

Western Civilization: A Good Idea

Niall Ferguson

According to folklore, Mahatma Gandhi was once asked by a reporter what he thought of Western civilization. He replied that he thought it would be a good idea. As the campaign against the concept advances, not least in American and European universities, I am inclined to agree with Gandhi. I think Western civilization really would be a good idea.

What exactly – or where – do I mean by “Western civilization”? Post-war White Anglo-Saxon Protestant males used, more or less instinctively, to locate the West (also known as “the free world”) in a relatively narrow corridor extending (certainly) from London to Lexington, Massachusetts, and (possibly) from Strasbourg to San Francisco. In 1945, fresh from the battlefields, the West’s first language was English, followed by halting French. With the success of European integration in the 1950s and 1960s, the Western club grew larger. Few would now dispute that the Low Countries, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Scandinavia and Spain all belong to the West, while Greece is an *ex officio* member, despite its later allegiance to Orthodox Christianity, thanks to our enduring debt to ancient Hellenic philosophy and its more recent debts to the European Union.

But what about the rest of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, encompassing not just the Balkans north of the Peloponnese, but also North Africa and Anatolia? What about Egypt and Mesopotamia, the seedbeds of the very first great civilizations? Is South America – colonized by Europeans as surely as was North America, and geographically in the same hemisphere – part of the West? And what of Russia? Is European Russia truly Occidental, but Russia beyond the Urals in some sense part of the Orient? Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union and its satellites were referred to as “the Eastern bloc.” But there is surely a case for saying that the Soviet Union was as much a product of Western civilization as the United States. Its core ideology had much the same Victorian provenance as nationalism, anti-slavery and women’s suffrage: it was born and bred in the old circular Reading Room of the British Library. And its geographical extent was no less the product of European expansion and colonization than the settlement of the Americas. In Central Asia, as in the South America, Europeans ruled over non-Europeans. In that sense, what happened in 1991 was simply the death of the last European empire. Yet the most influential recent definition of Western civilization, by Samuel Huntington, excludes not just Russia but all countries with a religious tradition of Orthodoxy. Huntington’s West consists only of Western and Central Europe (excluding the Orthodox East), North America (excluding Mexico) and Australasia. Greece, Israel, Romania and Ukraine do not make the cut; nor do the Caribbean islands, despite the fact that many are as Western as Florida.¹

Western civilization, then, is much more than just a geographical expression. Another puzzle that disunity appears to be one of Western civilization’s defining characteristics. In the early 2000s many American commentators complained about the “widening Atlantic” – the breakdown of those common values that bound the United States together with its West European allies during the Cold War.² If it has become slightly clearer than it was when Henry Kissinger was secretary of state whom an American statesman should call when he wants to speak to Europe, it has become harder to say who picks up the phone on behalf of Western civilization. Yet the recent division between America and Europe is mild and amicable compared with the great schisms of the past, over religion, over ideology – and even over the meaning of civilization itself. During the First World War, the Germans claimed to be fighting the war for a higher *Kultur* and against tawdry, materialistic Anglo-French *Zivilisation* (the distinction was

drawn by Thomas Mann and Sigmund Freud, among others). But this distinction was rather hard to reconcile with the burning of Louvain and the summary executions of Belgian civilians during the opening phase of the war. British propagandists retorted by defining the Germans as “Huns” – barbarians beyond the Pale of civilization – and named the war itself “The Great War for Civilization” on their Victory medal.³

“Western civilization” would be a good idea, in other words, if we were sure where to find it. This much can be said, nevertheless. For some reason, beginning in the late fifteenth century, the little states of Western Europe, with their bastardized linguistic borrowings from Latin (and a little Greek), their religion derived from the teachings of a Jew from Nazareth, and their intellectual debts to Oriental mathematics, astronomy and technology, produced a civilization capable not only of conquering the great Oriental empires and subjugating Africa, the Americas and Australasia, but also of converting peoples all over the world to the Western way of life – a conversion achieved more by the word than by the sword.

