

# WHAT WE MEAN BY THE WEST

BY WILLIAM H. MCNEILL

THE SUBJECT today is the meaning of “the West” in the sense of Western civilization. The first and most obvious point to make is that the meaning of the West is a function of who is using the word. Those who feel themselves to be part of the West—who think of the West as “we”—will surely have flattering things to say about their civilization. Those who think of the West as the “other” are likely to define it in less flattering terms. The basic meaning of the word is “where the sun sets”—one of the cardinal directions. Chinese geomancers drafted elaborate and codified rules about what that direction meant as opposed to the East, North, or South. But we in the West have nothing so precise as the Chinese: To us the West connotes all sorts of characteristics desired by some, eschewed by others.

In the United States, for instance, the West conjures up the Wild West of our historic frontier, a place of freedom, open spaces, new starts, and a certain manliness. But it was also a place where danger, loneliness (largely due to the paucity of women), and lawlessness often prevailed. At the same time, Americans have habitually embraced a contradictory meaning of the West. For inasmuch as all North America was the West vis-à-vis the Old World that colonists and later immi-

grants had left behind, the West was considered a “more perfect” place conducive, not to danger and lawlessness, but to liberty, equality, and prosperity. Americans were “new men under new skies,” as Frederick Jackson Turner proclaimed.

And yet, at the same time, Americans undeniably brought much of the Old World with them to the New. Hence, whatever qualities were to be found in both worlds tended to unite them and bespeak a broader notion of the West. At first, it encompassed the Atlantic littoral of Europe (the British Isles, Scandinavia, the Low Countries, France, and Iberia) plus America. In time, it came to encompass Australia, New Zealand, and all other European overseas settlements. The West, therefore, could be imagined as a civilization independent of locale. Finally, one hears today of a West that includes not only nations populated by European stock, but also non-Western nations that have assimilated Western institutions, techniques, and to some extent values: Japan, for instance.

What the West means in a given context, therefore, depends entirely upon who is invoking the term and for what purpose. But it is fair to say that virtually all definitions of Western civilization drew a line somewhere across Europe placing Germany (at times), Poland and Eastern Europe (at times), and Russia and the Balkans (at all times) beyond the pale of Western civilization. A Briton might joke that “the Wogs begin at Calais,” a Frenchman dub the Rhine the frontier of civilization, a German insist that “at the Ringstrasse the Balkans begin,” and a Pole that Asia begins with the westernmost Orthodox church; but wherever drawn, that line is the most enduring political/cultural demarcation in the history of Europe.

*Against seemingly impossible odds, the Greeks ultimately prevailed over the Persians in 480-479 B.C. The classical explanation offered by Herodotus was that free men fight better than the slaves of an absolute monarch.*

*Image at right is a detail from Crossing at Thermopylae: Massimo d’Azeglio (1823). Galleria d’Arte Moderna, Turin, Italy.*

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*William H. McNeill taught history at the University of Chicago from 1947 to 1987. During that time he wrote a good many books, the most important of which were *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (1963), *Plagues and Peoples* (1976), *Pursuit of Power* (1982) and, in retirement, *Keeping Together in Time* (1995). He is currently professor emeritus of history at the University of Chicago.*

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The meanings we give to the West today, in the United States, are by and large translated from the usage of Western Europeans in the late 19th century: the era when the British and French colonial empires bestrode the world and Germany and Italy were, by comparison, marginalized. But the outskirts of this Anglo-French core—Germany to the east and America to the west—might demand to be recognized as part of the West at the same time as they rivaled Western Europe for power and influence. The story of Western civilization in the 20th century, in fact, might be organized around the theme of the alternative visions of Western civilization that Germany and the United States each pressed, by force, on the Euro-Atlantic core.

Perhaps the most profitable way to proceed, therefore, is to trace so far as possible where this Western European self-conception came from, how it was received in the United States around the turn of this century, and how it was subsequently embodied in our own high school and college curricula.

