

EUROPEAN SON

AN INTERVIEW WITH ALAIN DE BENOIST

Bryan Sylvian conducted the following exclusive interview with Alain de Benoist, a prominent intellectual in the European New Right and a founder of the Centre for Research and Study on European Civilization (Groupement de Recherche et d'Études sur la Civilisation Européenne—GRECE). Mikayel Raffi assisted in the translation.

Few schools of thought come even close to the range and depth of the European New Right, from its Indo-European origins to the current biotech revolution and every thought current in between. This holds especially true for the dynamic core personified in one of the philosophical prime movers of France's New Right: Alain de Benoist.

The French New Right (hereafter NR) greeted the new century ready for action, and proved it by issuing a manifesto for the whole world to read. Alain de Benoist (b. 1943), along with Charles Champetier, crafted that statement, which took stock of the NR since its birth in 1968 and fashioned a weapon for future intellectual combat in response to its critical assessment of our present predicament. The NR manifesto, "The French New Right in the Year 2000," along with a biography of Alain de Benoist and a selection of his writings, can be viewed online ("Les Amis d'Alain de Benoist" <http://www.alaindebenoist.com>).

*The interview is a snippet from a much larger one that fleshes out the 2000 NR manifesto. It may also be the first exposure to the NR's outlook for many in the English-speaking world, for whom so little of the NR's output has been translated. This interview may serve as the first exposure of many in the English-speaking world to the NR's thought. For further study one might want to consult *New Culture, New Right: Anti-Liberalism in Postmodern Europe* by Michael O'Meara and *Tomislav Sunic's Against Democracy and Equality: The European New Right*.*

Readers of TOQ might want to study the NR manifesto since they too are in pursuit of the perilous Third Way (along third rails?) between "paleoconservatism" and "neoconservatism." TOQ continues to fashion its own statement of principles (which are up to ten now, many of which, in my opinion, mesh perfectly with NR beliefs). The NR has over thirty years of experience in avoiding the comfortable but irrelevant intellectual ghettos occupied by the beautiful losers, Sam Francis's description of the conservative establishment. Thus its evolution can serve as a practical guide.

In this time of struggle, the gulf that separates the United States from Europe needs to be bridged, since we share so much that is both precious and deserving of passage to future generations. Whatever dialogue results from interviews such as this one will, one hopes, forge an appreciation for a common effort that acknowledges differences (on such topics as nation-state vs. empire, racialism versus

communitarianism, etc.) but puts them into perspective in this time of both shared emergency and shared roots.

If a manifesto like this one, rooted in a particular civilization at a particular time, outlives the cultures and peoples that helped make its creation possible, that will surely be a disaster. If, on the other hand, such a manifesto brings everlasting fame to those who wrote it, to those who spread it, and to those courageous pioneers whom it helped spur to constructive action, then they would all be acting in the best of ancient Indo-European tradition.

TOQ: The French New Right, founded in 1968, published its first manifesto in 1999. What is the manifesto's background? Why did you and coauthor Charles Champetier feel the need to publish a manifesto at that time?

BENOIST: Actually, the NR published something like a manifesto in 1977, in the form of a work entitled *Dix ans de combat culturel pour une renaissance* ("Ten years of cultural struggle for a renaissance"). A second, augmented edition appeared in 1979 under the title *Pour une renaissance culturelle* ("For a cultural renaissance"). If Charles Champetier and I felt the need to publish a new manifesto, it was mainly because we wanted to draw up a balance sheet of our main theoretical accomplishments over the previous twenty years. At the same time, we were conscious that the world had changed. By 2000, not only had we passed from one century to another, but from the postwar era to a transitional period very unlike the one in which the NR was born. In other words, we have left modernity behind us and entered postmodern times.

TOQ: You seem to have accepted the term "New Right" and used it to identify your "metapolitical" think tank, even though it is the designation of your media critics and not your own. Why?

BENOIST: The label "New Right" (*Nouvelle Droite*) was actually invented by the French press in 1979, when we became the focus of an international media blitz. It is not quite accurate to say that we accepted the label from that very moment. We have rather suffered from this term, which for several reasons has always been a quite inappropriate description. Given its political connotation, it hardly does justice to a school of thought that has never sought to be a political actor. The vague and varied semantics of the word "right" also imbues it with a good deal of ambiguity. Finally, it can't be translated into English, since the "New Right" in England and the United States has really nothing in common with our own school of thought. For a time, we tried to substitute the term "New Culture," but this equally vague designation never caught on. Once the "New Right" acquired a certain currency, it seemed inescapable,

then, to accept it, although not without a certain reserve. As for myself, I try to use the term as little as possible.

TOQ: “Metapolitics” is a term rarely found in American political discourse. The NR manifesto defines it in the following way: “Metapolitics is not politics by other means. It is neither a ‘strategy’ to impose intellectual hegemony, nor an attempt to discredit other possible attitudes or agendas. It rests solely on the premise that ideas play a fundamental role in the collective consciousness and, more generally, in human history.... In a world where closed entities have given way to interconnected networks with increasingly fuzzy reference points, metapolitical action attempts, beyond political divisions and through a new synthesis, to renew a transversal mode of thought and ultimately to study all areas of knowledge in order to propose a coherent worldview. Such has been the aim for over thirty years” (*Telos* 115 [Spring 1999]). Is this a Gramscian call for the cultural revolution, which is seen as requisite for a political revolution? [Antonio Gramsci, the Italian political theorist, lived from 1891 to 1937.]

BENOIST: I think too much importance has been given to the expression “metapolitics.” In proposing a metapolitical course of action, the NR sought to carry out on a more or less collective level what theoreticians and intellectuals have always done individually. In this respect, the NR might be compared to the Frankfurt School of the 1930s and 1940s. It was also a matter of recalling that political movements are not the only things that change men’s lives, but that ideas also affect the evolution of their beliefs and behaviors. The Cartesian Revolution and the Kantian Revolution played a historical role at least as important as the French Revolution or the Industrial Revolution. Of course, metapolitics conceived in this way can also have political consequences. The French Revolution would have undoubtedly been impossible, at least in the form it took, without the work of the Encyclopedists or the Enlightenment philosophers. But these always unforeseeable political consequences occurred at a level quite different than ideas. Lenin, for example, would never have been a Marxist if Marx had not come before him, though this doesn’t mean Marx would have approved of Lenin! Think tanks, as they exist in the United States, are something else entirely. They endeavor to elaborate programs or provide ideas to politicians and political parties, which is not at all what the NR is about. Comparisons with Gramsci, which I myself have made, are also of limited value, insofar as Gramsci’s “organic intellectuals” were supposed to act in liaison with a political party (the Italian Communist party). The NR’s objective is much simpler: It seeks to propagate its ideas as widely as possible, to make its analyses known, and to facilitate the evolution of beliefs and behaviors.

