

ADMIRATION OR ENVY: THE AMERICAN DILEMMA

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It is now 140 years since John Stuart Mill’s *Considerations on Representative Government* was published. It has remained ever since very relevant to the problems facing civilisation; today its relevance to the world in general is greater than ever, bordering indeed on the uncanny.

Mill proclaims the superiority of Anglo-American civilisation. He does not say that America is a further development of the civilisation built up in the British Isles from the Middle Ages and especially from the seventeenth century onwards. He could have said that and perhaps he did say it elsewhere. I hope I will confound the multiculturalists by my straightforward opinion that Anglo-American civilisation is far and away the greatest civilisation that has ever existed. As to Mill, the great man’s exact words 140 years ago, were: “The striving, go-ahead character of England and the United States... is the foundation of the best hopes for the general improvement of mankind.”¹

What Mill did not know, though he might have guessed, of course, is that the American economy and polity were destined to dwarf those of the United Kingdom. Within twenty years of his writing these words, the USA had overtaken Britain economically and by the time of the First World War America was already more significant politically.

Naturally a theoretical classic is one thing, and energetic polemics another. A new book in the latter vein, published in French, is especially timely in view of recent horrors in the United States.² Guy Millière’s subject is envy and ingratitude. These are the two wicked and irrational responses American achievements have met in some quarters since the Second World War. For example, the acts of unfathomable baseness in America on the 11th of September this year, would prove, could we truly sound their depths, versions of that envy for which some say the angels fell.

By the same token the endless contemporary denigration of America by many academics and journalists exemplifies gross ingratitude for the blessings under which they live, both in America and the other countries she has guarded for half a century and more. Its international function is to shore up and energise America’s many foreign enemies.

As Pascal Salin of the University of Paris observes in his fine preface to Millière’s book,³ Millière is worthy of much praise for daring to stand up to the torrents of lies and hatred which have now poured for decades from the world’s press and media about this generous and open society.

The envious and ungrateful do not really want to know the truth, since it would disturb their hatreds. As Millière’s text shows, most of the arguments endlessly churned out by America’s rancorous critics, domestic and foreign, are manifestly false. He rightly stresses the irresistible attraction this free and open nation has for the world’s poor, especially the ambitious and hardworking poor.

Millière travelled around the United States to its most notable places, talking about various aspects of American reality with leading decision-makers and intellectual authorities. His book discusses work, earnings, immigration, universities, race, religion, leisure and law. He also analyses the hatreds besetting America from within and without, and considers the moral and political character and the prospects of this loved and hated land now constructing so much of the world in its own image. He is particularly concerned to contrast the media and professional academic view of America, hostile in many parts of the world, America included, with the observable reality.

Why is America so often hated at home and abroad? Paradoxically it

is because she is so successful and because for the most part, again at home and abroad, she is so loved and admired. So far as one can tell the poor and weak of the world do not hate the United States. Indeed, it is the most popular destination - Britain is the second - for those who wish to leave the poverty and tyranny of their homelands. Sad to say, all too often, as we British know especially well, the men-folk want to bring with them their appalling treatment of women and children, most notoriously in the Muslim case.

It is not from these poor people, however, that the root envy comes. The envy is from the élites, from those who trample their own poor underfoot, or make them their sad dupes. These élites sometimes depend on the West, sometimes not, but in many cases they seethe with jealousy of those richer and more powerful than they.

Mill and the Active and Passive Principles

Once again, as we seek understanding, Mill comes to our intellectual rescue. He enunciates two essential viewpoints, two operating principles which define civilisation. Neither can subsist without the other. They are the active principle, whose imperative is to change the world, and the passive, whose imperative is to endure the world. From this old and ostensibly modest and even banal distinction Mill contrives to hang a fascinating analysis. Both principles are necessary, but in civilisational terms the active principle is the motor. Civilisation is driven by active people; the passive type can at best endorse and consolidate it.⁴ Mill says that activism is characteristic of Anglo-American culture. By inference we may construct a neo-Millian rider, to the effect that envy is the tribute which inaction pays to activity.