### The Classical Cradle

The birth of a concept of a West as opposed to an East can be dated exactly to events that occurred on either side of the Aegean Sea in the years 480 and 479 B.C. That may seem exceedingly strange—to wit, that the West of Anglo-French imagination sprang from a Persian imperial invasion of Greece some 2,500 years ago—but it is nonetheless so. The army of the Persian Empire crossed the Hellespont to assault a ragged confederacy of some 20-odd city-states. The imperial side deployed perhaps 60,000 professional soldiers with an abundant supply train stretching 1,500 miles. The Hellenic side could field mere militia forces composed of citizen-soldiers. And yet, against all odds and apparent reason, the Empire lost and the militias won. That they did so posed a logical quandary even for the Greeks. But the classical answer offered by Herodotus was simply that free men fight better than “slaves.” This classical explanation of Greece’s deliverance was so powerful, persuasive, and it must be said, flattering to the Greeks that it echoed throughout the rest of Mediterranean antiquity. The only life worth living, it held, was that of a free citizen who might take part in the public deliberations that affected his fate up to and including the risk of death in battle in defense of freedom. So mighty was this ideal that it survived the conquest of the city-states themselves and entered into the public consciousness of their conquerors, Macedon first, and then Rome. And even though those empires liberated the Greeks themselves from their internecine warfare, the Greeks never ceased to mourn their lost freedom.

The republican spirit born of the love—and power—of liberty pervaded most of the classical texts that have come down to us: not only the histories of Herodotus, Tacitus, and Livy, but the oratory of Demosthenes, Cicero, and Cato, and the theater and poetry of Greece and Rome. The same spirit burst forth again in Renaissance Italy when city-states similar to those of the ancients reemerged, and in time it came to infuse the educational systems of all western Eu-

rope thanks to the Humanist revival of the classics. Indeed, that spirit could still be described in the early 20th century, playing on the minds and the feelings of Europe’s elites, calling them to honor its collectivized ideal of heroic virtue.

I say “collectivized” because the republican spirit always extolled, not personal heroism, but heroism and sacrifice in the service of polity and country. To live, and perhaps to die, for the *patria* was the only way to fulfill human destiny in its most complete sense. So it was that the French revolutionaries would consciously imitate the Roman Republic, 19th-century Germans consider their land the modern equivalent of ancient Greece, and the British Empire invoke the universality and virtues of ancient Rome.

But the phrase “so it was” is a loaded one. It may indeed appear natural that Renaissance Italy would notice its resemblance to Classical Greece, but trans-Alpine Europe was a region of dynastic territorial states, even national kingdoms, and thus hardly an analog to the original West of Athens, Sparta, and republican Rome. What is more, the Christian heritage, which was much stronger in northern Europe than in Italy (“the nearer the papacy, the farther from God,” quipped Machiavelli), was utterly at odds with the heroic republican ideal of antiquity. The Church taught obedience and humility as the paths to holiness and salvation, and a life and death given to God, not the state. How was it then, that republican *virtù* born at Thermopylae and reborn in Italy’s glorious *quattrocento*, in effect inspired the West as 19th-century English and French defined it?

### The West of the Renaissance

To address that question, however inadequately in a short talk, we must stretch our minds back beyond even Athens and Sparta to the megalithic cultures of the second millennium B.C. Little is known about them and their mysterious monuments, but it is clear that they spread around the shores of Europe from the Mediterranean to the North Atlantic, carrying with them the message that when a human being died, the soul migrated west to the Isles of the Blessed, to follow the sun and, like the sun, to rise once again. This doctrine of immortality most likely originated in Egypt, but it took root among many peoples, the Celts especially.

In time, of course, an overlay of Christianity obscured the older megalithic cultures of Western Europe, but the dream of the West as a sort of heaven, the place one goes to escape the crowding, pain, and heartaches of mortal life in an imperfect East, lived on. To the peoples residing near the coast of Atlantic Europe, folk wisdom taught that the West is always a better place, a place whither one’s ancestors went, a place to be reborn.

To view the East as impure, even dark, could not have clashed more sharply with the early Christian aphorism *ex oriente lux*: enlightenment comes from the east, the land of the rising sun. And indeed the initial political cleavage between a self-conscious West and East dates from the division of the Roman Empire under Constantine, the first Christian emperor, in the

fourth century A.D., and the removal of the imperial capital from Rome to Constantinople (Byzantium). Within a century and a half the Western Roman Empire fell before the barbarians, but the Eastern Roman (or Byzantine) Empire survived for a thousand years as a center of power, wealth, and Classical culture.

