

Global survey reveals growing economic hardship, opposition to US

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What the World Thinks in 2002—How Global Publics View: Their Lives, Their Countries, The World, America, the survey released December 4 by the Pew Research Center, is an eye-opening document in a number of respects. Prepared by a thoroughly establishment body, whose chief advisor is the former US secretary of state Madeleine Albright, the poll reveals growing worldwide economic hardship and political discontent. Eleven years after the dissolution of the USSR and the supposed final triumph of the profit system, the researchers report that “almost all national publics view the fortunes of the world as drifting downward.”

What the World Thinks in 2002, the first publication in the *Pew Global Attitudes Project*, was compiled on the basis of 38,000 interviews carried out in 44 countries over a four-month period (July-October 2002). In November researchers conducted a special six-nation survey on attitudes toward a possible US war with Iraq.

The *Pew Global Attitudes Project's* International Advisory Board contains not only Albright, but the former Canadian Liberal cabinet minister Lloyd Axworthy; Leslie Gelb, president of the Council on Foreign Relations; John J. Sweeney, president of the AFL-CIO; Desmond Tutu, Anglican Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town, South Africa; Kenneth Roth of Human Rights Watch and Henry Kissinger, the former Secretary of State.

The survey appears to reflect, at least in part, the anxiety of those sections of the ruling elite concerned that the reckless policies pursued by the Bush administration are hardening global opposition to America and destabilizing long-established political relationships. Indeed the report's first sentence notes pointedly that “discontent with the United States has grown around the world over the past two years [i.e., since the installation of George W. Bush].”

The survey organizers rarely give any indication as to the social background or occupation of those they interviewed. In the manner of bourgeois pollsters, they choose to treat the “national publics” as though they were not divided along social class lines. Nonetheless, from the character of the answers, which reveal on a number of issues (attitudes toward the military, the media, political figures, etc.), a politically moderate or even conservative coloring, one can infer that they did not speak to the more oppressed, much less ideologically radicalized, elements. The results, which must be disturbing to the various ruling elites, are all the more striking.

The headline carried by the survey's 11-page summary, “Global Gloom and Growing Anti-Americanism,” accurately encapsulates the researchers' findings. “As 2002 draws to a close, the world is not a happy place,” write the report's authors. “In all but a handful of societies, the public is unhappy with national conditions. The economy is the number one national concern volunteered by the more than 38,000 respondents interviewed.”

In the section of the report devoted to the respondents' attitudes toward their own lives, economic difficulty was named as the most pressing personal problem in 40 of the 44 nations surveyed. Nearly half of

American and British respondents mention economic problems most often, as do four-in-ten Canadians and French. In some so-called “middle-income countries,” such as Argentina, Turkey and Russia, as many people cite financial woes as in many of the most impoverished nations of Africa and Asia. The figures are stark: 92 percent of Bulgarians point to economic problems as the most pressing issue in their lives, 90 percent of Ghanaians; 84 percent of Indonesians, 85 percent of Russians, 86 percent of Kenyans; 81 percent of Venezuelans; 75 percent of Indians, and so on.

Issues related to economic hardship are also harsh realities in millions of lives. Six-in-ten Angolans cite health problems (the AIDS epidemic) as most important, and 28 percent refer to the lack of clean drinking water. In Bangladesh 47 percent of those interviewed mention personal family problems and other troubled social relations as the most pressing questions.

Health is generally the second concern after economic well-being. The same proportion of respondents in South Korea, India, Russia and Ghana cite health concerns as most important in their lives. The availability and affordability of quality education for their children is another problem concerning wide layers of the population. Crime is a critical question in Latin America and South Africa in particular.

The Japanese, according to the survey results, are the least complaining people in the world, with 43 percent of Japanese respondents acknowledging no major personal concern—but not because they are not afflicted by economic and social problems. On the contrary, the report notes that “the Japanese are among the gloomiest people in Asia, whether reflecting on the past, present or the future.”