As we survey the modern world, we can indeed see that in America especially there is a vast bustle; the active personality type is very typical. Mill did not connect this busy condition with religion, but it is connected. The unprecedented individualism of Judeo-Christian culture connects in the very long run with a sense of personal worth and a parallel sense of the manageability of the world. These were necessary developments for the escape from the “agrarian trap,” that mysterious exit from millennia of poverty and despotism, which began in Britain in the eighteenth century. Place this religious psychology alongside Buddhism, with its fleeing of the world. Contrast it with the hierarchical fixities of Hinduism. Above all compare it with Islam, whose fatalism is surely its most oriental and inhibiting characteristic. Paul Johnson says that Islam’s most notable feature is that it is unreformed.⁵

The other Judaic religions do have their fatalist impulses and moments. The Jewish prophets also praised men who endure; they do laud the passive mood. The Book of Job shows this. And the Christian Beatitudes promise the poor and the meek the Kingdom of Heaven. But the history of neither Judaism nor Christianity is marked by the monumental fatalism which today seems to lock Islamic societies into a terrible poverty at worst and at best a woeful dependence.

Oriental cultures can excel at emulative capitalism, a claim which certainly takes in those of the Muslim persuasion. It is hard to imagine any Eastern religious culture, however, under any circumstances leading the way out of the old circle of poverty and helplessness in which most humans passed their days in the pre-modern era. Many voices have been raised by historians against religious theories of the emergence of capitalism. In fact such theories seem intuitively plausible in their linking of two elements of the *differentia specifica humana*. Nothing else in creation possesses what mankind has, namely religion and complex economy, the devil lying exasperatingly in the etiological details of our associating them. That they should be connected, how-

ever, is what we ought to expect rather than casually dismiss. Weber in the early twentieth century and Novak today are not wrong in their claims. It is just that their arguments fail in the promised largesse. In the unpredictable combinations of history, the strange contingencies of circumstance, the material outcomes of ideal trends, the case these writers make is intrinsically convincing.⁶

Bin Laden, Envy and the Active and Passive Moods

It is hard to know whether the billionaire, Bin Laden, really approves of the Taliban and their appalling society. Does he hate his native Saudi Arabia for being insufficiently like Afghanistan or just for being weaker than America? He must, whatever he believes, see that the world he hates is a world where people do not endure physical filth or direct political oppression. He himself is certainly not one of Mill's passive personalities. He is the supremely successful activist in a passive world, a mover and shaker who has masterminded a series of counter-challenges to Western modernity, themselves in the active mood, indeed mounted with the Western enemy's active achievements. That the dupes who flew those fatal planes submitted to his frightful orders makes it apparent that however active Bin Laden may be, the recipients of his immoral requirements are cast fatally in the passive mould.

The Widespread Envy of America

Maybe Bin Laden resents the passing of the great days, long ago, of the Baghdad Caliphate and Spain under the Moors. In any case he is not alone. Envy of America is widespread in the world. Nothing offends those who cannot achieve more than the accomplishments of those who can, and the complaints of fundamentalist Islamic heresy are no exception. Moreover, the charge of ingratitude and envy seem especially applicable to Islam itself. Who could be more indebted to America than Central Asia's Muslims, whose religion the Soviets tried to extirpate? Who broke the Communists? Let us look at the Middle East. How could a backward desert tribe like the rulers of Saudi come to great wealth but through a foreign technology they could not themselves have invented?

We repeat, though, and Guy Millière, a Frenchman, does not shirk this, that envy is not a sin only of the uneducated and poor. There are offenders in the rich world, the worst in this regard, in some respects, being the French, though the antinomian intellectuals of Britain and America are not much better. The resentful intellectuals of France, however, are in a class of their own. Their destructive pre-eminence was on display through much of the twentieth century, when France, not Russia, was the intellectual base of international Communism. Moreover, the attempt by the French intellectuals to destroy the "bourgeois order," otherwise known as the free society, survived the fall of Communism, as the influence of Foucault and Derrida shows. The very essence of Foucault and Derrida, as Mill would be quick to point out were he here to read them, is that they cast the human race in the passive mould, seeing us as hopeless prisoners of cultural and language traditions. And the great sin of France is a quintessential passivity, whose active enactments are always vicious: envy.

