

The West's War on the West

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor

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Exasperated parents have been known to admonish their self-centered, insolent, or sulking teen-agers with the words “You are your own worst enemy.” It is highly unusual, however, for privileged adults to avidly turn on the civilization that has formed them, awarded them high status, and showered them with sundry and unprecedented material comforts. Yet progressive elites in the West revel in making themselves the West's own worst enemy.

History is littered with nations that have brought down calamity on their heads through reckless adventures abroad or descent into corruption and decadence at home. From Plato to Hegel, political philosophers have warned that to counter the seeds of their own destruction sown into their typical ideas and institutions, regimes should fashion an educational system that checks their worst tendencies and fosters the virtues on which their security, prosperity, and happiness depend. But in the United States – and in other western liberal democracies – elites have mobilized the educational system *against* Western civilization.

American K-12 schools routinely inculcate in their students the conviction – amplified in colleges and universities – that their country and the Western civilization of which it is a part are singularly cruel and unjust. Teachers instruct students – not as one opinion among others but as the unchallengeable truth – that America is racist to the core. The curriculum reinforces the dogma that the injustices perpetrated by white men against black people, other persons of color, and women are the primary lens through which American history and current events must be viewed.

The racialization of almost everything informs the progressive elite's multi-count indictment against the United States. They allege that the pillars of Western civilization – biblical faith, classical philosophy, Enlightenment thinking – are rife with racism and the rage to subjugate other peoples and nations. They see American history as a particularly ugly chapter of Western civilization, itself a disgraceful spectacle of colonialism, imperialism, and environmental exploitation. Meanwhile, these same elites overlook or shrug off dictatorships and totalitarianism; the bloody aggression, the mass murder, and the destruction of cultural heritages; the poverty, censorship, and pollution of air and drinking water that are the frequent lot of those who live outside of Western-style liberal democracies.

The elite indictment of the West depicts the natural sciences as distinctively Western and not the common property of humanity and holds them complicit in the West's allegedly insatiable appetite to control others. Educators assert that even such simple arithmetic as $2+2=4$ reflects and reinforces racist attitudes while diminishing the non-linear forms of thinking in which, they claim, non-white people specialize. Critics declare that Western artistic treasures – novels, paintings, music, and more – must be understood as vehicles for the perpetuation of oppression. Influential voices on the left denounce the borrowing from other peoples' and nations' beliefs and practices as “cultural appropriation.” And schools, large corporations, and the federal government subvert traditional understandings of sex and family by promoting gender change and by promulgating rules allowing athletes with male chromosomes and male biology to compete in women's sports.

In “The War on the West,” Douglas Murray amply documents the prevalence of these accusations. He also rallies readers to the defense of Western civilization.

A bestselling author, associate editor of *The Spectator*, and wide-ranging public intellectual, Murray writes with wonderful lucidity about the many fronts on which the West is waging war against itself. And he writes with a sense of urgency. While Western elites indulge in an “orgy of self-abuse,” the

Chinese Communist Party patiently pursues in the Indo-Pacific, and around the globe, a transformation of world order that rejects the norms of liberal democracy in favor of authoritarian government and the obligation of the individual to submit to the state's dictates.

Murray eschews the sarcasm, mockery, and outrage that have become the stock-in-trade of polemicists on both sides of battle lines in the West. Instead, he reasonably restates the charge – put forward in various versions by “antiracist” icon Ibram X. Kendi, legal and critical race theory scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, postcolonial studies pioneer Edward Said, and their followers throughout the progressive establishment – that Western civilization is distinguished by the shameful injustices that it systematically inflicts on minorities and women. Murray counters with telling examples from politics and public policy; historical knowledge encompassing Western and non-Western civilizations; command of logic, data, and common sense; gratitude for the West's multifarious achievements accompanied by a sober recognition of its failings; and a keen appreciation that the freedom to which it has been dedicated enables the West to learn from its errors. Time and again he exposes the one-sidedness and incoherence of those who see Western civilization as noteworthy only for the perpetration of crimes and the infliction of misery.

Murray also brings to light a chief source of elite hatred of the West: the passions of resentment and revenge. Drawing on Nietzsche's piercing 19th-century analysis in “On the Genealogy of Morals” of *ressentiment*, Murray contends that the will to deconstruct and vilify Western civilization springs from envy of the happy and powerful. The devious strategy for seizing control and exacting vengeance consists of a “revaluation of values.” The resentful exact their revenge by rebranding as evil that which has been generally accepted as good; promulgating, in the name of pity for those who suffer, punishing new moral standards designed to humble those who have prospered; and through this revaluation of values, arrogating authority to themselves.

Much in the manner that Nietzsche described, progressive elites – who already enjoy considerable power and prestige but apparently not nearly as much as they think they deserve – have enervated their rivals and empowered themselves by reconceiving reason as irrationality, virtue as vice, justice as injustice, rule of law as despotism, and despotism as freedom. In the same spirit, they have transformed “diversity,” which originally emphasized the benefits that derive from the encounter with individuals with different points of view, into a call for people of various races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations to think alike. They have replaced “equality,” which forbids discrimination based on race, with “equity,” which demands race-based discrimination. And they have redefined “inclusion” to exclude those who depart from the progressive faith.

Murray concludes with a rousing tribute to the West. While its wrongs in no way set it apart from other great powers and the peoples and nations of the world, he states, the West’s many achievements have greatly enriched humanity.

The West gave the world much of medical science, technology, and treatment. It founded the world’s oldest universities. It excelled in studying other peoples and places including lost and dead civilizations. It developed free-market capitalism, which has done more than any other economic system to lift people worldwide out of poverty. It elaborated and instituted the principles of individual freedom and human equality, inalienable rights, and limited government. It produced works of art of surpassing beauty that are admired – and provide consolation, hope, and inspiration – around the world. Migrants fleeing oppression or seeking better economic opportunities for themselves and for their children flow in one direction – to the West, and above all to the United States. And whereas it is inconceivable that, say, a white Westerner could move to China and rise to the top of the Chinese Communist Party, “It is America that has twice elected a black president – the son of a father from Kenya,” writes Murray. “And it is America whose current vice president is the daughter of immigrants from India and Jamaica.”

Although mostly a matter of demonstrable fact, a defense of the West in terms of the benefits it confers on its own citizens and of its contributions to humanity, Murray ruefully observes, “remains the very edge of permissible sayability.” Their narrowing of the bounds of respectable opinion is itself a striking measure of the damage done by Western elites.

Since admonitions are unlikely to temper the broadsides against the West leveled by the many self-absorbed, insolent, and sulking members of its elites, a counter-offensive must be undertaken for our fellow citizens’ hearts and minds. It should be grounded in the reform of our educational system so that our schools and universities teach rather than besmirch Western civilization.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. From 2019 to 2021, he served as director of policy planning at the U.S. State Department. His writings are posted at PeterBerkowitz.com and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.

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