Of course, one might wonder if ideas can play the same sort of role in our world as they did in the past. The time when intellectuals possessed a certain moral authority, at least in countries like France, for example, has obviously

passed. The academic world's prestige has declined to the advantage of the media's, whose forms, especially television, are ill-suited to complex thought. At the same time, it is evident that the most significant social transformations are no longer the result of politics, but of new technologies. Nevertheless, ideas retain their importance in influencing the values and value systems to which global society refers. The multiplication of networks, characteristic of our age, will likely also have a role to play in their diffusion.

TOQ: In what sense is the NR part of the right?

BENOIST: I myself having wondered many times about that, but before answering such a legitimate question, it is necessary to give a satisfactory definition of the word "right," which isn't easy. For the "right" differs from country to country and from epoch to epoch. Moreover, the right is never monolithic: There always exist several rights (as there exist several lefts) and some of these are closer to certain lefts than to the other ones on the right. Finally, many political or ideological themes and ideas have migrated in the course of history from right to left and vice versa. This makes it difficult to identify a common denominator that links all the different rights (as well as all the lefts). Many have tried to define such a denominator, but never with any unanimity, since their criteria were inevitably subjective and the exceptions too numerous.

In the last few years, the fog has only thickened. For example, if you look at all the great events of the recent period, you'll see that "transversal" cleavages have taken place in respect to traditional political affiliations. Both leftists and rightists are to be found among the supporters of European unification, just as there are leftists and rightists opposing the war in Iraq. At the same time, we are witnessing changes in electoral behavior, as more and more people vote indiscriminately, sometimes for leftist parties and sometimes for rightist parties. This suggests that the traditional basis of conventional political affiliations—whether generational, sociological, or religious—is in the process of disappearing. Today, to know that someone is "on the left" or "on the right" doesn't tell us much about how he or she really thinks on today's concrete problems. The left-right cleavage is consequently losing its operative value in defining an increasingly complex political scene. Other more interesting cleavages, related to issues of federalism, regionalism, communitarianism, secularism, etc., are beginning to replace it.

As for the NR, it has never identified itself with the traditionalist, counter-revolutionary right, nor with the fascist, Jacobin, or racist right, nor with the liberal conservative right. It has certainly drawn some lessons from the critique of Enlightenment philosophy, which has always been more common for the right than for the left. But in the matter of social criticism, it mainly refers to left-wing writers, whether on the mutualist wing of French socialism (Proudhon, Sorel, Pierre Leroux, Benoit Malon, et al.) or among the more modern "leftist"

thinkers and writers, such as Ivan Illich, André Gorz, Herbert Marcuse, Cornelius Castoriadis, Noam Chomsky, Jeremy Rifkin, Benjamin Barber, Michael Walzer, or Naomi Klein. There is nothing contradictory in this, for the NR tries to situate itself on the vanguard of the cleavages mentioned above.

TOQ: Does the NR have a presence in the English-speaking world outside the UK (i.e., outside of Michael Walker and *The Scorpion*)? What accounts for the NR's weakness in the English-speaking world?

BENOIST: The NR has never really penetrated the Anglo-Saxon world. A journal like *The Scorpion*, to which I am very sympathetic, has never been completely part of our movement. While my books have been translated into a dozen European languages, very few of my articles have appeared in English, which is undoubtedly significant. There are a few exceptions, notably *Telos*, in which a good number of my texts have appeared over the last ten or twelve years. Edited by the recently deceased Paul Piccone, *Telos* was originally a journal animated by the American disciples of the Frankfurt School (Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer). It was one of the main organs of the New Left in the 1970s, before it began opening itself up to new and more "transversal" themes which led it, for instance, to make the work of Carl Schmitt better known to the American public. It was also highly attentive to the evolution of European ideas, which distinguished it from most other American journals. The special issue *Telos* devoted to the NR (number 97-98 [Winter 1993]) is without any doubt the best English-language study to date on that subject.

But the main reason for this situation is quite possibly the paucity of culture or the lack of interest of most Englishmen and Americans in what is going on in Europe and elsewhere. It suffices to read the publications of the major academic book publishers to see that most of their references are English-language ones. Everything written in another language is more or less considered nonexistent. Generally speaking, very few European writers are translated into English. Those who escape this rule (Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, et al.) are usually the beneficiaries of certain fashions or people who have the help of some specialized networks (René Girard, Jean-François Revel, et al.). As for "French studies," which are often of high quality, they remain confined to the academic environment. With the larger public, the situation is especially bad. Outside a narrow elite, Americans don't speak foreign languages (they apparently think it is normal for others to speak their language), they are extraordinarily ignorant of matters of history and geography, and generally show only the slightest interest in the "rest of the world." As an array of recent studies shows, the vast majority of young Americans lack the most rudimentary geographical, historical, and political knowledge even of their own country. All this tends to make them quite unreceptive to NR's ideas.

But there is perhaps a more profound reason for the NR's failure to penetrate the English-speaking world. In the United States and England, intellectuals

have rarely had an important public role to play. Moreover, in contrast to German thought, Anglo-Saxon thought lacks a speculative dimension, being basically practical, if not scientific. It adores quantitative data and “case studies,” is marked by positivism and reductionism, and culminates in analytic philosophy, which, in my opinion, is the zero degree of philosophy. In such a view, politics is perceived as a matter of social engineering and “scientific” management. The political ignorance of the average American voter is also one of the best documented facts of political science (tending to confirm Anthony J. Downs’s “rational ignorance” thesis). Given its disposition to abbreviations and its impoverished structure (having neither the precision of French, the depth of German, nor the elegant beauty of Italian), it is unequipped to render certain conceptual nuances. To give a few examples: the word “people” is much flatter in substance than the French *peuple* or the German *Volk* (just as the word “soul” compares badly with *Seele*); the opposition between *être* and *étant* is only imperfectly rendered as “Being” and “being,” and it is rather difficult to express the difference (or opposition) between the law as an academic discipline (*droit*) and the law as a system of legislated rules (*loi*), given that the same word is used.