There are those who dispute that, claiming that all civilizations are in some sense equal, and that the West cannot claim superiority over, say, the East of Eurasia.⁴ But such relativism is demonstrably absurd. No previous civilization had ever achieved such dominance as the West achieved over the Rest.⁵ In 1500 the future imperial powers of Europe accounted for about 10 per cent of the world’s land surface and at most 16 per cent of its population. By 1913, eleven Western states,^{*} which accounted for 10 per cent of the world’s territory, 26 per cent of its population and 58 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP), ruled over a further 48 per cent of the world’s territory, 31 per cent of its population and 16 per cent of its GDP.⁶ The average American went from being 2.3 times richer than the average Chinese in 1830 to being 22 times richer in 1968. Average life expectancy in the United States was nearly twice what it was in India in 1900 and thirty years longer than it was in China in 1950. Higher living standards in the West were also reflected in a better diet, even for agricultural laborers, and taller stature, even for ordinary soldiers and convicts.⁷

Civilization is in large measure about cities. By this measure, too, the West had come out on top. In 1500, as far as we can work out, the biggest city in the world was Beijing, with a population of between 600,000 and 700,000. Of the ten largest cities in the world by that time only one – Paris – was European, and its population numbered fewer than 200,000. London had perhaps 50,000 inhabitants. Yet by 1900 there had been an astonishing reversal. Only one of the world’s ten largest cities at that time was Asian and that was Tokyo. With a population of around 6.5 million, London was the global megalopolis.⁸

Moreover, it became clear in the second half of the twentieth century that the only way to close that yawning gap in income was for Eastern societies to follow Japan’s example in adopting some (though not all) of the West’s institutions and modes of operation. As a result, Western civilization became a kind of template for the way the rest of the world aspired to organize itself. Prior to 1945, of course, there was a variety of developmental models that could be adopted by non-Western societies. But the most attractive were all of European origin: liberal capitalism, national socialism, soviet communism. The Second World War killed the second in

* The eleven were Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States. Of these only France, Portugal and Spain existed in 1500 in anything resembling their early twentieth-century form. For Russia’s claim to be considered a part of the West, see below.

Europe, though it lived on under assumed names in many developing countries. The collapse of the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991 killed the third.

To be sure, there has been much talk in the wake of the global financial crisis about alternative Asian economic models. But not even the most ardent cultural relativist is recommending a return to the institutions of the Ming or the Mughals. The current debate between the proponents of free markets and those of state intervention is, at root, a debate between identifiably Western schools of thought: the followers of Adam Smith and those of John Maynard Keynes, with a few die-hard devotees of Karl Marx still plugging away. The birthplaces of all three speak for themselves: Kirkcaldy, Cambridge, Trier. In practice, most of the world is now integrated into a Western economic system in which, as Smith recommended, the market sets most of the prices and determines the flow of trade and division of labor, but government plays a role closer to the one envisaged by Keynes, intervening to try to smooth the business cycle and reduce income inequality.

As for non-economic institutions, there is no debate worth having. All over the world, universities are converging on Western norms. The same is true of the way medical science is organized, from rarefied research all the way through to front-line healthcare. Most people now accept the great scientific truths revealed by Newton, Darwin and Einstein and, even if they do not, they still reach eagerly for the products of Western pharmacology at the first symptom of influenza or bronchitis. Almost every element in the periodic table was discovered by a Western scientist; the six discovered by Russians are the only exceptions.

Only a few societies continue to resist the encroachment of Western patterns of marketing and consumption, as well as the Western lifestyle itself. More and more human beings eat a Western diet, wear Western clothes and live in Western housing. Even the peculiarly Western way of work – five or six days a week from 9 until 5, with two or three weeks of holiday – is becoming a kind of universal standard. Meanwhile, the religion that Western missionaries sought to export to the rest of the world is followed by a third of mankind – as well as making remarkable gains in the world’s most populous country. Even the atheism pioneered in the West is making impressive headway.

