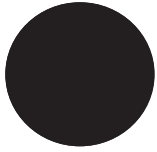


Mark Gilbert is associate professor of contemporary international history at the University of Trento (Italy).



Superman Versus Lex Luther

British Anti-Americanism Since September 11

Mark Gilbert

Two weeks after September 11, as New York fire department officials worked bravely in the wreckage of the twin towers, a British journalist named Mark Thomas tastelessly wrote in the *New Statesman* (a magazine that once published the flower of the British liberal intelligentsia) that the Bush administration's propaganda effort in the wake of September 11 had "hijacked the language of liberation" and was "headed in the direction of the twin towers of fact and truth." He added that "Americans have taken on the mentality of a lynch mob. You can almost hear them drawling in southern accents: 'Yew jus' know Bin Laden's guilty, yew only gotta look at his eyes!'"¹ Thomas admittedly did preface his article by saying that the attack on the World Trade Center was "one of the vilest atrocities we have seen." In the same magazine a week earlier, the veteran investigative reporter John Pilger had argued that "far from being the terrorists of the world, the Islamic peoples have been its victims—that is victims of American fundamentalism, whose power in all its forms, military, strategic and economic, is the greatest source of terrorism on earth."

The novelist Salman Rushdie was talking about just such people when he wrote in the *New York Times* in February that "anybody who has visited Britain and Europe, or has followed the public conversation there during the past five months, will have been struck, even shocked, by the depth of anti-American feeling among large segments of the population." September 11 (and even more the successful American military response to it), far from evoking pity, or

anger, actually took the lid off a boiling cauldron of resentment among European progressives against the American way of life, mentality, and political system. The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, in what was one of his last published essays, was probably telling the truth about people like himself when he said that the "striking images" of the terrorists' planes crashing into the towers had brought "immense joy" into our hearts. The attack on the World Trade Center, for Baudrillard, was something we have all, "without exception," been dreaming of for years. It was the dramatic realization of the "terrorist imagination" that inevitably "dwells inside" all of us as an unavoidable psychological response to the dominance of the external world around us by the world's hegemonic power. "They did it," Baudrillard said, "but we wanted it to happen."²

Why did so many liberals, intellectuals, thinkers, and media people in Britain and the rest of Western Europe feel a *frisson* of exultation when the twin towers were bombed?³ Why have they subsequently been so outright hostile, or at best ambiguous, about supporting the United States in the war on terrorism?

At least so far as Britain is concerned, the answer to these questions is explicit in the quotation from Pilger cited above: the perceived moral equivalence between the American government and the terrorists themselves. Just as many British progressives in the 1930s found choosing between fascism and the British Empire a difficult moral decision, so their counterparts today

look at the injustices of the present American-dominated world (and at specific American policies around the world) and conclude that there is no moral justification for taking the side of the United States in almost any struggle. The United States is regarded as having meddled cynically in every corner of the world to keep brutal dictatorships and loathsome client states in power. It can hardly complain when the downtrodden victims of this policy strike back at the symbolic heart of the American empire. Thus the dramatist Harold Pinter, in a contribution to a recent edition of *Granta*, certainly Britain's leading literary magazine, ranted that "hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of people" in "Guatemala, El Salvador, Turkey, Israel, Greece, Uruguay, East Timor, Nicaragua, South Korea, Argentina, Chile, the Philippines and Indonesia" had been "killed in all cases by forces inspired and subsidized by the United States." Pinter added that most of this ruthless repression of liberation movements around the world had been hidden by the skill with which America's leaders had masqueraded "as a force for the good." But the smiling mask has fallen away since September 11. According to Pinter, America now stands naked, revealed as "the most dangerous power the world has ever known," a country that "knows only one language—bombs and death." The United States, Pinter asserts, has "effectively declared war on the world."⁴

George Monbiot, one of the *Guardian's* most regular commentators and a leading spokesman on environmental and globalization issues, weighed in on the same theme at the end of last October. He charged that "for the past 55 years [the U.S. government] has been running a terrorist training camp, whose victims massively outnumber the people killed by the attack on New York, the embassy bombings and the other atrocities laid, rightly or wrongly, at al-Qaida's door." This "terrorist training camp" was the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHISC). Formerly known

as the School for the Americas, WHISC, Monbiot reported, had been renamed at the behest of anxious congressmen in January 2001 in a bid to wipe its tarnished name clean. He alleged that "more than 60,000 Latin American soldiers and policemen" had graduated from this institution since 1946. Among these graduates were many of Latin America's "most notorious torturers, mass murderers, dictators and state terrorists." Nor was this "ancient history." Recent graduates, he charged, were running paramilitary groups in Colombia and had commissioned "kidnappings, disappearances, murders and massacres." With bitter irony, Monbiot concluded his piece by saying that "given that the evidence linking [WHISC] to continuing atrocities in Latin America is rather stronger than the evidence linking the al-Qaida training camps to the attack on New York," European governments should apply "full diplomatic pressure" and seek "the extradition of the school's commanders...on charges of complicity in crimes against humanity." "Alternatively," he said, European progressives could "demand that our governments attack the United States." He agreed that this prescription was "ridiculous," but he "could not see the moral difference between this course of action and the war now being waged in Afghanistan."