These differences between European continental thought and the American mentality are especially marked by the latter’s economic and commercial conception of the world, its omnipresent Biblical values, and its technological optimism. Life’s tragic dimension is naturally lost to this mindset. The United States has a short history which overlaps that of modernity; American civilization, moreover, has always given more importance to space than to historical time (from the “frontier” defined by Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893 as the most representative notion of the American ideal to the modern conquest of outer space). In its brief history, it has known only a single great political model, which has remained practically unchanged since the Founding Fathers. While it is always possible for a European to refer to an array of political models which have existed in the past, political discussion in America is often reduced to the comparative merits of Hamilton, Jefferson, Washington, et al. Thus, there is a general consensus on the Constitution, which is just a scrap of paper. Neither fascism nor communism has ever had any real importance in America, not to mention counterrevolutionary thought, critical Marxism, revolutionary syndicalism, etc. American political life centers on competition between the two major parties, which Europeans see as fundamentally indistinguishable. Electoral campaigns, with their circus-like conventions, are totally dependent on money. They are nothing but competitions between millionaires—since Americans think that it is quite normal that their politicians are rich, just as they think it normal that politicians publicly exhibit their women and children and fill their public discourses with religious allusions. In continental Europe, a politician who said: “God bless you!” to his supporters or who called for his

fellow legislators to observe a day of prayer and fasting would be considered, by a majority of his fellow citizens, fit for an asylum!

What is termed the “right” in the United States bears little relationship to the European right (which would be hard pressed to find the equivalent of a Jerry Falwell, a Pat Robinson, a Tim LaHaye, or a Franklin Graham). On the basis of my personal observation, I would say that the American right – in the spirit of liberalism – attributes a far greater importance to notions of individualism, concurrence, and competition than to notions of people, of friendship (in the Aristotelian sense), and of the common good. It seems to be made up of two basic tendencies. On the one side, there are the “conservatives,” who defend Christian principles, bourgeois morality, law and order, belief in the primacy of free trade, and the market. On the other, there are groups or individuals obsessed by their hatred of blacks or Jews (who frequently denounce “Jewish racism” while themselves advocating “racism,” meaning that they take as a model the very object of their phobia). The first group is made up of people who defend an economic system that destroys everything they want to conserve, while the second is made up of maniacal lunatics. I haven’t much to say to either: Though they are of course very different, they are both incapable of the slightest critical reflection on the nature and foundations of their own society.

TOQ: You say that “modernity has given birth to the emptiest civilization mankind has ever known.” Are we about to enter a Spenglerian age of Caesarism that will break the rule of money and democracy, or have we already experienced enough Caesars in the totalitarian movements of the twentieth century (Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot)?

BENOIST: Independent of the fact that I lack sympathy for any form of dictatorship, I don’t believe for a minute that we are headed toward a new era of Caesars. Twentieth century totalitarianisms, which I examine at length in *Communism et nazisme* (1998) from a perspective close to that of Hannah Arendt’s, were above all phenomena closely dependent on modernity. As Zygmunt Bauman argues, one cannot disassociate them from mass mobilization, the technical mastery that came with industrialism, and the Promethean aspiration to create a “new man.” They are each linked to modernity’s Great Narratives (the modern ideologies), which very often took the form of a secular religion: The sacrifices required by totalitarian parties were obvious substitutes for the sacrifices required in former times by religions, and ideological wars had much in common with the old religious wars. Finally, the modern era was one of political-social explosions and revolutions. With the advent of postmodernity, it is no longer explosions, but implosions, that are the rule (this is one reason that the implosion of the Soviet system marks the symbolic end of modernity). World-weariness in our age is consequently no longer one of despair or anger, but of depression. At the same time, the clash of values cedes to the play of interests. The difference here is that interests can

always be subject to negotiation, while values aren't. That's why I think Western societies are now rather governed by these "petty and vulgar pleasures" that Tocqueville described at the end of *Démocratie en Amérique*. These societies remind me also of Nietzsche's Last Man—that is, societies dominated by the reign of the mediocre, in which atomized individuals concern themselves strictly with their own private affairs, each one trying to maximize their best interest in the here and now. This is not to say that totalitarianism has disappeared; it is precisely the contrary. It has adopted new forms which are essentially technological and mediocratic. After the "hard" totalitarianism of the last century, which assaulted the body and killed people, we see the emergence of a "soft" totalitarianism based on bureaucratic procedures of total control and "consensus thinking" [*pensée unique*] dictated by the media, whose role is to instill in us the belief that we live in the best of all possible worlds and that there is no alternative to the present status quo.

TOQ: Liberalism is the NR's principal enemy. There is much semantic misunderstanding between Europe and the United States as to what liberalism is. Would you say something about its genealogy?

BENOIST: This brings us to a key point. If you ask a continental European to name a liberal politician, the first he would cite would be Ronald Reagan or Margaret Thatcher. In continental Europe a liberal is seen as belonging to that part of the "right" which is inspired by Enlightenment principles. In the United States, where Enlightenment principles constitute the main and more general historical foundation, a liberal, by contrast, is a man of the left, who, while convinced of the market's primacy, advocates state intervention to distribute and allocate the public goods (what a European calls a "social democrat" or a "progressive"). As such, Europeans class liberals among the "conservatives" or "libertarians." This difference between American and European definitions is obviously a source of great confusion.

One of liberalism's oldest roots is medieval nominalism, which, in the scholastic debates over the "question of universals," supported the position that there is nothing beyond the particular and that human societies are made up only of individuals. In this nominalist sense, liberalism rests on an individualist anthropology, which considers that man is not by nature a social being (but that he "enters into society" by the way of rational contractualism). It thus treats the individual as the basic unit of reality and the standard for every kind of evaluation. Such an individual is viewed as an atom, an "unencumbered" entity abstracted from all social or cultural context, who is supposed to draw "natural rights" from his own nature—a "nature" which allegedly antecedes social and political life. Liberalism consequently doesn't recognize the primacy of communities, peoples, or cultures. All these larger entities are seen as transitory associations that are defined only as the sum of the individuals composing them: as Jeremy Bentham writes, "the community is a fictitious body."

