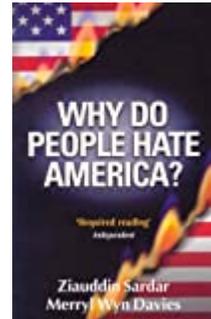




Ziauddin Sardar, Meryll Wyn Davies. *Why do People Hate America?* Cambridge: Icon Books, 2002. x + 231 pp. £7.99 (paper), ISBN 978-1-84046-383-5.



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Why Americans Will Hate This Book

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In *Why Do People Hate America?*, Ziauddin Sardar and Meryll Wyn Davies attempt to answer this question by presenting a case against what they see as America's unrelentingly shallow foreign policy. They do this by offering an even more unrelentingly shallow postmodern analysis of American policy and American society. Sardar and Davies have chosen the easy path by employing a reductivist approach based on supposition and anecdote. Call it the "Let's all blame America, 'cause it sells well" school of international political analysis.

It is tempting (and in many ways accurate) to portray America as an over-strong, overfed bully—the global equivalent of the playground misfit who beats kids up willy-nilly because he can. But this is also the literary equivalent of a child's taunt of "nyah, nyah, nyah." It teaches us nothing. In fact, this book comes across as a screed, in which broad generalizations are made about the American people, while bemoaning the fact that Americans often make broad generalizations about the rest of the world.

Sardar and Davies begin with two assumptions, upon which they base much of the rest of their book. First, they assume that Americans may not all believe in the same things, or act in the same way, but that they nonetheless present a united face to the world. "America in its actions and effect on other people around the world forms an immensely coherent whole. Wherever Americans travel, they take that complex whole with them" (p. 9). In essence, therefore, Sardar and Davies begin by saying that all Americans look and act alike to them.

The second assumption Sardar and Davies make is that it is realistic to analyze American attitudes and culture primarily by using TV and film, and that American television and films can provide an accurate representation of American attitudes towards foreign policy. "We thus make no apology for enveloping much of our analysis in films and television programmes, since a deeper understanding of our central question requires us to go beyond conventional politics and look also at the cultural and representational straightjacket encompassing the globe" (p. 10). Before the introduction is even finished, then, Sardar and Davies have lumped all Ameri-

cans into the same pot by telling us that most Americans form their political opinions based primarily on TV and film.

Most of chapter 1 is then devoted to an analysis of the way in which the television program *The West Wing* dealt with September 11. They argue that *The West Wing* reflected American policy, and demonstrate that films and television simultaneously reflect reality and construct it. How do Sardar and Davies show that *The West Wing* reflects American policy? They show it by telling us it is so. A single episode of *The West Wing* has been plucked out of context and used to illustrate the shallowness, not of the way the show's producers or writers perceive international relations, but of how all Americans perceive international relations. Who produces *The West Wing*? What are their politics? Who sponsors the show? Who watches it? How does this reflect the makeup of the country as a whole? Are the authors aware that *The West Wing*'s ratings are plummeting, and that the show has not been in the top 10 for some time? These facts are irrelevant to Sardar and Davies; indeed most facts seem irrelevant to Sardar and Davies.

Sardar and Davies return again and again to American films and TV to illustrate the notion that American culture is actively destroying the world by engaging in "cultural bioterrorism" (p. 131). Westerns all demonstrate a gung-ho, kick-butt, expansionism-at-any-cost philosophy, films portray ethnic minorities such as Indians and blacks as criminals and renegades, war films distort or re-write history. These are all pointed up as examples of how Hollywood reflects and distorts America's image of foreigners. But for every film Sardar and Davies claim reflects foreign policy, it is possible to point to another that does not. For every John Wayne film depicting Indians as bloodthirsty savages, there is a *Dances with Wolves* (itself based on a 1950 Delmer Daves film in which James Stewart's weary Civil War veteran seeks solace with the understanding and honorable Apache Indians). But then, if film did not distort, it would just be a documentary, and even documentaries distort. The book's later discussion of how the American film industry distorts war history is equally shallow. The authors state, "War is one of the main arenas where American films routinely re-imagine or distort history" (p. 177).