The Argentines are also relatively gloomy, unsurprisingly considering the economic disaster of the past two years: “Most feel their lives have gotten worse in recent years and few express optimism about a better future.” According to the survey, Brazilians are as pessimistic about the present, but more hopeful about the future.

“By nearly all measures, the Turks are among the unhappiest people surveyed,” the pollsters observe. “More generally, the publics of the six countries in the Middle East/Conflict Area [Lebanon, Uzbekistan, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan and Pakistan] are dissatisfied with the state of their lives, and a relatively high proportion of respondents in this region also report that they have been unable to afford basic necessities in the past year.”

The most devastated area is Africa, where “overwhelming majorities” of respondents “say there have been times in the past year when they did not have enough money for food, clothing or health care.” Majorities of those interviewed in Latin America, Russia and Ukraine report that they have been unable to afford food at some time in the past 12 months.

The results drawn from interviews in the poorest countries on this score are horrifying, but hardly surprising. One of the most remarkable and damning findings of the survey is that “going without some basic necessities is far more common in the United States than in other major countries.” Fully 15 percent of those Americans interviewed acknowledge not being able to afford food “occasionally” in the past year, 19 percent

have gone without clothing and 25 percent without health care! According to *What the World Thinks*, “Overall, a third of Americans say they have encountered at least one of these hardships in the past year.” (Such a figure would probably give a more accurate sense of the real level of poverty in the US than the derisory official rate.) Levels of deprivation are higher in the US than in Western Europe, Canada, Japan and even the Czech Republic and South Korea.

While the majority of those interviewed in North America and Western Europe generally believe their lives have improved over the past five years, a different picture emerges elsewhere. Most Argentines think their lives were better in the late 1990s; in Venezuela, 57 percent believe that life has gotten worse over the past five years. Many Eastern Europeans have lost ground over the past five years: a majority in Bulgaria (55 percent) believe their lives are worse today, as do pluralities in Ukraine, the Slovak Republic, Poland and Russia. People in Turkey, Pakistan and Lebanon all believe that conditions have worsened. In Japan “nearly twice as many feel their lives have gotten worse in that period as believe things have improved.”

In the section, “Global Publics View Their Countries,” the report’s authors write bluntly that the more than 38,000 people interviewed “are overwhelmingly dissatisfied with the way things are going in their countries today. Solid majorities in nearly every country in every region surveyed say they are unhappy with the state of their nation.”

Region by region, the levels of national dissatisfaction range from 55 percent in the US to 70 percent in Italy; 60 percent in the Czech Republic to 91 percent in Bulgaria; 78 percent in Jordan to 93 percent in Turkey; 79 percent in Mexico to 96 percent in Argentina; 75 percent in the Philippines to 92 percent in Indonesia; 55 percent in Tanzania to 90 percent in Kenya. The few nations where a majority or near majority express satisfaction—Uzbekistan (69 percent), Vietnam (69 percent), China (48 percent), Pakistan (49 percent)—one has the feeling national pride plays as large a role as any. Canada was the only advanced capitalist country in which respondents answered positively, and here one suspects a certain anti-Americanism enters into the equation.

What will the defenders of capitalism respond to this?—“By an overwhelming margin in almost all countries, people have a negative view of economic conditions in their country.” The perception is widespread, “in Latin America and Japan, where economies are expected to shrink in 2002; most of Eastern Europe, where growth is slowing; much of Africa, where inflation remains strong; and in Indonesia and Turkey, which are actually growing faster this year than last but still live under the burden of huge international debts.”

Concern over the spread of infectious diseases is highest in Africa, where AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and other illnesses are rampant. Nine in ten respondents in South Africa, Kenya and Uganda judge disease a “very big problem.” The report quotes a 30-year-old odd-job man in Nairobi, Kenya’s capital city: “AIDS is everywhere. I’ve lost friends, quite a few friends. But it’s difficult to know who has it because nobody has a test. What’s the point? Nobody wants to know they have the disease when there’s no medicine for it.”