The West, by comparison, was laggard, poor, and soon divided into semicivilized Germanic or Celtic kingdoms. Even after Charlemagne revived the Western empire in the late eighth century, Western Europeans remained threadbare country cousins to the magnificent, grandiose Byzantines. And yet, as is always the case when less "civilized" peoples encounter comparatively richer, mightier, and more highly skilled cultures, the West felt a deep ambivalence toward the East. Yes, those "Greeks"—as they referred to the Byzantines—may be grander than we in material terms, but they are also decadent, corrupt—and heretical. For whatever its other shortcomings, the Catholic West could boast of the papacy and the maintenance of true religion and virtue. The pope, as successor to Peter the Prince of the Apostles, was the guardian of correct Christian doctrine both in theory and, as ecumenical councils invariably recognized, in practice as well. The papacy, therefore, became the sole principle of unity and authority and the focus on consciousness and self-assertion in Catholic Europe, and the line that resulted from the peripatetic activity of missionaries from Rome on the one hand and Byzantium on the other came to divide Europe more deeply and lastingly than any geographical, ethnic, political, or economic one. The West meant Latin, Catholic Christendom, and a balance between church and state; the East meant Greek Orthodoxy and caesaropapism.

But however much the reach of papal authority defined the West, the very tension between spiritual and secular authority in a disunified West meant that the papacy had to cope with enemies within. The Holy Roman Empire, ruled by Charlemagne's heirs, embodied the imperial principle in the West; the autonomous city-states of Northern Italy (that grew rich, ironically, off the Crusades) embodied the republican principle, and both opposed papal pretensions to Western unity based on a hierarchical church and dogmatic faith. Their long-simmering rivalries boiled over in the Renaissance and split all northern Italy into the warring camps of the pro-papal Guelfs and pro-imperial Ghibelines, purporting to incarnate the civic humanism of the ancients.

What made the conflicts of Renaissance Italy of surpassing importance to Europe and the world was that the Italians of the 14th and 15th centuries were the cultural, intellectual, and, not least, economic leaders of all Europe and the Mediterranean (the Byzantine Empire having shrunk to a rump besieged by the Turks). The Italian project was nothing less than to organize the western promontory of the Eurasian landmass into a single, integrated market economy through commerce, specialized production, new credit mechanisms and new means of mobilizing capital such as the joint-stock company. The city-states themselves pioneered tax systems that allowed them to mobilize relatively enormous resources, floating public debt that al-

lowed them to amortize the cost of wars and public works over decades, and efficient new political/military administrations that magnified the power of civil government (in Florence and Venice at least; in Milan the military escaped civilian control).

This was the achievement—this congeries of skills enhancing power and wealth—that accounts for the otherwise anomalous fascination for things Italian that gripped trans-Alpine Europe from the 15th to 17th centuries. The kingdoms of Spain (and through Spain, the Low Countries), France, and England imported Italian methods and so developed such powerful central monarchies that the Italian city-states themselves were soon eclipsed. The French invasion of 1494 sounded the death knell for Italian independence, and yet the wars that followed only hastened the diffusion of Italian knowledge to the north and west of Europe, including the Classics, the ancient philosophies about how to lead a good life, the ideal of collective patriotic effort in war and in peace, a curiosity about (and glorification of) the natural world, and the pursuit of Humanist, not strictly Christian, virtue.

Not surprisingly, this spreading and eager embrace of what appeared to be secular values provoked a backlash among the pious. We call it the Reformation, and it occurred just where one would expect, in the region of Europe that had not absorbed nor benefited from the new Italian ways of life, but in fact felt exploited by them: Germany. Luther thus represented a reactionary movement, but even so, he and Calvin employed Humanist literary techniques in their effort to elevate the authority of Scripture. The imperatives of survival in the so-called Religious Wars that lasted more than 150 years then forced Protestant and Catholic states alike to learn and use the tools of power forged in the Renaissance. But the concepts of citizenship and republican virtue were the special province of Calvinists, first in Geneva, then in the Dutch Republic, and in Cromwellian England.