Using film to re-write history is hardly unique to American cinema. Do Chinese films ever show the Japanese view of the Rape of Nanking? Do Iranian films and Iraqi films present identical views of the Iran-Iraq war? Sardar and Davies do not care. They do point out,

however, that it is very difficult to find Iranian or Chinese independent films shown in America. This is meant as another sign that Americans are not exposed to foreign cultures. But they avoid pointing out that it is even more difficult to find Chinese or Iranian independent films in China or Iran. Does that tell us anything about American foreign policy? No, absolutely nothing.

Directors are under no requirement to depict only the truth and, although biased films certainly do not encourage good foreign relations, there are probably worse impediments to good foreign relations than the occasional action movie. Surely, poorly thought-out foreign policy, terrorism, weapons proliferation, unequal subsidies, the American State Department's lack of research and understanding of foreign cultures and history, all contribute much more to America's lack of understanding of foreign cultures than Vin Diesel, a hastily written script, and an enormous special effects budget.

Sardar and Davies argue that American films are so pervasive and universal that they constitute a cultural, global "straightjacket" which forces American cultural and political viewpoints on the rest of the world. "The US is storyteller to the world" (p. 203). Yet, in those parts of the world where we are told America is most hated, the only way to watch American films uncensored and uncut is by satellite.

The authors also point to foreign shows, such as *Till Death do us Part* and *Absolutely Fabulous*, which are remade on American TV as an example of how America seeks to remake the world in its own image. "If something truly original turns up on from a foreign land," goes their argument, "the standard response is to buy up the rights and remake it in a US version" (p. 132). They then make the mistake of using *Survivor*, which originated in the Netherlands, as an example. Yet, the U.S. *Survivor* was a famous flop, although the British, French, Indian, German, Swedish, Mexican and numerous other international *Survivor* shows have proven very popular everywhere but America. And far from being bought up and taken over by American producers, the original *Survivor* producers actively marketed and sold the concept to countries all over the world. So what does *Survivor* being remade in America tell us about America? Absolutely nothing. It is a TV show, shown in England and in Sweden, and it tells us nothing about those countries either, except that a taste for shallow reality TV is apparently universal.

Where the authors criticize America for historical reconstruction, they ignore the common postmodern the-

sis that territorial socialization is a universal means of strengthening state identity, especially through education. As the postmodern geographer David Newman points out, “Fie trips to sites of historical significance, naming of landscapes on maps, and the mythification of religious and/or battle sites in which the nation was victorious, are all a part of the process through which territorial symbolism plays a role in the construction of national identity” (p. 24).[1] Every state has its frontier mythology, its famous battles, its re-written history. The fact that America does this can hardly be a cause of any special hatred.

At one point, Sardar and Davies ask, “Why is the American public so exceedingly ignorant of world affairs?” (p. 200). A recent poll in *The Guardian* newspaper (U.K.) demonstrated that one in eight Britons could not name a single world leader, including their own prime minister, and only 18 percent of British men polled could name five world leaders. Ignorance of world events does not seem to be confined to America.

In setting out to deconstruct America, Sardar and Davies make the same mistakes as many others who attempt to explain why America is so bad at seeing the world through other people’s eyes. They assume that an inability to understand other cultures is a uniquely

American problem. They then prove that this is a world-wide problem by being unable to understand American culture. But do people, in fact, hate America? Recent polls taken in the Arab world seem to indicate that, on the contrary, America’s culture is not what Arabs hate about America. American culture seems to be what Arabs regard favorably about America; it is the foreign policy that is the problem. The same polls show that it is specifically America’s foreign policy towards Israel that is the problem. Do Arabs hate the United States because of U.S. intervention in Central America? They could not care less. Do Central Americans hate the United States because of its Israeli policy? Hardly.

Does America do bad things? Yes, of course. Is America’s foreign policy shallow and self-serving? Yes, of course. Do some people have a good reason to hate America? No doubt. But piling on the blame is not the same as offering analysis. Sardar and Davies are, in effect, saying that people hate America because Americans are all alike. Do they all look the same to you?

Note

[1]. “Boundaries, Territory and Postmodernism: Towards Shared or Separate Space?” (conference paper presented in Durham, 15 July 1998).

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