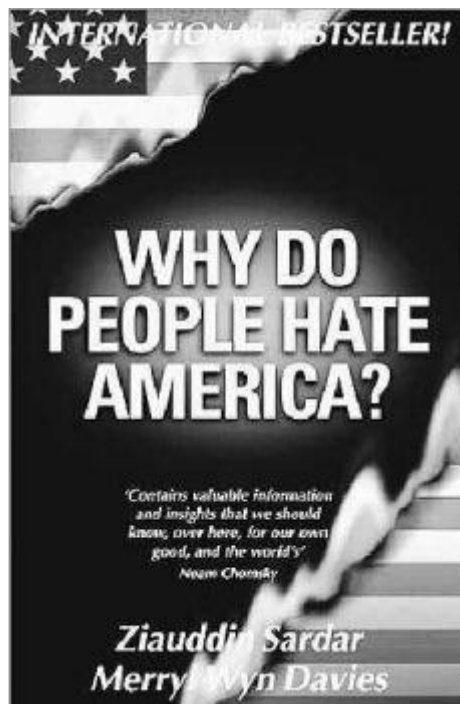


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Hating America

While segregating American foreign policy from the people, Sardar and Davies illustrate why some nations actually have reasons to hate the former, says TABISH KHAIR.



WE all remember the scene through several TV replays. It is September 11, 2001 and a woman, anonymous and shell-shocked, emerges from the dust clouds swaddling the crash-bombed Twin Towers. She looks into the camera of the waiting reporter and asks: "Why do they hate us?"

I had heard exactly the same question about five months before September 11. It had been posed by an American poet — white, Democrat, much travelled and intellectually open — in response to a private discussion with some Asian and African writers at a residency in Switzerland. The Asians and Africans were fluent in English and held democratic and feminist views, and yet this well-meaning and intelligent American could respond to their criticism with only that subjective question: Why do they hate America?

Arundhati Roy has replied to the question from the perspective of Anglophone American-literature-reading Indians like me by pointing out how grossly misleading the rhetoric of hate is. Does "hating America" mean hating Walt Whitman and Sylvia Plath, Hollywood films and the various kinds of American music that we listen to? That, evidently, is one side of the answer to that rhetorical question: America is many things and one can resist aspects of "the American experience" without "hating America". Ziauddin Sardar (writer, editor and cultural critic) and Merry Wyn Davies (writer and anthropologist) provide the other side in great detail. While highlighting the complexity of America and segregating official American policy

from an easy correspondence with the American people, they nevertheless set out to illustrate why some people actually have reason to hate America. It is a brave attempt in a world where even historical allies, like France, are to be made — according to U.S. policy makers — to "pay a price" for not kowtowing abjectly to American decisions.

Sardar and Davies debunk the "Us-Them" thesis of the American Right that, as they point out, sees September 11 as a landmark in the battle between good and evil, with America monopolising the former. They point out how spokespersons of the American Right routinely simplify complex issues and indulge in disinformation. While they highlight how the current villains, Islamic Fundamentalists, have stepped into the shoes of the Communists and Socialists in the rhetoric of the American Right, perhaps Sardar and Davies miss out on a contextual opportunity by failing to highlight how the American and U.S.-led persecution of the Left, in the U.S. and globally, created or consolidated the discourses and instruments that are now being used to justify a permanent state of controlled long-distance war that, after all, is not very different from the Cold War.

However, quoting extensively from other writers and scholars, they successfully dismantle the stereotypes of Islamism, Arabs, "anti-Americanism" etc. being used to sustain largely undemocratic control of global resources by American governments. They also quote texts like Zoltan Grossman's **A Century of US Military Interventions from Wounded Knee to Afghanistan**, which lists 134 such "interventions" between 1890 and 2001. Sardar and Davies illustrate how the "ascendancy of the hamburger culture has meant the eradication of indigenous Third World cultures everywhere" and how American failure to see the "obscene power" of their cultural hegemonies makes them many enemies, among native elites who fear cultural erasure and the poor millions who cannot afford hamburgers anyway. Of particular interest in the book are the chapters about the stories Americans tell (and have been told) about America and "the burden of the American (gunfighter) hero," both of which enable one to understand the widespread support that Bush's policies have gained in the U.S. The book also takes up more specific issues for discussion, such as the U.S.-support for Israel: "Israel receives 40 percent of all US foreign aid... , roughly \$ 500 per Israeli citizen."

Finally, Sardar and Davies try to understand why well-meaning Americans often take recourse to the "they-hate-America" argument: "America is what we have termed a 'hyperpower' — a nation so powerful that it effects the lives of people everywhere. Yet, Americans are shielded from knowledge and debate about the actual consequences of US engagement with the rest of the world." As **Why Do People Hate America?** has been published in the U.K. and Australia, it is unlikely that it will enable ordinary Americans to dismantle their shield of comfortable ignorance in these days of hawkish "missile shields". Nevertheless, Sardar and Davies cannot be accused of either intellectual apathy or moral cowardice in the face of an increasingly tyrannical "new world order". Sometimes at the risk of simplifying complex economic matters, they provide highly readable and pertinent answers to the question: Why do (ordinary) people hate America?

Why Do People Hate America? Ziauddin Sardar and Meryll Wyn Davies, Cambridge: Icon Books Ltd., 2002, p.231, £7.99.

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