



Europe, America and the Death Penalty

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Análisis n° 167

January 30, 2007

The execution on 30 December of Saddam Hussein, the former Iraqi dictator, was (not surprisingly) greeted with the reflexive moral superiority complex that has come to characterize the anti-death-penalty left wingers who make up much of today's European news media. Although Hussein was sentenced to death by a sovereign Iraqi court which provided Saddam with a level of justice that he never gave to the thousands of people he murdered, political commentators across the continent were quick to portray the execution as another example of the values gap that exists between a Europe that is enlightened and an America that is unsophisticated and uncivilized.

Writing in the Barcelona-based *La Vanguardia*, Eusebio Val, one of the most reliably anti-American propagandists in the Spanish press corps,

tried to convince his readers that Saddam was executed because US President George W Bush never forgave the former Iraqi leader for attempting to assassinate his father (incredibly, Val was also concerned about whether Saddam had been allowed to snack on his beloved Doritos corn chips before he was hanged). Slightly less sensational, the Germany-based *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* wielded the tried and true tactic that pits the United States against Europe. Its headline declared that: "President Bush praised the execution, from Europe came sharp criticism."

Imagine, then, the chagrin felt by sheepish euro-lefties when a Novartis/Harris poll conducted for the French daily *Le Monde* found that a majority of respondents in Britain (69 percent), France (58 percent) and Germany (53 percent) said they

were in favor of executing Saddam Hussein. And in Spain, where the Socialist government (which imagines it can 'erase' its own history through secret midnight raids to remove street signs, statues and other symbols dating back the Franco dictatorship) announced that it "laments this morning's execution of the Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein," 51 percent of Spaniards surveyed said they thought Saddam should indeed be executed.

Echoing these findings, another poll, this one commissioned by Germany's leftwing *Stern* magazine, found that 50 percent of Germans support the death penalty for Saddam, 39 percent oppose it and another 11 percent don't know. In a highly unusual gesture, the Germany's leftist *Spiegel* magazine admitted that the poll results were "surprising."

But the survey results are not really very surprising at all. In fact, poll after poll shows that ordinary European citizens favor the death penalty almost as much as do Americans. In Britain, for example, opinion surveys consistently show that between two-thirds and three-quarters of the population favors the death penalty, about the same as in the United States. In Italy and France, which have dominated the international fight against capital punishment, roughly one-half of the population wants it reinstated. And in Canada, where the political left like to portray their country as kinder and gentler than its southern neighbor, up to 70 percent of Canadians want to bring back the death

penalty, which was abolished there some 30 years ago.

To be sure, there is a highly contentious debate within the United States over capital punishment, and the practice has been banned in a dozen American states. According to government statistics, death sentences in America have dropped by some 50 percent and executions by 40 percent since 2000. Moreover, according to a recent Gallup poll, some 65 percent of Americans support the death penalty, down from an all-time high of 80 percent in 1994. If anything, however, these numbers show that Europeans and Americans are really not very far apart at all on the issue of capital punishment.

But if ordinary Europeans hold perspectives that are quite similar to those of ordinary Americans, then why do European elites persist in trying to sell the idea that there is a big values gap between Europe and the United States on this issue?

Well, that is precisely the question raised by the *Financial Times Deutschland* in a 2 January editorial, in which it expresses amazement at all of the crocodile tears being shed over Saddam's execution. Why, the paper asks, is there not more outrage among European lefties at the executions in China, which, according to Amnesty International, is the world leader in capital punishment? Why is there not more of a leftwing outcry at the practice in Iran and Saudi Arabia of hanging teenage homosexuals in public squares? Moreover, the newspaper argues that accusations of "American vic-

tors' justice" are unfair because the United States initially banned the death penalty in Iraq, but the Iraqi government subsequently reinstated the practice: "One can only speculate as to why politicians are making the butcher Saddam Hussein, of all people, into a martyr for human rights," the paper says.

It does not require much speculation, however, to conclude that the uproar by the European left over the execution of Saddam Hussein is either disingenuous at best, or hypocritical and/or dishonest at worst.

Locating the Real Values Gap

Whatever the case may be, one thing is for certain. There is a values gap, and what's more, one does not need to look across the Atlantic to find it. In fact, upon closer examination one may deduce that the European political and media elite are trying to draw attention to a transatlantic values gap that does not exist, in an effort to conceal a trans-European values gap that really does exist.

In fact, Europe is teeming with signs of a burgeoning values gap between European political and media elites on the one hand and ordinary European citizens on the other. Like on the issue of capital punishment, for example. As many polls show, most European countries have small majorities in favor of the death penalty, and yet European elites have abolished capital punishment in spite of (not in response to) the wishes of European voters. And yet, European elites sanctimoniously insist that opposition to the death penalty is a "European value."

And a similar dynamic is at work with the project of European integration. For example, five years ago European elites abolished national currencies in favor of a common currency, but with little or no input from European voters. (And in the few countries where there was a referendum, like in Denmark, voters said "no" to the euro.) Today, public support for the euro is lower than at any point since its induction in 2002. According to a recent EU survey, just 48 percent of eurozone citizens think the transition from national currencies to the euro was a beneficial move.