Consider modern times. Germany crushed France in three successive wars. In 1871 she made France seem ludicrous. Between 1914 and 1918 she killed three million of her soldiers, and in the Second World War she reduced France to a humiliating dependency. Mill's "passive type" perfectly defines most of the accommodating French population during the Second World War. They endured in the Millian sense, and not even with the resigned nobility which can sometimes grace lack of movement. Whilst they seethed with proper hatred of their conquerors, this emotion was soon to be transferred to their British and American allies, as France sought to massage her offended ego. That Communism was so popular with the French is understandable too, despite the huge Russian losses in the war. This did not promote French envy. After all, slavery and cowardice have some status similarity. You cannot owe slaves, however courageously they fight, the gratitude you owe to free men.

America by contrast saved France first from the Kaiser, then from

the Nazis and then from the Communists. The result? France cuddles up to Germany for decades on end, and rarely loses an opportunity to spite America. No one with any sense would want France and Germany to be enemies today, but the contrast is instructive. One shakes one's head in wonder that so brilliant a nation should fall prey to so crippling a sin as envy. It was the weak link in the armour even of a man as indisputably great as Charles de Gaulle.

The West's Internal Fifth Column and America's Rule of Rules

America's foreign intellectual enemies matter, by definition. The home grown kind are in some ways perhaps even more hurtful. The many intellectuals who revile the USA from within would mostly be incarcerated or shot if the politics of their country were 1% as vile as they say. They are the worst fifth column in the world. It was people like them whom Kipling was thinking of when he spoke in the British context of those who engage in "making mock of uniforms which guard you while you sleep."

Whichever enemies of America we light upon, were criticism and reality ever more adrift from each other in history before? America is not the *fons et origo* of ancient wrong, but a novel enactment of human right, her affairs mostly run the way our affairs should always be, given, of course, the technical constraints of time and place.

What is America's rule of rules, the one so exasperating to her enemies? It is really so simple that it is strange so few societies have practised it. It is that men and women should not be judged by how they are born but only by how they live. This is Mill's activism in motion.

The enactment of this rule has had extraordinary outcomes. Economic historians are used to the matchless development of the American economy, defying as Jim Potter of the London School of Economics once put it, "even Texan superlatives."⁷ In fact the social achievement, a concomitant of the economic, is no less remarkable. Consider the strange tale of social absorption America achieved. She took the unschooled and displaced peasantries of Europe, poverty stricken Irish, Poles and Italians. She took downtrodden Jews from the Shtetl. She took, at first with bigoted European reserve, large numbers of China's immemorably abused coolies. She later accepted millions of Hispanics, fleeing from the corrupt, impoverished despotisms of Latin America. All these she took, and many more. Finally she began to draw to herself the blacks whom many of her white citizens had wronged.

What do we now see, bit by bit, and still incomplete, across the last two centuries? That with uneven but Promethean ingenuity and daring and at dizzying speed, America has turned this unruly assortment of humanity into a great nation, one with historically new, hitherto unknown features. One such feature is a vast middle class. Of all the achievements and conditions of modernity this is probably the greatest and most definitive. This class has worked alongside a highly skilled working class and the richest capitalist élite of all time. This élite, in its sporting and entertainment wings especially, contains many black people. And all these groups live alongside each other in fluid and constant interchange.

This historically original social structure has functioned to make the United States incomparably the most successful commercial and political society ever. The American population is unprecedentedly active at the level of economic decision-making, despite - and here I am obliged to sound a very critical note - the deadening and stupefying effects of some aspects of American mass culture.

Underestimating Great Britain

All this achievement was not secured without pain, or error, or bigotry. Nor was it done without guidance. America was able to employ representative government, the rule of law and the capitalist economy, those mighty creations of that other, older recipient on a vast scale of human envy and ingratitude, Great Britain. Indeed, neither Millière nor one of his formidable interlocutors, Lawrence Chickering, discussing the originality of America's experiment and the inge-

nuity of her legal arrangements, gives enough weight to the political continuity between the British and American experience.⁸

The Negative Side to the American Achievement

There were bound to be negative sides to such a story. One Millière faces squarely. That a large minority of American blacks are welfarised, demoralised and criminalised, is mostly the result of the bogus guilt mongering and false charity of America's white and black welfare élites, who have a vested interest in keeping things that way. Millière points out that most American blacks are not welfarised. The black American population is roughly comparable in size to the population of Canada, but considerably richer. All Americans are lucky and American blacks perhaps especially so given the corruption and tyranny prevailing almost everywhere in Africa today.