The Indictment of British Progressives

America, so runs the indictment of most British progressives, is everywhere on the side of the powerful against the powerless, the rich against the poor. One sees this in the Middle East, where the United States has propped up the Saudi monarchy and assorted other corrupt, unjust, sexist regimes; one sees it in Africa, where the frightful condition of countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo (AIDS, malnutrition, the disintegration of the state) is alleged to be a direct result of U.S. foreign policy. One sees it, above all, in Israel. The Palestinian question has enraged the British left. Much of the British liberal-left now regards Ariel

Sharon as a war criminal comparable to Milosevic, Israel as a pariah state almost on a par with South Africa during the apartheid era, and the United States as (at best) a hypocrite that is prolonging the agony of the Palestinian people at the behest of the powerful Jewish lobby in the United States.⁵ As the *Guardian* columnist Polly Toynbee, a leading cheerleader for Tony Blair's New Labor, wrote last October, the U.S. government should use against Israel "the same thunderous and threatening language the President applies to the war in Afghanistan." While elements of this view are shared by more centrist or conservative newspapers—the *Economist*, for instance, has been a severe critic of Israeli policy toward Palestine throughout the 1990s—some writers on the left have pushed their attacks on Sharon's Israel to a point where it has given rise to the fear that a new anti-Semitism is rife.

On January 14, 2002, the *New Statesman* published two investigative articles on the efforts of Jewish lobbyists to "spin" news coverage of Israel in Britain and the British government's own public relations efforts to disguise the extent of its "support for Israeli repression." The articles themselves were on the whole inoffensive. The magazine's front cover, which was headlined "A Kosher Conspiracy" and featured a gold Star of David impaling the Union Jack, by any reasonable standards was not. The cover unsurprisingly aroused a wave of outraged protests from Britain's Jewish community. The paper's somewhat hapless editor, Peter Wilby, was quoted by the *Independent* as saying, "I thought that kosher, as a word with a double meaning and a degree of implied irony, would be more acceptable than Zionist." Seemingly, he did not appear to understand that the principal problem was with the word "conspiracy," although he subsequently apologized for "unwittingly" giving the impression that the *New Statesman* was following the anti-Semitic tradition of seeing the Jews "as a conspiracy piercing the heart

of the nation."⁶ Despite this apology, the episode left a sour taste in the mouths even of non-Jews. As the chief rabbi of Great Britain, Jonathan Sacks, subsequently pointed out in the *Guardian*, the left has been assertive in its denunciations of Israel, less emphatic in its condemnation of open anti-Semitism among Muslims in Britain and at the U.N. conference on racism in South Africa. As Sacks said, "Were this cumulative hate to be directed against anyone else, the left would be the first to protest."⁷

The mainstream center-left has undoubtedly become more anti-American as the events of September 11 have receded. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, newspapers like the *Guardian*, and the *Observer*, Britain's leading liberal Sunday newspaper, took the line that Britain should support America in the war on terrorism while acting as a "candid friend." They somewhat patronizingly warned against unilateral American military initiatives ("In the past, Britain has played a role, sometimes effective, sometimes not, in mediating the American instinct for excessive and counterproductive military solutions to political problems") and urged the United States to work through international organizations and to do more to alleviate the poverty and injustice that are breeding grounds for the resentments that produce terrorists. Nevertheless, like the ruling Labor Party, they supported military action against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The U.S. reluctance to condemn Israel outright, President Bush's warnings in his State of the Union address to the rogue states composing the "axis of evil," the alleged mistreatment of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, and the administration's plans for greatly increased military spending appear to have tipped these influential voices into a more openly hostile position. Editorial and op-ed commentary since the end of January 2002 has tended to back the line taken by the former French foreign minister, Hubert Védrine, who criticized the "new

simplism” in American foreign policy. The United States is now seen by many British liberals as the main threat to a successful campaign against terrorism because it privileges military reactions to what are ultimately extremely complex socioeconomic problems.

Thus the writer Barbara Gunnell, responding to the “axis of evil” speech in the *New Statesman*, derided George Bush and Tony Blair’s assumption that the word “evil” carries “a precise meaning that we all understand and assent to.” According to Gunnell, the advantage of this tactic is that by dubbing bin Laden and his ilk as “evil,” we need not ask “why they act as they do, feel outraged or oppressed, opt for suicidal terror rather than protest or political engagement.” For “evil simply demands opposition rather than analysis or understanding.” George Bush, by dramatizing the conflict between the United States and the terrorists as a war between good and evil, is obviously appealing to “a cruder fantasy literature personification of good—Superman versus Lex Luther.”⁸ In Gunnell’s view, we can no longer “shy away” from searching for the social and economic causes of the terrorists’ willingness to destroy themselves in pursuit of a political goal. This ultra-rationalist position, which implies that no action, however appalling its consequences, should be condemned morally but only investigated sociologically, is an example of liberal fundamentalism—liberalism that has lost all moral compass. If Barbara Gunnell cannot see that flying a hijacked airplane full of terrified passengers into a crowded skyscraper is a willed act of evil to which implacable opposition is both necessary politically and right morally, she would do well to read *Crime and Punishment*.

