

Rediscovering Western Civilization

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor
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Humanities courses in America's best universities are apt these days to denigrate, or even deny the reality of, Western civilization. Rare are classes devoted to transmitting Western civilization's leading ideas; examining its continuities and breaks; and cultivating the independence of mind that Western civilization prizes by exploring the several sides of fundamental moral questions and enduring political controversies.

Yet without such a liberal education, it is difficult to appreciate the sources of American freedom and prosperity. Among the most vital sources is the conviction, central to Western civilization, of the dignity of the individual, a conviction that in the modern era has received most forceful political expression in the idea of rights inherent in all persons. To put Western civilization on trial without so much as summoning witnesses for the defense, as our universities like to do, is to presume without opportunity for rebuttal that villainy lies at the heart of the American constitutional order.

The doubts that American universities assiduously nurture about Western civilization are hardly confined to universities. Or even to the United States. In February, the Munich Security Conference addressed the issue of "Westlessness." In a [speech](#) that opened the conference, President of Germany Frank-Walter Steinmeier stated that anxieties about the West extend to matters of diplomacy and defense: "The 'we' of 'the West' that was once a given is clearly no longer something that can be taken entirely for granted. This is true both within our societies, but also in relation to the existential issues of foreign and security policy on which this conference focuses."

It follows from President Steinmeier's observations that the recovery of the principles that undergird, and the practices that typify, Western civilization is not only an intellectual requirement but also a strategic one. The strategic concerns of the United States revolve around the defense of liberal democracy — which encompasses individual freedom, human equality, consent of the governed, toleration, private property, and the rule of law — at home, and preservation of a free and open international order, which best serves the interests of nation states dedicated to the protection of individual rights. The defense of liberal democracy and of a free and open international order depends on the cohesiveness of the West. That cohesiveness, in turn, depends on citizens of the West regaining an appreciation of the West's cultural inheritance, a distinctive component of which is its openness to other cultural inheritances and its readiness to embrace all who embrace political freedom and equality under law.

In "[The Lost History of Western Civilization,](#)" Stanley Kurtz makes a vital contribution to restoring an appreciation of the West. His scholarly report for the [National Association of](#)

[Scholars](#) (on whose board I serve) reconstructs pivotal episodes in the several-decades-long effort in the American academy to debunk Western civilization. For the debunkers, writes Kurtz, “Western civilization is both a recent invention and a thinly disguised form of neo-imperial propaganda.” At the same time, the debunkers denounce Western civilization as permeated with discrimination based on race, class, sex, and as dedicated to imperial conquest and exploitation. “The upshot appears to be,” Kurtz tartly observes, “that the West is evil; and besides, it doesn’t exist.”

Kurtz finds a turning point in an obscure 1982 scholarly article by University of New Brunswick, Canada, historian Gilbert Allardyce, “The Rise and Fall of the Western Civilization Course.” Allardyce maintained that, writes Kurtz, “The very idea of Western civilization is a modern invention devised during World War I as a way of hoodwinking young American soldiers into fighting and dying in the trenches of Europe.” Published in *The American Historical Review*, the Allardyce thesis gave intellectual heft to the movement at Stanford in the 1980s to abolish the university’s popular, required course on the history and ideas of the West.

Stanford’s discontents with the teaching of Western civilization came to national attention in 1987 when, following a rally in the university’s central plaza featuring presidential-hopeful Jesse Jackson, students marched away chanting, “Hey hey, ho ho, Western culture’s got to go.” Surveys at the time indicated that the majority of students felt gratitude for the mandatory course that introduced them to the Bible, Plato and Aristotle, Voltaire, Darwin, Marx, Freud, and more. But their affection for the class — and the opportunity it provided for conversations over shared texts addressing perennial questions about morality, society, politics, and religion — was no match for the accusations of racism flung at the course.

Although commonplace now, it was still novel in 1987 to charge that the study of the great books of the West was discriminatory because the curriculum excluded minority authors and made minority students feel uncomfortable. The accusers won. In 1988, Stanford abolished its Western civilization course.

In the name of what came to be known as multiculturalism and in the spirit of what eventually was dubbed political correctness, colleges and universities around the country followed suit. The term for the new intellectual orientation, which suggests generosity and open-mindedness, obscured its crusading and intolerant spirit. Far from seeking to draw attention to, and encourage sympathetic understanding of, the distinctive cultural traditions of diverse peoples, multiculturalism taught that the divisions of nations and civilizations were invented or socially constructed and must be overcome to create a worldwide community governed by progressive moral and political norms.

On the basis of a painstaking “excavation of the lost history of Western civilization,” Kurtz concludes that the multicultural critics of Western civilization are guilty of the sleight of hand they accuse defenders of the West of performing — inventing a history to advance a partisan political agenda. As he amply demonstrates through probing examination of college curricula from the colonial period to World War I, contrary to Allardyce, the study of Western civilization has been a featured part of the American curriculum from the beginning.

To be sure, such study proceeded under different descriptions and adopted varying focuses and texts. But from a concentration on Christendom in the 18th century to Europe in the 19th century to Western civilization in the 20th century, colleges and universities taught that America springs from a tradition that arose from the merging of the biblical heritage and the heritage of classical Greece and Rome; a tradition that underwent momentous shifts in the Renaissance and Reformation; and a tradition that in the modern era made the protection of individual rights the first task of politics.

The indefensible Allardyce thesis encouraged proponents of multiculturalism to deny the history of the teaching of the history of West as a means to denying the history of the West. Postmodern ideas, disseminated most powerfully by French thinker Michel Foucault and no less problematic, emboldened multiculturalists to see the West whose existence they denied as evil.

According to Foucault, what we call “culture” and “society” are nothing more and nothing less than forms of domination that enable oppressors to entrench invented or socially constructed claims about truth and knowledge in order to manage and marginalize the oppressed. Foucault and the legions of academic multiculturalists who follow him ostentatiously reject the possibility of objective knowledge. At the same time, they affirm as incontrovertibly true that across cultures “regimes of truth”— that is false and pernicious claims about the way the world really is — are the chief means by which the oppressors maintain power. Under Foucault’s spell, multiculturalists selectively reject the very notion of truth while insisting that they possess indisputable knowledge about the logic of oppression and the obligation to resist it. It is this self-contradictory thinking that inspires the fashionable dogma that the primary purpose of the American constitutional tradition’s commitment to individual freedom and human equality is to camouflage the institutionalized persecution of minorities and women.

Multicultural critics of Western civilization profess a confused agglomeration of convictions and aspirations. In the fight against the West’s supposed cultural imperialism, they seek to impose a comprehensive moral view and global political culture. They have constant recourse to notions of genuine freedom and equality, the very principles found at the heart of the civilization they assail as both an imaginary construction and an implacable system of domination. And they suppose that they have achieved a radical break with the West through the embrace of identity politics which, through its demand for heightened sensitivity to the variety of sentiments and attachments that shape persons, radicalizes Western individualism.

From obligations of intellectual integrity to the defense of liberal democracy and of the rights inherent in all persons that inspire it, the rediscovery of the West is a civilizational imperative.

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Links:

https://www.realclearpolitics.com/authors/peter_berkowitz/

<https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/EN/Frank-Walter-Steinmeier/Reden/2020/02/200214-Munich-Security-Conference.html>

<https://www.nas.org/reports/the-lost-history-of-western-civilization/full-report>

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