With every passing year, more and more human beings shop like us, study like us, stay healthy (or unhealthy) like us, shop like us and pray (or don’t pray) like us. Burgers, Bunsen burners, Band-Aid, baseball caps and Bibles: you cannot easily get away from them, wherever you may go. Only in the realm of political institutions does there remain significant global diversity, with a wide range of governments around the world resisting the idea of the rule of law, with its protection of individual rights, as the foundation for meaningful representative government. It is more as a political ideology than as a religion that a militant Islam seeks to resist the advance of the late twentieth-century Western norms of gender equality and sexual freedom.⁹

In short, it is not “Eurocentrism” to say that the rise of Western civilization is the single most important historical phenomenon of the second half of the second millennium after Christ. It is a statement of the obvious. Defined neither culturally nor geographically but institutionally, Western civilization emerges as the most successful operating system yet devised for industrial societies. For it is not persuasive to argue the Western civilization triumphed because of imperialism. Many other civilizations had tried building empires, with much less success. The only credible explanation, I believe, is that the “killer applications” of Western civilization evolved first in northwest and then spread from there: the idea of competition in both economic and political life as legitimate; the Scientific Revolution on the basis of the experimental method;

the rule of law based on private property rights; modern medicine; the consumer society; and the worth ethic, Protestant or otherwise. The great strength of this institutional approach is that it explains the timing and location of Western ascendancy much better than other models that emphasize geography, culture or empire.

Is decline and fall nevertheless what lies head for Western civilization? In demographic terms, the population of Western societies has long represented a minority of the world's inhabitants, but today it is clearly a dwindling one. Once so dominant, the economies of the United States and Europe are now facing the real prospect of being overtaken by China (on a current dollar basis) within twenty years (on the basis of purchasing power parity, it has already happened). Western "hard power" seems to be receding in the Greater Middle East, from Iraq to Afghanistan, while the "Washington Consensus" on free market economic policy disintegrated in the financial crisis, which seemed to reveal a fundamental flaw at the heart of the consumer society, with its emphasis on debt-propelled retail therapy. The Protestant ethic of thrift that once seemed so central to the Western project has all but vanished. Meanwhile, Western elites are beset by almost millenarian fears of a coming environmental apocalypse.

Perhaps more importantly, Western civilization appears to have lost confidence in itself. Beginning with Stanford in 1963, a succession of major universities have ceased to offer the classic "Western Civ." history course to their undergraduates, and attempts to revive it have been roundly defeated. In schools, too, the grand narrative of Western ascent has fallen out of fashion. Thanks to an educationalists' fad that elevated "historical skills" above knowledge in the name of "New History" – combined with the unintended consequences of the curriculum-reform process – too many British schoolchildren leave secondary school knowing only unconnected fragments of Western history: Henry VIII and Hitler, with a small dose of Martin Luther King, Jr. A survey of first-year History undergraduates at one leading British university revealed that only 34 per cent knew who the English monarch was at the time of the Armada, 31 per cent knew the location of the Boer War, 16 per cent knew who commanded the British forces at Waterloo (more than twice that proportion thought it was Nelson rather than Wellington) and 11 per cent could name a single nineteenth-century British prime minister.¹⁰ In a similar poll of English children aged between eleven and eighteen, 17 per cent thought Oliver Cromwell fought at the Battle of Hastings and 25 per cent put the First World War in the wrong century.¹¹ Throughout the English-speaking world, moreover, the argument has gained ground that it is other cultures we should study, not our own. The musical sampler sent into outer space with the *Voyager* spacecraft in 1977 featured twenty-seven tracks, only ten of them from Western composers, including not only Bach, Mozart and Beethoven but also Louis Armstrong, Chuck Berry and Blind Willie Johnson. A history of the world "in 100 objects", published by the Director of the British Museum in 2010, included no more than thirty products of Western civilization.¹²

A striking illustration of the problem is the way in which Western history is taught in elite American universities. If one poses the question "What are the most significant events in modern history?" no two people, and certainly no two historians, would give the same answer. I submit that a list of significant historical subjects that omitted the majority of the following twenty would be regarded as incomplete in the eyes of any reputable newspaper, magazine, textbook or encyclopedia publisher. To provide a rough measure of importance in this sense, the numbers in parenthesis are the number of times these terms appeared in the average professor's newspaper of choice, the *New York Times*, in the past 12 months:

1. [Any period of] British history (31)

