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Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies

By Ian Buruma, Avishai Margalit

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Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies By Ian Buruma, Avishai Margalit

A pioneering investigation of the lineage of anti-Western stereotypes that traces them back to the West itself.

Twenty-five years ago, Edward Said's *Orientalism* spawned a generation of scholarship on the denigrating and dangerous mirage of "the East" in the Western colonial mind. But "the West" is the more dangerous mirage of our own time, Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit argue, and the idea of "the West" in the minds of its self-proclaimed enemies remains largely unexamined and woefully misunderstood. *Occidentalism* is their groundbreaking investigation of the demonizing fantasies and stereotypes about the Western world that fuel such hatred in the hearts of others.

We generally understand "radical Islam" as a purely Islamic phenomenon, but Buruma and Margalit show that while the Islamic part of radical Islam certainly is, the radical part owes a primary debt of inheritance to the West. Whatever else they are, al Qaeda and its ilk are revolutionary anti-Western political movements, and Buruma and Margalit show us that the bogeyman of the West who stalks their thinking is the same one who has haunted the thoughts of many other revolutionary groups, going back to the early nineteenth century. In this genealogy of the components of the anti-Western worldview, the same oppositions appear again and again: the heroic revolutionary versus the timid, soft bourgeois; the rootless, deracinated cosmopolitan living in the Western city, cut off from the roots of a spiritually healthy society; the sterile Western mind, all reason and no soul; the machine society, controlled from the center by a cabal of insiders-often Jews-pulling the hidden levers of power versus an organically knit-together one, a society of "blood and soil." The anti-Western virus has found a ready host in the Islamic world for a number of legitimate reasons, they argue, but in no way does that make it an exclusively Islamic matter.

A work of extraordinary range and erudition, *Occidentalism* will permanently enlarge our collective frame of vision.

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Editorial Review

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Four characterizations of the West contribute to the anti-Western stance Buruma and Margalit call Occidentalism and are used to justify attacking individual Westerners as less-than-human beings. The West prefers the sinful city to the virtuous countryside; the West destroys heroism and replaces it with trading; the West thinks only of matter and not of spirit; the West worships evil. Buruma and Margalit argue that the first two of those conceptions, typical of secular Occidentalism, are themselves Western, products of European romanticism that early-twentieth-century Japan and Germany exploited to their own ruin. The third idea informs Russia's long struggle with the West but stems from German romanticism, in particular, with its sense of the wounded national soul. The fourth, peculiar to religious Occidentalism, animates radical Islamism but derives from the good-evil polarities of Persian Manichaeism that the young Augustine embraced. Buruma and Margalit conclude that these ideas' lives are "a tale of cross-contamination" that cannot be ended by answering anti-Western intolerance with more intolerance. A timely tract, brilliantly though broadly argued. *Ray Olson*

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Review

...an important book on a topic that deserves to be treated seriously by scholars and concerned citizens alike.
-- *Library Journal*, March 15, 2004

About the Author

Ian Buruma is currently Luce Professor at Bard College. His previous books include **God's Dust, Behind the Mask, The Missionary & The Libertine, Playing the Game, The Wages of Guilt, Anglomania**, and **Bad Elements**. He writes frequently for **The New York Review of Books, The New York Times Magazine, The New Yorker**, and **the Financial Times**.

Avishai Margalit is Schulman Professor of Philosophy at the Center for Rationality at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. His previous books include **Idolatry, The Decent Society, Views and Reviews**, and **The Ethics of Memory**.

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