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HOMO SOVIETICUS, THE NAÏVE AMERICAN AND 11.09

A confusing sense of *déjà vu* enveloped me during a field visit to Poland this past summer. I thought back two decades to the early 1980s when, as an aspiring young anthropologist, I witnessed suppression of the Solidarity movement and life under martial law. Warsaw's subsequent opening of borders and the appearance of markets and political parties had long eclipsed that experience. September 11 brought it back.

I recalled the long-held Polish view of the naïve American, accustomed to a life of security and, however respected and admired, fundamentally ill-equipped to understand the rest of the world or manoeuvre within it. This innocent abroad was usually a visitor to Poland, trying to make sense of the country's particular socialist path. In Polish eyes, two decades on, that green American is struggling to make sense of the newfound and equally unaccustomed insecurity of post-September 11. The context has changed, but Americans are as naïve as ever.

In the 1980s, with Eastern Europe still behind the Iron Curtain, only a few Westerners – diplomats and journalists on assignment, scholars, students, family members, and adventure seekers – ventured to explore it. I settled into my fieldwork routine by living with a Polish family and participating in classes and other activities at Warsaw University. I encountered only occasional foreigners, often guests of the university.

The fact that we were so few on the ground added to our glamour and popularity. Our hosts were hospitable, helpful, and complimentary; we were valued and embraced. But something in us was lacking: many Poles found it necessary to explain the basics to outsiders who had no point of reference for understanding the Polish world and how it works. 'We' and 'they' were separated by fundamentally divergent life experience. As I wrote in *The private Poland* (1986), 'Westerners were seen as unable to understand the Polish situation, no matter how much people might try to teach them.'

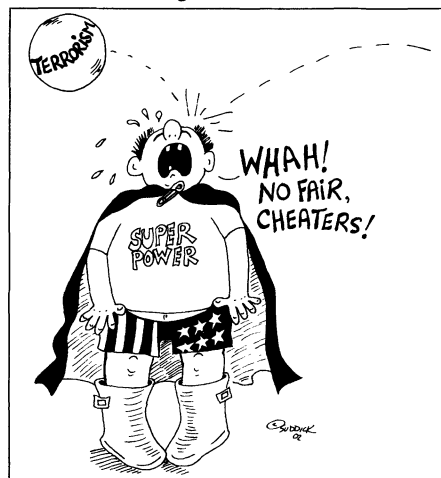
Poles, after all, had had anything but an easy life or undisturbed family histories. Concentration camps, deportations to Siberia, shifting borders, martial law, material scarcities, dodging the system simply in order to survive – all this was 'normal', the way things were, not the way they should be. War, revolutions, uncertainty were a part not only of the history of Poland, which had been crushed by so many occupiers, but of immediate experience.

On the other hand, in the view of many Poles, Americans lived a particularly unfettered, enviable life: America evoked good fortune and freedom. The Polish nation was among the most pro-American in the world, where an otherwise sophisticated élite used to greet with scorn any disparaging comments

about President Ronald Reagan. Western Europeans often criticized the United States for its meddling around the world, but to Poles America, that land of immigrants (including many Polish ones), was a well-meaning, albeit clumsy, arbiter of democracy, freedom and prosperity. And Americans, seen as blissfully oblivious to the world, were almost revered for that very quality.

'Poles often laugh at the gullibility of foreigners behind their backs or simply joke affectionately with them, as one might poke fun at children,' I wrote at the time. 'This is the reason Poles try to "take care" of foreigners.'

I found this almost paternal concern for the protected American replayed after September 11. In the initial aftermath of the calamity, I was surprised to hear the alarmed, concerned and empathetic voices of Eastern European friends on the telephone. I had known them for some 20 years, but they had never before called from across the Atlantic. In my recent visit to Poland, there was time for much more reflection and long conversation. How, friends



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wondered, were Americans, who knew little true hardship and certainly not an attack on their territory, coping?

Similar questions were raised further east, in another corner of the post-communist world that I visited this summer – post-Soviet Georgia. Armed with ample doses of irony and clear-eyed realism to make sense of the world, both Poles and Georgians puzzled at how Americans can be so trusting – of their government, their companies, their commentators. When high-priced pundits (some of them, it emerged later, paid by the now bankrupt Enron) were talking up stocks and forecasting an indefinite upward climb of the market, how could people have been so gullible? How could Americans have taken those now infamous Enron slogans – Integrity, Respect, Communication – to heart? (To anyone raised under communism, of course, such slogans seem familiar – and transparent as blatant propaganda.)

A Georgian acquaintance who (unlike many of his cohorts) narrowly avoided serving in the Red Army in Afghanistan in the 1980s wondered how Americans could be so naïve as to

think that they could conquer and control that territory with sheer technology. His wife asked how Americans could take flags (of which they had seen much display on CNN) as a sign of patriotism. 'It's so superficial. Anyone can fly a flag,' she said. 'Don't people see through that?' Real patriotism, she explained, entails putting yourself on the line. Further, they asked, how can Americans buy into a 'war on terrorism'? 'That implies that terrorism can be defeated. Yet, by definition, it can never go away. It will always be a threat.'

That the world had changed for Americans also seemed a blow to the new sense of security of my associates in Eastern Europe, especially in Poland. The United States had, after all, occupied a revered symbolic and strategically crucial place in the Polish worldview under communism. How could America, that hallmark of invulnerability, that pillar of military, technological, political and democratic strength, and the world's only superpower, be open to such potent attack by a handful of hijackers with box cutters? America, the superpower that successfully challenged the Soviet Union, is vulnerable.

It was a sharp contrast to some of the reactions I heard expressed in Western Europe – a sort of smug satisfaction that boiled down to: 'You Americans have been insulated and arrogant. You're finally reaping the harvest of your misguided foreign policies.'

However, US intentions toward Iraq may be draining away some of the sympathy roused by September 11 in the former Eastern bloc. The militarization of American foreign policy and talk of war – with little support from allies or consideration of world opinion – is enraging many Poles and Georgians, along with their Western brethren. American naïveté may be losing its allure.

On my last visit to Poland, the conversation turned not just on September 11, but on the corporate scandals sweeping America. My interlocutors perceived a new insecurity in America. Not only was personal safety threatened, but so too were people's pensions, life savings, and plans for their 'golden years'. My friends seemed almost like parents wondering how a child going through puberty would emerge from adolescence. 'The world is completely changing for them,' they said. 'What will Americans be like when they are finally forced to grow up?' ●

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Having spent six years in Poland during the 1980s and 1990s, Janine Wedel published two books on Poland. Her third book is *Collision and collusion: The strange case of Western aid to Eastern Europe* (NY: Palgrave, 2001).

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