Communal attachments and social or cultural belongings consequently play no role in constituting the human self, which is supposed to be motivated only by the pursuit of interest (an interest always for oneself, not for another). Sociologically speaking, the liberal adheres to methodological individualism; epistemologically, to an analytic and reductionist view of the world in which the whole is nothing but the sum of its parts.

Liberalism is also an economic doctrine, which takes the “self-regulating” market as the paradigmatical model of the society. As an advocate of free trade, the liberal believes that economic life is best regulated by the market, which is treated as the most efficient, rational, and just way of harmonizing individual exchanges. The market becomes thus both the real place where goods are exchanged and the virtual entity which creates the optimal conditions for exchange, that is, the “spontaneous” adjustment of supply and demand and the level of the prices. At the same time, commercial exchange is posed as a “natural” model for other social relations. This leads the liberal to see the market as a “natural” entity that defines an order anterior to all kind of deliberations and decisions. Constituting the form of exchange that most conforms to human nature, the market is believed to have arisen with the dawn of humanity. This, however, is obviously a fiction, for in reality, the market emerged at a relatively late stage of history — all traditional societies were holistic, based on a nonmercantile system of “gifts” and “counter-gifts” — and, as Karl Polanyi has shown, rather than being a natural or spontaneous form of exchange was in most places instituted by the state.

These characteristic traits of liberal thought, with their two dimensions, descriptive and normative (individuals and markets are both described as “facts” and as models to realize), are hostile to collective identities. Exactly for the same reasons that forbid one to reduce a collective interest to a simple sum of individual interests, a collective identity cannot be analyzed in a reductionist manner that takes it as the simple addition of its individual components. A collective identity is rather the result of an effect of composition, on whose basis can be defined the common good (not only in the sense that this good benefits all the individual parts of the collectivity, but also in the sense that this good is the good of a whole of which everybody is a part). To the degree, then, that liberalism rests on individualistic premises, it undermines or destroys all social bonds which go beyond the individual. As for the market’s optimal functionality, it implies that nothing ought to limit the free circulation of men and merchandise, which cannot but contribute to the dissolution of organic social structures and shared values. As Adam Smith noted in a famous passage, the merchant belongs to no particular country; every time he considers that his “best interest” is elsewhere, he will leave his country and take his capital with him abroad.

In the liberal view of the world, society is only the product of individual will and choices, a mere collection of individuals egoistically searching to

satisfy their particular interests. This society can be seen as the result of an initial voluntary and rational decision (the fiction of the “social contract”) or as the unintended consequence of the systemic interaction of individual agents, guided by the “invisible hand” of the market. The liberal analysis of society rests, then, either on a contractual approach (Locke), or a supposed “invisible hand” (Smith), or a social model which develops itself spontaneously, without having to be decided by any human project (Hayek). It is exactly this model of man and society that the NR resists.

TOQ: You say in your manifesto that modernity’s theory of the *tabula rasa* denies human nature. What is the relation between the NR’s view of man and the view informed by sociobiology? Specifically, you write of a people’s “hereditary predisposition to certain aptitudes and modes of behavior” and the limits on individual autonomy and plasticity that enable human beings to “resist political and social conditioning.” Could you be more specific? What is the human biological legacy and how does it affect political culture?

BENOIST: Enlightenment philosophers such as Condorcet or Helvetius believed man was born a blank slate—that all his traits were due to environmental influences. They nevertheless believed in “human nature,” but it was a disembodied, pre-political, abstract nature which they needed for their theory of rights, a conception completely alien to Aristotle’s view that man is inherently social and political. This belief in all-powerful environmental influences has been adopted by most theoreticians of the ideology of progress, which envisage the man of the future as inevitably better because his environment will have been improved (a theme whose optimistic belief in progress is shared by certain Social Darwinists, like Herbert Spencer). At the scientific level, the theory of the *tabula rasa* was adopted by the Lamarckian theory of the heredity of acquired characteristics, a theory that culminated in the Soviet Union with Trofim D. Lysenko. Such a theory—which has recently been criticized by Steven Pinker (*The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, New York, 2002)—has ceased to be tenable. Human nature exists, but it has nothing to do with the idea fabricated by the eighteenth century *philosophes*. Environment plays a role, but is far from being omnipotent. The development of the life sciences shows, every day, the reality of the biological and genetic components of human beings. These components seriously limit the plasticity of human nature. However, they do not suppress it completely. The notions of free will and liberty retain a meaning that cannot be eradicated.

The rise of genetics, neuroscience, evolutionary biology, ethology, sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, etc. has been invaluable in putting man back into the general scheme of evolutionary development. But the conclusions, more ideological than scientific, that some scientists or writers have drawn from these new sciences have led them to excesses which deserve to be criticized as much as the ones they want to correct. While the theoreticians of the blank slate

denied all genetic determination, others believe today that genetics explains everything. Konrad Lorenz once told me during a stay at his residence in Altenberg, Austria: "If you say man is an animal, you're right. But if you say he is nothing but an animal, you're wrong." This is my position. Today, the neo-Darwinian theory offers the most satisfactory explanation for intraspecific evolution and sexual selection (though the exact mechanisms of interspecific evolution have, in my view, not been identified with complete satisfaction), but it remains open to quite different interpretations. A great many English-speaking researchers have a tendency to reduce man to his biological components, and then to convert biological facts into economic terms: One only needs to read the recent literature of the sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists to see that for them almost everything is a matter of costs and benefits, of investments and interests, etc. This reductionist approach tends to ignore the radically new properties that emerge at different levels (just as the properties of water can be found in neither of its elements, oxygen nor hydrogen). The fact that man is an animal, that he shares more than 98 percent of his genetic material with chimpanzees and bonobos, says nothing about those specifically human characteristics which have emerged in the evolutionary process and which radically distinguish man from other animals.