All the while, of course, the great Age of Exploration, the invention of printing, and all the discoveries of the Scientific Revolution gradually persuaded Western Europeans, for the first time in history, that they might actually know more than the ancients, and if so, know more than anyone in the world! To be sure, those annoying Ottoman Turks seemed to belie this new Western conceit. The largest and most enduring of the "gunpowder empires" of the Early Modern centuries, Ottoman Turkey swallowed almost all of Araby, Byzantium, and the Balkans, and cast its shadow over Central Europe. A religious interpretation of the Ottoman phenomenon might dismiss it, not as a sign of Western inferiority, but as God's scourge for the sins of the Christians. Certainly, neither the Turks nor the Europeans believed they had ought to learn from the other and an intense mutual *disregard* was their preferred posture. But whether one viewed the Turks as punitive agents of God or (like Voltaire) as an interesting, if frightening Asian apparition, no Westerner doubted that his civilization was freer, truer, and in the long run stronger than that of the East, notwithstanding the fact that Protestants and Catholics within the West fought for differing definitions of freedom, truth, and strength.

## Birth of the Anglo-French West

Now, so far as the future United States is concerned, the intense (or intensifying) conflict between a definition of the West based on republican virtue and liberty, and a definition based on true doctrine as upheld by the papacy, threw up two major landmarks. They are utterly familiar to Anglo-American audiences, but still worth recalling. The first was the series of English Revolutions from 1640 to 1660 and 1688. In one sense these were as reactionary as Luther's revolt in that they rejected the efficient "modern" royal government crafted by the Tudors and Stuarts in the name of Parliament's medieval powers, not to mention sectarian strife. Yet in another sense—by one of those sleights of hand by which history is so often turned inside out—after 1688 the "reactionaries" in Parliament invented what amounted to an entirely new kind of sovereignty in what came to be known as Great Britain. It was government by consent of the taxpayers, representative government that asserted rights over the crown and thus preserved a private sphere for differences of religion and much besides, that made private property sacred and thus pulled the sting from the arbitrary tax collector, and that rested, though a monarchy still, on a vigorous dose of republican virtue and liberty. For the English system could not have functioned for a season without the recognition by the enfranchised possessing classes that they must pay, they must serve, as the legal forms of parliamentary consent prescribed. The Glorious Revolution proved to be a remarkably effective compromise that preserved a broad zone of personal freedoms and security against the power of the state, yet permitted the state to mobilize the nation for common action under parliamentary cabinet government.

So successful was Britain in its wars, mostly with France, after 1688, and so alluring was its economic expansion, that the British system became a model for many other European reformers. The English Revolution was a dramatic demonstration of how a movement that began by kicking against the pricks of modernity ended by inventing a sort of supermodernity that left all its foreign competitors gasping for breath. (The leaders of Japan's Meiji Restoration, who overthrew the shogunate in the name of seclusion only to launch a crash modernization campaign, provide a later example.) By the late 18th century, therefore, the French in particular recognized that the institutions established by the Bourbon kings were hopelessly superannuated, laying the groundwork for the second great landmark, the French Revolution. Many Enlightenment thinkers, such as Montesquieu, proposed that France reform its institutions along British lines, but others sought to get to the very roots of things, which is what being "radical" means. What the British called "the rights of Englishmen" the French radicals set out to improve upon by invoking "the rights of all mankind." Where British liberalism meant oligarchical rule by taxpayers, French radicalism would mean democratic rule by all male citizens, displaying (even imposing) the republican ideals of Athens and Rome: a worship of reason, virtue, liberty, equality, and fraternity. And where the British practiced a certain tolerance and reconciled their freedom



with an established Christian church, the French revolutionaries explicitly repudiated the Christian tradition and replaced it with a secular, civic cult.

The excesses and contradictions of the French Republic of Virtue need no elaboration. But it must not be forgotten that the methods of military and financial mobilization employed by the French Republic (and later by Napoleon) were so shockingly successful that Britain, Prussia, and the Austrian Empire had no choice but to copy French techniques or perish. In fact, the demonstration of what democratic government *à la française* could achieve in war was so compelling that even after Waterloo no part of the Western world could afford to neglect it. Taking the common people into active partnership with government and catering to social elites became, quite simply, an imperative of success and even survival in the competition among sovereign powers. Even tsarist Russia and Tokugawa Japan, after their respective humiliations at the hands of the Anglo-French in 1856 and by the Americans in 1854, were obliged to abolish legal inequality and embrace Western methods of national mobilization with all their implications for "citizenship." Indeed, we may say that the mobilization of the masses became the principal political agenda of the 19th and 20th centuries.