Yet another example involves the European constitution. After voters in France and the Netherlands rejected the document in a referendum, Jean-Claude Juncker, prime minister of Luxembourg and the then head of the rotating EU presidency, said that French and Dutch citizens would have to keep voting until they came up with the right response.

By contrast, it is inconceivable that an American politician could be so openly patronizing vis-à-vis the US electorate and get away with it. In an insightful essay about transatlantic relations in the December 2002 edition of *The American Enterprise*, a public policy magazine, veteran transatlantic observer Karl Zinsmeister writes that: "Many Europeans, in a way Americans find impossible to understand, are willing to let their elites lead them by the nose. There is a kind of peasant mentality under which their 'betters' are allowed to make the important national judgments for them.

'Europe's leaders see themselves as wise parents, and their citizens as children,' explains journalist and Briton Clive Crook. 'In France, Germany, and the institutions of the European Union, elites take major political decisions and impose them on the voters without consulting them,' summarizes John O'Sullivan. 'Political elites feel that the people have no right to obstruct the realization of the European dream.'"

And why don't European politicians respond to public opinion?

Because European democracy is less democratic than American democracy, according to a July 2000 essay titled 'Death in Venice' which was published in *The New Republic*, a weekly news journal which appeals to many American progressives. In trying to understand why, if European and American voters favor the death penalty in equal measure, European countries have abolished the practice and the United States has not, the essay concludes that part of the answer lies in the differences between European parliamentary government and the American separation-of-powers system.

"Parliamentary government may provide voters with more ideological variety, but it is much more resistant to political upstarts, outsiders, and the single-issue politics on which the death penalty thrives. In parliamentary systems, people tend to vote for parties, not individuals; and party committees choose which candidates stand for election. As a result, parties are less influenced by the odd new impulses that now and

again bubble up from the electorate," the essay concludes.

In other words, in European countries where elite opinion is largely united in their opposition to capital punishment, their parliamentary forms of government make it difficult to translate public support into legislative action. Indeed, candidates who support contrary views on the death penalty are less likely to be chosen to stand for election. By contrast, candidates in the United States are mostly independent and self-selected, and as such they serve as a much more direct conduit between public opinion and political action.

In the final analysis, then, if there is a genuine transatlantic values gap, it lies not in a superior European concept of morality, but in an inferior European form of democracy!

The Story Behind the Story

It would seem, then, that the hysterical reaction to the execution of Saddam Hussein by the European left has in fact very little to do with the underlying issues surrounding capital punishment, but a whole lot to do with promoting a value system that the euro-left likes to call 'progressive'.

Indeed, as many insightful analysts on both sides of the Atlantic have already concluded, the desire among European elites to turn the death penalty into a transatlantic wedge issue is deeply rooted in leftwing ideology. Unlike in the United States, the far-left in most European countries constitutes an

important political force, and their representatives dominate wide swaths of the media, academia and a variety of influential political parties.

Not only do euro-lefties reject the death penalty in all cases (putting them at odds with a majority of their own fellow citizens), but they also oppose American-style free-market capitalism, the American concept of limited government and individual self-reliance, the American desire to promote democracy abroad, as well as the projection of American economic, political and military power around the world.

At the same time, however, they brush aside the inconvenient fact that this American power they so despise is the same power that guarantees their freedom and secures the very liberty that allows them to propagate their ideology. For Europe is unable to defend itself without American largesse. And this paradox exposes the phoniness behind European “progressive” ideology, which at base is a morally bankrupt worldview built upon a wobbly foundation of deceit, equivocation and post-modernist gobbledygook.

It also lays bare that the European left’s concern for human rights is little more than a cover for its primary objective of spreading the false religion of anti-Americanism. As Charles Krauthammer, the American political commentator, pointed out in the *Washington Post* in March 2005, going back at least to the Spanish Civil War, the left has always prided itself on being the great in-

ternational champion of freedom and human rights. And yet, when the United States removed the man responsible for torturing, gassing and killing tens of thousands of Iraqis, “the left suddenly turned into a champion of Westphalian sovereign inviolability.”

“A leftist judge in Spain orders the arrest of a pathetic, near-senile Gen. Augusto Pinochet eight years after he’s left office, and becomes a human rights hero—a classic example of the left morally grandstanding in the name of victims of dictatorships long gone. Yet for the victims of contemporary monsters still actively killing and oppressing—Khomeini and his successors, the Assads of Syria and, until yesterday, Hussein and his sons—nothing. No sympathy. No action. Indeed, virulent hostility to America’s courageous and dangerous attempt at rescue,” Krauthammer wrote.

The transatlantic values gap over the death penalty is little more than a fiction being propagated by a self-righteous European elite that refuses to face reality. And this reality is that ordinary Europeans and ordinary Americans see eye-to-eye on most issues, including capital punishment. In this context, a growing number of analysts on both sides of the Atlantic have concluded that the death penalty, like so many other wedge issues, is part of a much broader effort by European elites to conceal the reality of European moral decline by attempting to portray Europe as a moral vanguard.

America is not perfect, but at least its political system is designed in a

way that its elected officials cannot ignore the will of the electorate. If European voters would hold their elected officials to account, Ameri-

can-style, many transatlantic wedge issues, including “values gap” over capital punishment, would disappear overnight.