Simplism on Both Sides

There is in fact “simplism” on both sides of the argument. The United States certainly can be accused of failing to understand that the repressive, unjust, and brutal regimes

that it supports around the globe are a major cause of the terrorism that struck so savagely at the heart of Manhattan. America does stand for injustice in many parts of the world, little though the Bush administration and conservative op-ed columnists want to admit it. British progressives, however, can justly be accused of the opposite error: of attributing to America causal responsibility for every major political problem in the world. Would Central Africa today be a haven of prosperity, peace, and good government if America had allowed it to settle its own affairs in the 1980s? Would South America be enjoying greater social equality and booming economic growth under the enlightened leadership of Salvatore Allende’s successors had the United States not backed various reactionary regimes acceptable to the United Fruit Company? Would the Middle East necessarily calm down if the United States withdrew its support for Israel and unequivocally backed the concept of a Palestinian state and an Israeli withdrawal to its 1967 frontiers? Just to pose the questions is to see the absurdity of the British left’s simon-pure understanding of the realities of international affairs. They can see that President Bush is guilty of simplistic moral rhetoric when he talks of a struggle between “good” and “evil,” but cannot see that they themselves simplistically identify America’s admittedly imperfect record as a supporter of democracy around the world as the primary cause of the fact that the world today is not a prosperous, peaceful, democratic place.

Americans should not read this article and conclude that Britain, of all countries, is brimming with America-haters who would abandon the alliance with the United States tomorrow. Even on the left, there are individual writers (Christopher Hitchens and William Shawcross being the most obvious cases) who have been willing to face the disapproval of their peers and question the somewhat one-eyed view of the world’s problems depicted in this article. Public

opinion has in general backed the United States conditionally but strongly since September 11. Opinion polls carried out in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon showed strong public support for the bombing campaign in Afghanistan and for sending in ground troops (American and British) to rout out bin Laden.

But American policymakers should not relax. The equation that practically all Americans make between their own institutions and way of life, and an idealized form of democracy is increasingly regarded as a bad joke by most Europeans of liberal, environmentalist, progressive Catholic, or social democratic views—more than half the electorate in most European countries and significant forces even in Britain. U.S. policy toward the environment, the death penalty, AIDS, Cuba and Latin America, Third World debt, Palestine, international governance, and free trade damages America's standing with many moderate Europeans who are not yet willing to regard the United States as Lex Luther rather than Superman. As the *Independent* recently argued, "The harsh truth is that for all the platitudes we hear about how shared values, heritage and interests make Europe and America partners for all eternity, the glue that binds them has rarely been thinner."⁹ Many American policymakers (Colin Powell has been elected an honorary European) give the impression of either not realizing this, or (more probably) not giving a damn. But if they continue to give this impression, they risk the growth of

anti-Americanism in Britain, and elsewhere in Europe, until it becomes a force with real political resonance. ●

Notes

1. Mark Thomas, "Terror in America: Comment," *New Statesman*, September 24, 2001, p. 19.
2. Jean Baudrillard, "L'esprit du terrorisme," *Le Monde*, November 3, 2001.
3. *Guardian* writer Charlotte Raven wrote on September 18, 2001 ("A Bully with a Bloody Nose Is Still a Bully") that her "unqualified sympathy" for the victims of 9/11 was "underpinned by a feeling that few have dared even to whisper." Namely, "that the US might benefit from an insight into what it feels like to be knocked to your knees by a faceless power deaf to everything but the logic of its own crazed agenda." She added that there was "nothing shameful about this position."
4. Harold Pinter's comments are to be found in *Granta*, vol. 77 (spring 2002), pp. 66–69.
5. Jewish community pressure groups, together with the evangelical right, have been regularly accused of stifling debate on the Palestine question. For a particularly striking example, see Jonathan Steele, "New York Is Starting to Feel Like Brezhnev's Moscow," *The Guardian*, May 16, 2002, p. 18.
6. "'Voice of the Left' Accused of Anti-Semitic Smear," *The Independent*, February 1, 2002, p. 13.
7. Jonathan Sacks, "The Hatred That Won't Die," *The Guardian*, February 28, 2002, p. 19.
8. Barbara Gunnell, "Take Cover: Evil Is Back," *New Statesman*, February 11, 2002, p. 16.
9. "President Bush Should Listen to What He Is Told During His European Trip," *The Independent*, May 23, 2002.