Corruption of political leaders is considered a major problem in many countries, with particularly high percentages registered in Eastern Europe, Latin America and Africa.

In “Global Publics View the World,” the report returns to the same recurring theme: “If any single attitude unites people of different nations and varied personal circumstances, it is their very strong dissatisfaction with the way things are going in the world.” The pollsters did not apparently suggest “The present economic system” as one of the possible answers to the question: what is the leading problem in the world? Instead the respondents list AIDS, religious and ethnic hatred, nuclear weapons, the rich vs. poor gap and pollution and the environment as the greatest threats—all of which are specific manifestations of the failure of world

capitalism.

Revealing one of the pollsters’ major concerns, nearly a third of the survey is devoted to how “Global Publics View the United States.” The survey discovered that “the United States and its people” are viewed favorably in a majority of nations, but “only somewhat favorably in virtually all these countries. Moreover, negative opinions of the US have increased in most of the nations where trend benchmarks are available.”

Negative opinions about the US were most pronounced in the Middle East and Central Asia, particularly in Lebanon, Jordan, Pakistan and Egypt. In four of the six Eastern European nations surveyed, positive opinions about the US have declined since 2000. In Latin America, only 34 percent of Argentines view the US favorably, down from 50 percent two years ago. More than four in ten South Koreans have an unfavorable opinion.

The researchers found that there was general support for the “war on terror,” but “there is equally strong global consensus that the United States disregards the views of others in carrying out its foreign policy.” In both Western and Eastern Europe people broadly view the US as unilateralist (Germany, oddly enough, is the only European country where a majority of those interviewed felt that the US considers others in determining its foreign policy). Respondents in the Middle East oppose both the so-called war on terror and view the US as going it alone on foreign policy.

“In general,” the report notes, “respondents to the global survey are more critical of US policies than they are of US values.” There is a strong sense in most of the countries, for example, that American policies serve to increase the gap between rich and poor. “Moreover, sizable minorities feel the United States does too little to help solve the world’s problems.” These views are not restricted to the impoverished countries; in France, Germany and Canada, some 70 percent say US policies “serve to widen the global economic divide.” A plurality in every Latin American country believes that Washington’s policies widen the social chasm and in each of these nation’s “majorities say that the US is not doing the right amount to solve world problems.” US citizens were generally more positive about their country’s policies, but it is notable that a plurality (39 percent) “believes the United States has added to the global economic divide.”

The report also uncovered widespread opposition to the “Americanization” of the global culture. Respondents in only three of the 44 countries where interviews were carried out (the Philippines, Ivory Coast and Nigeria) thought that the spread of American ideas and customs was a positive good. At the same time, American science and technology are widely admired. In most countries, “American technology is admired more than American ideas about democracy, ideas about business, or popular culture.”

US business practices are widely disliked, especially among those with some experience dealing with American corporations. This is especially the case “among major US trading partners, such as France, Germany and Canada.”

The six-nation follow-up survey on the impending US assault on Iraq revealed widespread opposition internationally and within the US itself. Large majorities in France, Germany and Russia oppose the use of military force to topple the Saddam Hussein regime. The British public is divided and 62 percent of Americans interviewed favor such a move. Less than half the respondents in Turkey, the only Middle Eastern country where attitudes toward a US invasion of Iraq were probed and one of the countries most vulnerable presumably to Iraq’s “weapons of mass destruction,” view Iraq as a great or even moderate threat. Eighty-three percent of the Turks interviewed opposed allowing the US and its allies to use bases in Turkey for military action against Iraq.

Despite the ceaseless clamor from the White House and Pentagon about “weapons of mass destruction,” with the usual addendum about bringing democracy to Iraq, large percentages in every European country “think

that the US desire to control Iraqi oil is the principal reason that Washington is considering a war against Iraq.” In Russia 76 percent subscribe to this view; in France 75 percent; in Germany 54 percent; and Britain 44 percent. In the US, 22 percent believe oil is the driving force behind the war, but considering that this three-letter word is never mentioned in the mass media, the figure is itself telling.



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