And that, of course, was the essence of the West—the Anglo-French West—that imposed itself on the rest of the world between 1750 and 1914, and loomed as a model when America's national career began. It was a model to be imitated, but it also struck Americans as a seat of the corruptions that they yearned to cast off as they crossed the Atlantic and breathed Western air.



*The inventions and skills borrowed from China, including the compass, printing, gunpowder, and the notion of meritocracy, were key elements in the rise of the West.*

The United States would be better, purer, freer, even though more ignorant, crude, and clumsy: the same ambivalence Medieval Europe felt toward Byzantium, that northwestern Europe felt toward Renaissance Italy, that Germany felt toward France.

But the United States caught up expeditiously. Favorable geopolitics permitted it to realize Manifest Destiny and build a continental state of enormous proportions by comparison to anything in Western Europe. It did not occur painlessly, as the Civil War graphically proved, but Americans caught up with the core European West by the late 19th century and developed that chip on the shoulder born of an inability to decide whether we ought to imitate or repudiate the Old World. The crisis point came with the First World War. Should the United States join the Anglo-French West in its fight against Eastern barbarians and so merge into the West once and for all, or stay out? Under Woodrow Wilson, Americans chose to engage: And at that moment what we think of as Western civilization, Western Civ, was born.

## The West of American Schools

The courses and curricula in the history of Western Civ that became ubiquitous from about 1930 to 1960 were first crafted in response to U.S. belligerence in

1917. Initially, at least at Columbia University, Western Civ was designed to teach soldiers what it was they would be fighting for in Flanders Fields. Imitations proliferated, textbooks were written to accommodate them, and the texts bred a certain standardized interpretation, which in turn formed the intellectual bedrock for two generations of American college students and governing elites. The West as understood in the United States, therefore, was a product of what those students heard in the lecture hall, read in the texts, and expressed in their own words in the essays and examinations assigned in Western Civ courses.

Now, by the time I myself took such a class in the 1930s, Western Civ had evolved (at the University of Chicago and elsewhere) into a powerful and frankly missionary enterprise. The curriculum was based upon a systematic polarity between reason and faith—"St." Socrates versus St. Paul—and the notion that truth was an evolving, discovered thing rather than a fixed, dogmatic certainty laid down once for all in the Bible or church doctrine. The effect of this on young people was to give them a sense of emancipation from old religious identities, often ethnically transmitted, a sense of common citizenship and participation in a community of reason, a belief in careers open to talent, and a faith in a truth susceptible to enlargement and improvement generation after generation.

This was indeed a liberating message for many Americans in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s: It conveyed membership in the great cultivated, reasonable, sophisticated world of "us," the heirs of a Western tradition dating from Socrates and surviving all the tribulations of the Medieval and Early Modern eras. World War II and the cold war only intensified, even as they perhaps narrowed, the agenda of a unified West led by America fighting for freedom and reason and tolerance, and mobilizing itself through an appeal to republican virtue, against new Eastern tyrannies, be they German or Russian.

Yet, oddly, the 1960s were the very moment when college courses in Western Civ began to be abandoned. One reason for this was that young teachers of history, be they graduate teaching assistants or junior faculty, simply refused to become apprenticed by their elders to serve as "slave labor" in the sections of large Western Civ courses. Instead, they tended to stake out their little private kingdoms built around the subjects of their Ph.D. theses. It does not really matter what one studies, they insisted, for one piece of history is as good as another. What is more, the senior professors always teach courses around their projected next book, so why shouldn't I? After all, I must write books, too, in order to get promoted to tenure. So how dare you indenture me to somebody else's course whose naïve ideas I do not want to propagate anyway?

That attitude was, I believe, a highly destructive and narrowly careerist response to what were real deficiencies in the way Western Civ was taught at the time. But more recently, perhaps since the late 1970s, the debate has taken a different twist as more and more historians agree that the overspecialized "smorgasbord" curricula of the 1960s were disastrous, but disagree about the nature of the survey courses that

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