2. The Reformation (52)
3. The Scientific Revolution (8)
4. The Enlightenment (163)
5. The American Revolution (111)
6. The French Revolution (11)
7. The U.S. constitution (87)
8. The Industrial Revolution (68)
9. The American Civil War (13)
10. German Unification (2)
11. World War I (609)
12. The Russian Revolution (21)
13. The Great Depression (245)
14. The Rise of Fascism (6)
15. The Third Reich (52)
16. World War II (2,746)
17. Decolonization (16)
18. The Cold War (846)
19. The history of Israel (7)
20. European integration (69)

In assessing the range of courses provided by three major U.S. history departments—those of Harvard, Stanford and Yale—I have simply used this list as a benchmark. If you were an undergraduate at one of these institutions in the fall of 2016, which of these subjects would you have found covered by the courses on offer to you?

The answer in the case of Harvard is: not many. To be precise, a historically inclined student would have looked in vain for a course on all but seven. German Unification, Fascism and the Third Reich were covered by a single course, “HIST 1265: German Empires, 1848-1948.” There were also courses that covered the Russian Revolution, the Great Depression, the Cold War and European Integration. This was a somewhat meagre showing for a department that lists 55 faculty members, of whom only seven are listed as being on leave this semester. Twenty Harvard historians are listed as specialists in the history of the United States. Yet, last semester at least, the undergraduate looked in vain for education about the American Revolution, the making of the Constitution, and the Civil War.

The picture at Yale looks at first sight better, until one realizes that nearly all the coverage was provided by just two courses: John Merriman’s “HIST 202: European Civilization, 1684-1945,” and Paul Kennedy’s “HIST 221: Military History of the West since 1500.” Aside from these two, only four other faculty members—of a department numbering 67—were engaged in teaching any of the topics on my list last fall semester. Similarly, at Stanford, six courses were on offer that related to the twenty topics in our list. That leaves 42 faculty members whose interests would seem to lie elsewhere.

Now, this is not to say that the other courses available at these three universities are without value. It *is* to say that undergraduates wishing to increase their familiarity with significant events in the history of Western civilization would be justified in feeling short-changed. These findings are all the more surprising when one reflects on the relative stability over time of the geographical focus of history departments on American and European history.

It is worth looking at some of the courses that were available at Harvard, Stanford and Yale in the fall of 2016. Take, for example, Harvard’s History 1954: “Emotions in History.” The

course description was as follows: “What is the place of emotion in history? The question itself holds multiple meanings, and in this course we consider two in particular: how to write the history of emotion(s), and how the historian’s emotions affect the writing of history. Do historians benefit more from proximity to, or distance from, their historical subjects? Should historians of emotion suppress, or cultivate, their feelings of empathy? Does emotive writing inevitably fail the test of scholarly rigor and balance? We will explore some possible analytic frames for the history of emotion and debates over the subjectivity of history, and consider their application to case studies drawn from Australian history.” It strikes me as not wholly surprising that this course had, according to the [my.harvard](#) site, a total enrollment of one.

Or consider the following course titles available at Yale, which were among the options available to students interested in North American history last fall:

History 4XXJ “Indigenous Religious Histories”

History 1XXJ: “Witchcraft and Society in Colonial America”

History 283: “History of the Supernatural”

History 260J: “Sex, Life, and Generation”

Stanford’s History 41Q was entitled “Madwomen: The History of Women and Mental Illness in the U.S.” It enticed potential students by proposing to “explore how gender has shaped the experience and treatment of mental illness in U.S. history” and asking the question: “Why have women been the witches and hysterics of the past?” I do not wish to dismiss any of these subjects as being of no interest or value. They just seem to address less important questions than how the United States became an independent republic with a constitution based on the idea of limited government, or how it survived a civil war over the institution of slavery.

The contrast with the courses that were offered by the Harvard History Department in the fall semester 1966 is very striking (see appendix). For example, students of American history were offered “Hist. 61a: The Growth of the American Nation, 1600-1877” and “Hist. 160b: The American Revolution and the Formation of the Constitution,” as well as “Hist. 164b: The United States in World Politics.” There were no fewer than twelve courses in British history in the course catalogue: too many, no doubt, but better than nothing, which is what students in the fall semester 2016 were offered. In all, the History Department of 1966 offered 27 courses on my 20 important historical subjects, five times more than their counterparts today.

