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Ithaca, New York 14850-2599

FAX COVER SHEET

DATE: December 3, 1996

TO: Brian Lamb

FAX#: 202/737-3323

FROM:

Number of pages including the cover sheet (2)

MESSAGE (please print):

In response to your "softball" interview of Mr. Bork
on "Booknotes," please note copy of letters to the
editor, "The 'Cultural Arrogance' of Eurocentrism."
I am a C-Span 'fan!'

O-BK

Source: *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 11/8/96

LETTERS

The 'Cultural Arrogance' of Eurocentrism

To THE EDITOR:

As a European American, by ethnicity, I am offended and frightened by the cultural arrogance expressed in the excerpt from Robert H. Bork's new book, *Slouching Toward Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline* (Eerdmans, October 11). Judge Bork starts out by stating that it is he "who other cultures are equal to the culture of the West." Translating that from the negative to the positive, I understand him to mean that Western culture is superior to other cultures. But he takes a much more radical position than cultural superiority when he goes on to suggest that Western culture is the only viable culture: "If the legitimacy of Eurocentric standards is denied, there is nothing else."

I am surprised at Judge Bork's lack of knowledge of history. Like all major world cultures, Western civilization developed by assimilating ideas from many other cultures. In my opinion, the vitality of the United States today is based on the creative interaction among the many cultures of its citizens.

Judge Bork referred to the "static societies of Asia and Africa." I would remind him that China built a great civilization and became static only when its leaders became convinced that their civilization was superior to all others and cut their people off from interaction with other, "barbaric" cultures. Is this what Judge Bork had in mind for America?

To THE EDITOR:

I must thank *The Chronicle* for printing the short excerpt from Robert H. Bork's new book. For it made me aware of just how distorted and narrowly self-serving a conservative interpretation of American history can become. It makes me shudder to think that this man could have become a Supreme Court justice!

Just as when exclusionist ideologues defended the Jim Crow laws and denied Asians the vote in the early part of this century, the moral bankruptcy of his views will doom such shrill attempts to demonize multiculturalism. Is this the brand of exclusivist, "Eurocentric" history he and other like thinkers wish to teach our children? . . . Sorry, Mr. Bork, you cannot lightly push aside profoundly influential social movements like Communism and Fascism as non-European aberrations. If you consider European culture as some sort of standard-bearing ideal, then you should at least have the intellectual integrity to include all of European culture: imperialism, colonialism, modern warfare, mass destruction of the environment, wholesale genocide of entire peoples, hundreds of millions ruthlessly killed in two world wars, and so on. Your Disney view of American history is a whitewash, and the first to tell you this would be most educated Europeans today.

appalled by many aspects of contemporary European culture and society. You would find the socialism of most European countries abhorrent, the cultural sensualism disgusting, and the religious secularism a cause for great moral concern. In reality, American culture long ago embraced distinctive values that differed profoundly from European values. European visitors to America in the turn of the century regularly expressed their surprise at how different American culture and society were from theirs. In a fascinating essay written in the 1920s, the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung . . . concluded that even though the majority of immigrants at that time were from Europe, American culture was profoundly influenced by the African and Native American elements in society.

By the 1930s African music and art were already exercising a strong influence in Europe and in other parts of the world—to the chagrin of Hitler—and only the most virulent Eurocentrist would attempt to deny the fundamentally African-American nature of modern American music. In fact, a good deal of what you consider "European," Mr. Bork, is either not European at all, or has been profoundly influenced by other cultures. Much that we consider great in 20th-century European art, for example, has been taken from African and Asian art. I suspect, however, that your vision of Eurocentrism does not include the Europe of the 20th century.

Instead of the barbarism you rhetorically attribute to multiculturalism, it would be much easier to provide a convincing characterization of the 20th century as the age of Eurocentric barbarism. Multiculturalism is destructive only insofar as it aggressively eliminates the warped, racist, Eurocentric interpretation of American history. Multiculturalism acknowledges openly the wide-ranging influence of Europe in American history, in particular in areas like

law, but it eliminates Eurocentrism by recognizing—and celebrating—the equally important contributions of African, Asian, and Native American cultures.

Unlike the destructive, exclusionary nature of Eurocentrism, multiculturalism is inclusive by nature. It teaches that numerous cultures have contributed fundamentally to that which is American. Rather than teaching millions of Americans of non-European heritage that they are somehow of lesser value than Europeans, multiculturalism presents the sweeping panorama of American history with comprehensive, truthful accuracy.

We should see Bork's shrill voice for what it is, as yet another attempt to incite discord and division in a time of sweeping social change in American history.

Commission on Race
Pennsylvania State University
University Park, Pa.

To THE EDITOR:

The excerpt from Robert H. Bork's book will certainly appeal to some people of European descent and erage some not of European descent, who are still ignorant of the real nature of multiculturalism in the United States. Fortunately for Bork, there is no one definition of multiculturalism, so that he is free to impute to multiculturalism all the ridiculous ideas stated in the excerpt.

There is no doubt that American culture today is dominantly Eurocentric. But that does not necessarily imply that it should remain so, except to undisciplined reactionaries of European descent. Necessity, rather than culture, is the mother of invention and migration, and human nature is the fount of both domination and reciprocity. It is erroneous to attribute superiority of ideas to any particular

Continued on Page B10



THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

WEEKLY LETTERS

"You know we've been coming here for too long when the fortune cookies make racist references."