Above all, man, unlike animals, is not "fixed." His instincts are relatively nonspecific (the animal knows instinctually what to eat and what not, but man does not). He may be the site of certain biological determinisms, but these are so numerous and contradictory that a good part of him remains undetermined: Human nature is expressed in certain aptitudes, propensities, and potentialities, not in rigid programs. The chimpanzee and the bonobo lack a syntactic language, a reflective consciousness (the conscience of their own conscience), and a metaphoric and symbolic system of thought. Man is also preeminently a hermeneutical creature: the only one capable of phenomenological interpretation; the sole one never to be satisfied with what he knows, but who constantly reexamines and interprets his knowledge with the aim of satisfying the needs of his symbolic imagination; the only creature obliged, as Rousseau says, to "give a meaning to the word 'to be.'" (That's why I disagree completely with what Hume and others said about the "naturalistic fallacy": For man, facts and values can never be completely separated). Likewise, man is the sole animal who not only lives in the world, but who ceaselessly creates new ones. He is the sole animal who can consciously and persistently adopt antiselective behaviors, that is, oppose "natural selection" (which means that "natural selection" has also selected, in the human realm, the possibility of antiselective behaviors). He is the sole animal, as Aristotle noted, who wants to be something more than an animal. He is the sole animal who possesses a history, the only animal whose infinite capacity for historical change constitutes his destiny. He is the sole animal capable of revering and expressing desires that are not purely natural needs, the only one who is conscious of his finitude, the sole animal, finally, who is

capable of eroticism. Human existence has an obvious biological basis, but human specificity is a social-historical one.

With some justice, Heidegger says “science does not think.” By this he means that science leaves things at the point where it is necessary to begin: Science, in other words, enunciates facts, but “to think” is not only to know or be familiar with the facts, it is also to signify and interpret them. Ontology in this sense always exceeds epistemology, for man’s world is first of all an existential structure based on *Dasein*. Like Heidegger, I am not a positivist. I think that evolution is as much a matter of cooperation as a matter of competition and that everything is not simply the result of selective pressures. Nor do I believe for a moment in Richard Dawkins’s theory of the “selfish gene”: If man were merely a vehicle for his genes, how could you explain the fact that he behaves so often in ways contrary to his genes’ interests? Man does not live solely to assure the perpetuation of his genetic material. (And if you consider that everything is formed from atoms and molecules, why stop at genes?) I also have doubts about the very notion of “natural laws,” for the simple reason that man can violate them: To what degree is a law “natural” when this law doesn’t impose itself “naturally”? Biology and genetics furnish very useful statistical data, but humankind is also extremely polymorphous. I am quite ready to admit, following William D. Hamilton’s theory of kin selection (1964), that the individual is statistically more likely to sacrifice himself for someone with whom he is genetically related rather than for someone with whom he has no genetic relation, but that hasn’t prevented thousands of people from sacrificing themselves everyday for people with whom they have no genetic relationship or, to take the opposite track, thousands of children from being killed by their biological parents. Biology explains evolution over long periods very well, but much less easily rapid changes, political revolutions, or mentalities that change within homogeneous populations in short periods of time. It can probably explain why Shakespeare had the capacity to write *Hamlet*, but can it explain why Shakespeare wrote what he did in *Hamlet* and not something else? If genetic determinism were sufficient for understanding the human condition, history would be completely predictable—though in fact it is completely unpredictable and always open. The autopoietic complexity of man’s world explains the persistence of uncertainty, including that of science.

Let me ask a question to conclude. At the very moment when biotechnology poses the possibility of imbuing man with a “new nature,” hasn’t the old nature-nurture debate already in part been transcended?

TOQ: You advocate a society grounded in local communities, with strong cultural ties. Shouldn’t all immigration to Europe be stopped so that a “return to communities” can begin?

BENOIST: It would certainly be desirable if immigration were halted, for it constitutes a forcible process of uprooting—for the immigrant as well as for the populations subject to it. This uprooting has its origins in the logic of liberal capitalism, which promotes the idea that searching for one's immediate material interest is more important than retaining one's cultural identity and that national borders ought not to obstruct the circulation of merchandise or peoples. In Europe, it is the employer class [*le patronat*] that was the first to organize immigration so as to gain access to foreign labor forces—a reserve army of labor—which kept wages low. Employers are also the ones who benefit the most from illegal immigration. Whoever, then, criticizes immigration without mentioning capitalism would do better to keep his mouth shut. Everything, though, that can be done to slow the rhythm of immigration, if not put an end to it, would be welcome. But it would be unrealistic to believe that immigrants who are already here will decide to leave or that it would be possible to oblige them to leave. That's why I think that it would be better to abandon the Jacobin logic of assimilation, which knows only abstract individuals and restricts cultural identities and religious liberties to the private sphere, and to adopt a real policy of recognition of communities in the public sphere. To use an American expression, I still prefer the salad bowl to the melting pot. To make the end of immigration the requisite to a "return to communities" would condemn us to an endless wait. It would be better to reorganize political society so as to favor a renewal of communal life for both the host population and the immigrant populations, without assimilation or apartheid.

TOQ: In the debates between those who defend the nation-state and those who advocate a European imperium, the NR comes down firmly on the side of the imperial or federalist principle, which organizes communities up through intermediate levels of subsidiarity to the rulers. Peter Brimelow mentions in *Alien Nation: Common Sense about America's Immigration Disaster* (New York: Random House, 1995): "In nine surveys since 1955, no more than 13 percent of Americans have ever said they wanted immigration increased; recently, the proportion has been as low as 4 percent. But immigration has nevertheless increased. There could be no sharper contrast between what America wanted and what it got" (p. 95). How would the application of your imperial principle remedy this disparity between the will of the people and the will of the rulers in respect to immigration?

BENOIST: Allow me to point out that immigration continues even where the public powers have taken drastic measures to stem it. That is to say, in formulating the question you have already given its answer. The best way to close the gap separating the people's aspirations and the agenda of the New Class—that is, the best way of solving the problem of political representation—would be to install at every level of society, beginning from the bottom, new

democratic procedures of consultation, discussion, and decision. It is a matter of correcting the failures of parliamentary and representative democracy by creating a real system of participatory democracy. This is the basis of subsidiarity, which allows people to decide as much as possible by themselves in those affairs that concern themselves, by assuming the responsibilities and consequences of their choices, and by leaving to higher levels of authority only those decisions that interest the larger collectivity and cannot be made elsewhere. A solution to the crisis of political representation will certainly not come about by withdrawing to the private sphere, which liberals define as the natural site of liberty, because they define liberty as that part of human existence that can be subtracted from public life. On the contrary, the only possible solution is to be found in a revitalization of citizenship that permits everyone to participate in public life.