There are two problems with the new history that has displaced the old. The first is that some of it is so disconnected from our contemporary concerns that it is little better than the antiquarianism scoffed at by the *philosophes* 250 years ago. The second problem is that the *microcosmographia academica* is so often accompanied by overt politicization. Indeed, some of it is so skewed by contemporary concerns that is fundamentally unhistorical. For example, Stanford’s History 3A, “Making Palestine Visible,” claimed to show how “Palestinian claims to rights” had been rendered “illegible for much of the American public.” The course description went on: “This learning experience, incorporating discussion and clarification at its core, connects with the national and Stanford campus discussion of activism on Israel-Palestine.” The same university’s History 263D, “Junipero Serra,” requires students to participate in “a formal debate on the ethics naming university or public buildings after historical figures with contested pasts.” (Pointedly, the course description adds: “Taught in English.”)

I began with Gandhi. Let me conclude with Churchill, who is often thought of as his polar opposite, if only because of some derogatory terms he once applied to him. “There are few words which are used more loosely than the word ‘Civilization’,” declared the greatest of all

Western leaders in 1938, at a time when civilization as he understood it stood in mortal danger. “What does it mean?” His answer was as follows:

It means a society based upon the opinion of civilians. It means that violence, the rule of warriors and despotic chiefs, the conditions of camps and warfare, of riot and tyranny, give place to parliaments where laws are made, and independent courts of justice in which over long periods those laws are maintained. That is Civilization – and in its soil grow continually freedom, comfort and culture. When Civilization reigns in any country, a wider and less harassed life is afforded to the masses of the people. The traditions of the past are cherished and the inheritance bequeathed to us by former wise or valiant men become a rich estate to be enjoyed and used by all.

The Central principle of Civilization is the subordination of the ruling class to the settled customs of the people and to their will as expressed in the Constitution ...¹³

These days, most economists and political scientists agree with Churchill, though they use rather different language when they are emphasizing public order, private property rights, the rule of law and other benign institutions.

In 1938 the principal threat to Western civilization appeared to come from within it: from Germany. Yet Churchill understood that Hitler was not the real threat; the real threat was the delusion of the appeasers within his own party “that the mere ... declaration of right principles ... will be of any value unless ... supported by those qualities of civic virtue and manly courage – aye, and by those instruments and agencies of force and science which in the last resort must be the defence of right and reason.” Churchill was emphatic. “Civilization will not last, freedom will not survive, peace will not be kept,” he declared, “unless a very large majority of mankind unite together to defend them and show themselves possessed of a constabulary power before which barbaric and atavistic forces will stand in awe.”¹⁴

Barbaric and atavistic forces are abroad to day, too. But today, as then, the biggest threat to Western civilization is posed not by other civilizations, but by our own pusillanimity – and by the historical ignorance that feeds it.

Notes

¹ Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations*.

² See e.g. Kagan *Paradise and Power* and, more recently, Schuker, “Sea Change.”

³ See most recently Osborne, *Civilization*.

⁴ See Fernández-Armesto, *Millennium*; Goody, *Capitalism and Modernity* and *Eurasian Miracle*; Wong, *China Transformed*.

⁵ McNeill, *Rise of the West*. See also Darwin, *After Tamerlane*.

⁶ Based on data in Maddison, *World Economy*.

⁷ Details in Fogel, *Escape from Hunger*, pp. 9, table 1.2, and 13, table 1.4.

⁸ Figures from Chandler, *Urban Growth*.

⁹ For an illuminating discussion, see Scruton, *The West and the Rest*.

¹⁰ Matthews, “Strange Death”; Guyver, “England.”

¹¹ Amanda Kelly, “What did Hitler do in the war, miss?” *Times Educational Supplement*, January 19, 2001.

¹² MacGregor, *History of the World*.

¹³ Churchill, “Civilization,” pp. 45f.

¹⁴ Churchill, “Civilization,” pp. 45f.