There Are Bad Sides to Advanced American Capitalism

My brief is the dialectics of envy and the whiter shades of grey which civilisation presupposes. This is not the same as Guy Millière's of course. It is not Millière's purpose to find things wrong with America, since America's is an experiment he seeks to defend. Thus he wants to rebut or challenge the familiar claims about fast food, pop music, obesity, philistinism etc. This is to defend the indefensible, or at any rate the undesirable. America, like Britain and like France too, has a socialistic education system which under-equips and under-cultivates huge sections of the population. Her philistinism is notable mainly because her greater wealth gives it more sustenance than is possible elsewhere.

America, the Negative Side and the John Does

Anyway there is another explanation for the negative side of America. The American nation could not have been built without that optimism and sense of belonging to a superior experiment which her foes and critics find so offensive. Without this sense, poor and self-effacing immigrants could not have been raised. Nor could America's achievement have been done without a certain levelling down of attitudes and ascriptions, in parallel with the remorseless rise of the American wealth machine. Her unparalleled markets, far from putting a remote, unresponsive élite in charge, in large degree put Mr and Mrs John Doe in the guiding seat. The Does are not wicked or oppressive people, but they are innocent and gauche and their tastes in music, food and consumer purchases are offensive to delicate European or educated East Coast sensibilities. The answer is not to denigrate but to educate those people, most of them perfectly decent, who happen to lack cultural discretion. And let us not forget that America's educated élite is the most accomplished in the world, by far.

For fundamentalist Islam, of course, the idea that the poor or weak should be allowed to rise socially and economically or even dare to raise their voices is total anathema. Today's radical Islamic regimes are the most oppressive in the world, their fanatical, bigoted leaderships quite indifferent to the fate of the poor masses over whom they preside and totally dismissive of all female humanity.

Murdering White People is Not a New Idea

In America the common man is in considerable degree in charge. This fact, which Millière brings out implicitly rather than explicitly, is the reverse of what the Marxists had to say. They claimed that America was ruled by a nexus of capitalists and war-mongering arms billionaires, a viewpoint militant Islam has now assimilated to its own challenge, by the simple device of dumping the Marxist class war and substituting a heretical version of holy war in its place. There is nothing original in what Bin Laden and his clique have to say. It was a white Frenchman, the venomous Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, who first popularised the idea that killing white people was a good idea if you are not white⁹ though subsequently terrorists have made it clear that they are prepared to kill people of any race in the course of their criminal rage.

Today, in many places in America itself, black academics and so-called Muslims, attracted to a religion which has never repudiated slavery and some of whose adherents still run slaves out of Africa, indict white people in general and America in particular as the source of the world's wrongs. Above all they practise a terrible antisemitism.¹⁰ Perverse and anachronistic results follow inevitably from such wilful romanticism.

Fundamentalist Islam is Not the Worst Enemy of Modernity

It is true that fundamentalist Islam is a fearful enemy. Even so, there is no intrinsic reason great wealth should offend the children of the prophet. I take it that what most offends people like the gulf oil billionaires is that their wealth is a form of foreign dependency. Rich people in America and the other advanced countries enjoy an achieved wealth. It was actively acquired. In the great days of Islam, Baghdad and Cordoba were the wealthiest cities in the world. Any real revival of these great centres will have to come through their own efforts. The hatred some Muslims feel is fanned by their knowledge that the West created and maintains them. In any case, though, the truth is that the greatest threat to Western societies is the rot that has set in from within, the self-hatred promoted in the West by corrupt socialist intellectuals.

This is a plague which has now raged for over a century and a half. In all the rich countries there are large, affluent, cosseted intellectual minorities committed to hatred of Western society in general and the United States in particular. Once they sided with Marxism. Now they plump for "multiculturalism," even more protean, unstable and unforgiving. Nor will the habit of embracing one's sworn enemies ever evaporate, though good people have a duty to fight it. It is the deadly price of freedom itself, the self-flagellation of wealth, part of the tragic baggage which humanity must carry forever in the ages of affluence.

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