TOQ: In your manifesto, you mention that the twenty-first century will be characterized by the development of a multipolar world based on the world's different civilizations: European, North American, South American, Arabic-Muslim, Chinese, Indian, Japanese, etc. These civilizations will not supplant local, tribal, or national identities, but will be constituted as the ultimate collective form with which individuals are able to identify (*Telos* 115 [Spring 1999]). Have you examined the restrictive immigration policies of these different civilizational regions and compared them to European and American policies?

BENOIST: The collapse of the Soviet system put an end to the binary world system established at Yalta. With this, the United States has become the sole existing superpower. The foreign policy of this superpower, now faced with serious domestic problems and a declining economy (its share of world commerce continues to fall, it consumes more than it produces, and its deficits have reached historically unprecedented levels), consists in trying to perennialize its hegemonic position by seizing control of the world's oil resources (Iraq and Afghanistan) and by preventing the emergence of any kind of potential rivals in Europe, China, and elsewhere.

Against this backdrop, the question arises as to whether globalization, which is essentially a process of turning the world into an immense market — the substitution of a single unified economic space for a plurality of distinct political societies — will take a unipolar or multipolar form. I, of course, favor a pluralistic world, a *pluriversum*, which reconstitutes the world around a certain number of great continental blocs. Only the advent of a multipolar world will preserve human and cultural diversity and regulate globalization in a way not exclusively favorable to the interests of a single dominant power. I do not believe in Huntington's clash-of-civilizations thesis: Civilizations are not unitary or homogeneous blocs and no miracle will turn them into the principal agents of international relations. From this perspective, Europe is the ally of whoever refuses America's commercial, technological, and military imperial-

ism. To reduce this problem to a comparison of immigration policies would be tantamount to taking the part for the whole. If Third World countries often struggle more effectively than Western ones against immigration, it is both because the problem there is less significant and because these countries have not completed their transition to modernity. The modern world is a globalized one, where controls are more difficult to exercise, because borders do not stop anything anymore and, above all, no longer represent a guarantee of securing cultural identities. A policy favoring more restrictive immigration would entail, then, greater cooperation with the immigrants' countries of origin.

TOQ: At what level of your personal identity (you have said that you consider yourself a Norman, then a Frenchman, and finally a European) would you place being a "white man," or does this term hold no meaning for you?

BENOIST: Human races exist, since in certain domains racial affiliation can have a statistically predicative value. Therefore, it's not insignificant if one belongs to one race rather than to another, just as it's not insignificant if one is tall or short, or belongs to the human species rather than to the baboons or the beetles. But this does not imply that such biological data are key to comprehending the whole of human history. One can recognize the importance of the economy without wanting to reduce everything to an economic factor. One can even recognize the reality of race without using it to explain everything. The recognition of ethnic factors explains practically nothing in the *internal* history of populations, for this history is based upon the social-historical specificity of human existence. It is not "race" that allows me to understand why the Renaissance evolved into the industrial era, or the system of honor into the system of dignity, why the symbol of the apple has a different meaning for Celts and for Slavs, why the Soviet Union collapsed, or how medieval nominalism contributed to the birth of modern individualism. It's not "race" that tells me if Machiavelli was right and Hobbes wrong, or the contrary, if monarchy is superior to a republic, what value the neo-Kantianism of the Marburg school has, or if one should prefer the philosophy of Aristotle to that of Plato. It's not "race" that helps me determine how I should politically discriminate between a friend and an enemy, or what criteria I should use to define the common good. One can multiply these examples to infinity. Races, like civilizations, are not political actors. To privilege racial factors to the detriment of all others is one of the innumerable ways of being ideologically hemiplegic.

TOQ: Judaism has been characterized as having separatist, ethnocentrist, and misanthropic tendencies. Tacitus describes Jewish ethnocentrism as follows: "among themselves they are inflexibly honest and ever ready to show compassion, though they regard the rest of mankind with all the hatred of enemies" (*Histories*, 5.2-5). These Jewish characteristics have continued down to the present, as Kevin MacDonald argues in his trilogy. Separatist, ethnocentric ideologies are

also increasingly evident among non-European ethnic groups in the United States — blacks and Latinos, for example. Is it reasonable to suppose that a European imperium could be composed of subgroups devoted to a separatist, ethnocentric ideology and a hatred of outsiders? Wouldn't it be difficult for an imperium to keep peace among such groups? Aren't there at least some advantages to homogenization and a common culture?

BENOIST: Ethnocentrism is not distinct to the Jews. All the world's peoples have manifested it in diverse degrees. Ethnocentrism is especially marked in children, before they learn to build themselves through a relationship with the Other, and among threatened minorities who have the feeling of living in a hostile environment. But it can also be present among majority populations: Western civilization has never ceased to rank cultures and peoples, always placing itself at the top of the pyramid. It is, indeed, the sole civilization to have theorized racism. It is also the sole one to have tried to convert the rest of the world, through its military, missionaries, and merchants (the "three m's"), to its model, implying that it was the best. Its ethnocentrism thus takes the form of a universalism. It is my conviction that every universalism is essentially a latent or masked ethnocentrism.

Ethnocentrism can only be condemned, for it arises from a subjectivist metaphysics that confuses identity (or belonging) with truth. It would be an error, though, to believe it automatically leads to "separatism." The recognition of differences is now a requisite to living together in a globalized world in which no Western nation is any longer "homogeneous." Of course, such a recognition demands reciprocity and respect for the common law. Federal or imperial policies are the best suited to the coexistence of diverse populations, because such policies do not force different peoples into the same mold, but deter separatist tendencies by generalizing the principle of autonomy — that is, in establishing a flexible dialectic between the necessity of unity in decision and respecting the diversity of the communities.

