stamp. Exclusivity, whether racial, religious, or nationalist, is never good for minorities. Only in the Middle East have Jews brought their own form of exclusivity and nationalism. But Zionism came from the West. And so Israel, in the eyes of its enemies, is the colonial outpost of "Westoxification." Its material success only added to the Arab sense of historic humiliation.

The idea, however, that Jews are a people without a soul, mimics with no creative powers, is much older than the founding of the State of Israel. It was one of the most common anti-Semitic slurs employed by Richard Wagner. He was neither the first to do so, nor very original in this respect. Karl Marx, himself the grandson of a rabbi, called the Jews greedy parasites, whose souls were made of money. The same kind of thing was often said by 19th-century Europeans about the British. The great Prussian novelist Theodor Fontane, who rather admired England, nonetheless opined that "the cult of the Gold Calf is the disease of the English people." He was convinced that English society would be destroyed by "this yellow fever of gold, this sellout of all souls to the devil of Mammon." And much the same is said today about the Americans.

Calculation -- the accounting of money, interests, scientific evidence, and so on -- is regarded as soulless. Authenticity lies in poetry, intuition, and blind faith. The Occidental view of the West is of a bourgeois society, addicted to creature comforts, animal lusts, self-interest, and security. It is by definition a society of cowards, who prize life above death. As a Taliban fighter once put it during the war in Afghanistan, the Americans would never win, because they love Pepsi-Cola, whereas the holy warriors love death. This was also the language of Spanish fascists during the civil war, and of Nazi ideologues, and Japanese kamikaze pilots.

The hero is one who acts without calculating his interests. He jumps into action without regard for his own safety, ever ready to sacrifice himself for the cause. And the Occidental hero, whether he is a Nazi or an

Islamist, is just as ready to destroy those who sully the purity of his race or creed. It is indeed his duty to do so. When the West is seen as the threat to authenticity, then it is the duty of all holy warriors to destroy anything to do with the "Zionist Crusaders," whether it is a U.S. battleship, a British embassy, a Jewish cemetery, a chunk of lower Manhattan, or a disco in Bali. The symbolic value of these attacks is at least as important as the damage inflicted.

What, then, is new about the Islamist holy war against the West? Perhaps it is the totality of its vision. Islamism, as an antidote to Westoxification, is an odd mixture of the universal and the pure: universal because all people can, and in the eyes of the believers should, become orthodox Muslims; pure because those who refuse the call are not simply lost souls but savages who must be removed from this earth.

Hitler tried to exterminate the Jews, among others, but did not view the entire West with hostility. In fact, he wanted to forge an alliance with the British and other "Aryan" nations, and felt betrayed when they did not see things his way. Stalinists and Maoists murdered class enemies and were opposed to capitalism. But they never saw the Western world as less than human and thus to be physically eradicated. Japanese militarists went to war against Western empires but did not regard everything about Western civilization as barbarous. The Islamist contribution to the long history of Occidentalism is a religious vision of purity in which the idolatrous West simply has to be destroyed.

The worship of false gods is the worst religious sin in Islam as well as in ancient Judaism. The West, as conceived by Islamists, worships the false gods of money, sex, and other animal lusts. In this barbarous world the thoughts and laws and desires of Man have replaced the kingdom of God. The word for this state of affairs is *jahiliyya*, which can mean idolatry, religious ignorance, or barbarism. Applied to the pre-Islamic Arabs, it means ignorance: People worshiped other gods because they did not know better. But the new *jahiliyya*, in the sense of barbarism, is everywhere, from Las Vegas and Wall Street to the palaces of Riyadh. To an Islamist, anything that is not pure, that does not belong to the kingdom of God, is by definition barbarous and must be destroyed.

Just as the main enemies of Russian Slavophiles were Russian Westernizers, the most immediate targets of Islamists are the liberals, reformists, and secular rulers in their own societies. They are the savage stains that have to be cleansed with blood. But the source of the barbarism that has seduced Saudi princes and Algerian intellectuals as much as the whores and pimps of New York (and in a sense all infidels are whores and pimps) is the West. And that is why holy war has been declared against the West.

Since the target of the holy warriors is so large, figuring out how to defend it is not easy. But it is not immediately apparent that a war against Iraq was the most effective way to fight the Islamist jihad. Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath regime was a murderous dictatorship that deserved to come to an end, but it was not in line with the holy revolution. There is no evidence that Saddam wished to destroy the West. Osama bin Laden clearly does, and *he* is still at large. It may even be that attacking Iraq, however gratifying in many ways, has made the defense against Islamist revolution harder. Moderate Muslims everywhere are cowed into silence by aggressive U.S. actions, for fear of being seen as traitors or, worse, barbarous idolators.

As even President Bush has been at pains to point out, the battle with religious terrorism is not a war against Islam, or even religion. Violent attempts to force secularism on Muslim societies in the past invited the problem of religious extremism and should not be seen as the solution now. Zealotry was in part a reaction against the aggressive secularism of such regimes as Reza Shah's in Iran during the 1930s. If political freedoms are to be guaranteed in the Muslim world through popular sovereignty, religion will have to be taken into account. The best chance for democracies to succeed in countries as varied as Indonesia, Turkey, and Iraq is if moderate Muslims can be successfully mobilized. But that will have to come from those countries themselves. Even though Western governments should back the forces for democracy, the hard political struggle cannot be won

in Washington, or through the force of U.S. arms.

In the West itself, we must defend our freedoms against the holy warriors who seek to destroy them. But we must also be careful that in doing so we don't end up undermining them ourselves. In the balance between security and civil liberty, the latter should never be sacrificed to the former. We should also guard against the temptation to fight fire with fire, Islamism with our own forms of intolerance. To think that we are at war with Islamism in the name of Christianity, as some zealots believe, is a fatal error, for that is to conform precisely to the Manichaeistic view of those who seek to defeat us. Muslims living in the West should not be allowed to join the holy war against it. But their rights as Europeans or Americans must be respected. The survival of our liberties depends on our willingness to defend them against enemies outside, but also against the temptation of our own leaders to use our fears in order to destroy our freedoms.

Ian Buruma is a professor of human rights, democracy, and new-media studies at Bard College and a regular contributor to The New York Review of Books. He and Avishai Margalit, a professor of philosophy at the Hebrew University, in Jerusalem, are the authors of Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of its Enemies, which will be published by the Penguin Press next month.

<http://chronicle.com>

Section: The Chronicle Review

Volume 50, Issue 22, Page B10

[Front page](#) | [Career Network](#) | [Search](#) | [Site map](#) | [Help](#)

[Copyright](#) © 2004 by The Chronicle of Higher Education