Kevin MacDonald's work on the way Jews have adopted a collective evolutionary strategy is certainly interesting. Such a strategy, reinforced by endogamy, is anchored in a very strong orthopraxy (in Jewish religion, common practice is more important than individual belief itself). However, my opinion is that the specificity of Judaism lies elsewhere, specifically in the way its ethnocentrism is legitimated in reference to a universalism (one God, but a Chosen People). Another of Judaism's distinctions is its view of transcendence, which desacralizes the cosmos and leads to a vast movement of "disenchantment" (*Entzauberung*) of the world. Finally, Jewish specificity is evident in its moral view of the world, which sees it as "unjust," that is, morally defective, and hence as something which has to be "repaired" (*tikkun*). Another defining trait is the importance Judaism attributes to intellectual study, to cognitive powers, to the exclusion of all other qualities. That's why Jews can feel themselves at ease in

the contemporary world, which ranks cognitive powers above all others, and tends to consider IQ the best criterion of human value.

TOQ: Why have the various “far right” nationalist parties, say in France, Italy, Austria, the Netherlands, etc., experienced only limited success and failed to rival the “mainstream” parties, especially given the high levels of immigration and immigrant crime?

BENOIST: Their success is limited because, apart from their critique of immigration, they differ little from the other parties. They are essentially protest parties, collections of malcontents. The social pathologies born of immigration are, of course, undeniable. In France, which has 60,000 prisoners out of a population of 60 million (which is proportionally far less than the 2 million prisoners held in the United States), 60 percent of crime is committed by immigrants or their offspring. (This figure is an estimate because French law prohibits statistics that mention ethnic and religious affiliation.) Nevertheless, if the majority of criminals are immigrants, the vast majority of immigrants are not. In addition, crime rates among immigrants are generally higher than those in their native countries (just as black crime is higher in the United States than in black Africa, which indicates that genetic factors are not the sole cause). The rise of populist parties that make immigration their war horse has everywhere provoked a resurgence of “anti-fascism,” which is as obsolete as fascism itself, but this rise has done nothing to lower the crime rate. The most powerful of the anti-immigrant parties, the National Front of Jean-Marie Le Pen, managed a few years ago to gain control of several important municipal governments in the south of France. The number of immigrants in these cities was exactly the same before and after.

TOQ: In an interview with *The Economist* (November 16, 2002), Le Pen said: “The greatest challenge is demographic. The countries of the north — the world of the white man, or let’s say the nonblack world — have an ageing population. They are rich, and they are facing a third world of 5 billion people, maybe more tomorrow, who are very young and dynamic. This dynamism will be transformed into immigration.” Although the NR manifesto states that immigration is an “undeniably negative phenomenon” and that it favors “policies restrictive of immigration,” the NR and the National Front are not allies; you, for example, have repeatedly distanced yourself from Le Pen and his scapegoat logic. What are your views on the first round of presidential voting on April 21, 2002, and particularly on Le Pen’s showing in the second round, in which he got 16.9 percent of the vote?

BENOIST: If I have criticized the National Front, it’s simply because I don’t share its ideas. To believe (and to make believe) all problems would automatically be solved by ending immigration is obviously counterfactual. In making immigration the pivot of its political discourse, the National Front condemns itself to being

the party of xenophobia and exclusion, which means it will never obtain power. There is little doubt that immigration is a problem, but it is not responsible for the loss of French identity. Rather, it's the previous loss of their identity that makes the French unable to understand why immigrants want to maintain their own. The main reason for the dissolution of identities in our world is the logic of commerce, which eradicates any kind of symbolic guarantee in the exchanges; the result is the disappearance of all identitarian references beyond material consumption and the logic of monetary benefits. The National Front is also a nationalist, antifederalist, antiregionalist, anti-European Jacobin party. On all these counts I oppose it.

Le Pen's second place finish in the presidential vote of April 2002 was due to the left's fragmentation. The great number of left and radical left candidates for the presidency prevented the socialist Lionel Jospin from winning the votes he would otherwise have obtained. This enabled Jacques Chirac to triumph easily in the second round of voting, though he didn't get as many votes as in the first one. Le Pen had no chance of winning, especially in a system in which positions of power are determined in advance. I doubt if he will ever win more votes in the future.

TOQ: You are famous for your anti-Americanism ("Alain de Benoist's Anti-Americanism," *Telos* 98–99 [Winter 1993–94]). Why can't you make a distinction between the early American republic and its modern descendant? You once said that "you remain to be convinced that the most celebrated works of the Founding Fathers have much political relevance" ("Three Interviews of Alain de Benoist," *Telos*, *ibid.*). Paul Piccone and Gary Ulmen have wondered why you fail to acknowledge that "the US is still rooted in many of the communitarian and federalist traditions of the American Revolution, [that it] has been able to resist Jacobinism much better than the rest of Europe, and remains a much more open society than most of the rest of the world" ("Introduction," *Telos* 117 [Fall 1999]). Are you saying that you would not have joined the European noblemen who fought for American liberty?

BENOIST: I am not an Americophobe, the main reason being that I have a horror of all phobias. But you are right to say that I frequently criticize America. Naturally, I appreciate the federalist and communitarian traditions of American political life, which you are correct in stressing. But these traditions contain other, more questionable aspects. The thought of the Founding Fathers was mainly inspired by Enlightenment philosophy, which implies contractualism, the "language of rights," and a belief in progress. With some justice, Christopher Lasch has said that the suppression of roots in the United States has always been seen as the main precondition of expanding freedoms. This negative attitude towards the past is quite typical of liberal thought. The United States was born from a will to break with Europe. The first immigrant communities wanted to free themselves, which meant, in effect, freeing them-

selves from European rules and principles. On this basis, there arose a society which Ezra Pound characterized as “a purely commercial civilization.” Pound’s characterization accords with that of Tocqueville, who claimed: “The passions that animate Americans are commercial, not political ones, for they have carried into their politics the habits of trade.”

The first immigrants wanted not only to break with Europe. They wanted to create a new society that would regenerate the whole world. They sought a new Promised Land which would become the model of a Universal Republic. This Biblical theme, which lies at the center of Puritan thought, has, since the age of the Founding Fathers, been a recurring motif in American history. Based on the notion that America was from its very beginning divinely chosen to be an “elect” nation, this sense of “election” underlies its “civic religion” and its “exceptionalism.” John Winthrop, the first governor of Massachusetts, said: “We will be like a city on the hill, all the eyes of the world will be on us.” For George Washington, the United States was a New Jerusalem, “conceived by Providence to be the theater in which man attains his real stature.” Thomas Jefferson defined it as “a universal nation in pursuit of indisputable universal ideas.” John Adams saw it as a pure and virtuous republic whose destiny was to govern the world and to perfect mankind. This messianic vocation later took the form of Manifest Destiny, which John O’Sullivan proclaimed in 1839; America’s mission, he claimed, was to bring its way of life, the best conceivable, to the rest of the world. In 1823, James Monroe presented the country’s first foreign policy doctrine as if it were a testament of Providence. Nearly all his successors have done likewise. In 1996, Jesse Helms was still saying that America must be an example to the rest of the world. Foreign relations, then, are only conceived as a way of diffusing the American ideal to the whole Earth. Because they see their society as better than any other, the Americans feel not the slightest need to learn about others, and feel it’s up to others to adopt their way of life. It shouldn’t be surprising, then, that setbacks in U.S. foreign policy are often the result of this profound inability to imagine that other peoples could think differently than Americans do. In fact, for a great many Americans, the outside world simply doesn’t exist, or exists only insofar as it is Americanized and thus made comprehensible to them. Given such a perspective, isolationism and the crusader spirit are simply two sides of the same coin, for they are both based on the belief in a Manichean moral world—a belief fostered by America’s specific blend of politics and religion. Such a millennial vocabulary, positing a binary world divided between the forces of Good and the “axis of Evil,” can be routinely used in any circumstance.

Since the end of the Soviet system, America’s will to hegemony has been even more brutally affirmed. The election of George W. Bush, a truly “born again” moron easily manipulated by his entourage of neoconservative Israelophiles and Protestant fundamentalists, has led to the adoption of a new strategic doctrine legitimizing preventative war, which international law has always

considered a form of aggression. The illegal as well as illegitimate attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq (and perhaps Iran tomorrow) were the first consequences of this new doctrine, whose principal effect has been to sow chaos, terrorism, and civil war in those parts of the world. This represents a return of Teddy Roosevelt's policy of the "Big Stick," applied between 1903 and 1908. At the same time, the United States has adopted an unqualified unilateralism that reduces its allies to vassals. After having supported Islamist movements for decades, it is now encouraging Islamophobia, as a way of creating a new devil to replace the Soviets' defunct "evil empire." It claims to be fighting "international terrorism," but this terrorism is actually an offshoot of its policies in the Middle East and elsewhere. Not content with flooding the world with its cretinizing "cultural" products, it has become the principal force for the brutalization of international relations.

I think I am familiar with the United States. I frequently visit it and have spent several extended stays there. I've crisscrossed it from Washington to Los Angeles, from New Orleans to Key Largo, from San Francisco to Atlanta, from New York to Chicago. Of course, many things there have been to my liking. Americans are a hospitable people, even if their human relations are often superficial. They have an undisputable sense of community. Their great universities have facilities which Europeans can only dream of. I won't forget either the influence that American cinema has had on me at a time where it was still not reduced to stereotypical stupidities or "spectacular" special effects, or that of America's great literature (Mark Twain, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, John Steinbeck, Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, William Faulkner, et al.). But I have also seen the other side of the "American way of life": a culture conceived as merchandise or entertainment, a technomorphic conception of existence which turns man into an extension of his remote control or computer monitor, the detestable relations between the genders, the automobile civilization and the commercial architecture (there is more real sociality in any African rural market than in a supermarket, this typical symbol of Western nihilism), obese children raised by television, an obsession with consumption and success (the "winners"), the so-frequent absence of an inner life, junk food, technical optimism (it's necessary to be positive, in the end everything will work out, because there is a technical solution for everything), the mélange of Puritanical prohibitions and hysterical transgressions, of hypocrisy and corruption, etc. All this, of course, is said in haste, at the risk of being unjust. But it is nevertheless true that this America—the America of "golden boys" as well as "rednecks," of bodybuilders and bimbos, of the "American Dream" and majorettes, of money makers and Wall Street brokers—I have no sympathy for. The United States is frequently depicted as a free country ("the land of the free"). I've found, as far as I am concerned, that it is one of the least free, beset with a conformism that already struck Tocqueville. You flatter yourself

to think it is an “open society.” But if it is so good to be “open,” why then do you worry about immigration?

No, quite probably, I would not have been on the side of the liberal Marquis de La Fayette, whose engagement in America proved disastrous for France. Instead, I would have readily defended the massacred and hounded Indians or taken the side of the admirable Irish people in their struggle against English genocidal policies. There have always been good causes to serve in the history of humanity. I am not sure the American Revolution was one of them.

TOQ: Does the term “Occident” have as negative a connotation for you as the “West”?

BENOIST: Etymologically, “Occident” (*Abendland*, in German) is the place where the sun sets, where things come to completion, where history is terminated. In the past, this term designated one (*pars occidentalis*) of the two empires born of the Roman Empire’s dismemberment. It subsequently became synonymous with “Western civilization.” Today, as with much else, it has taken on an economic coloration: Occidental countries are above all the “developed” countries. It is not a term I use in a positive sense. In my eyes, the Occident – in contrast to “Europe” – represents globally a nihilistic model of society. I have traveled widely in the world. I have seen what happens when deeply rooted cultures are touched by the “Occident”: Their traditions are transformed into folklore for tourists, their social bonds are destroyed, their behavior becomes utilitarian and self-interested, American music and films model their minds, a passion for money submerges all else.

The term “Occident” also often refers to the ensemble made up of the United States and Europe. But this ensemble, to the degree it ever existed, is already in the process of breaking apart, as Immanuel Wallerstein has recently noted (“Does the Western World Still Exist?” <<http://fbc.binghamton.edu>>). The transatlantic gap deepens every day. In exacerbating competition, globalization is revealing profound differences between European and American interests. From a geopolitical perspective, the United States is a maritime power and Europe a continental one: the logic of sea and land being inherently at odds. I am not an “Occidental,” but a European.

Bryan Sylvian conducted this interview, posing the questions in English; Alain de Benoist’s responses were in French. Mikayel Raffi and Bryan Sylvian translated the latter. Bryan Sylvian is a Ph.D. candidate at UCLA. He resides in the San Gabriel Valley of Southern California.
