

## The West, the World, and The Battle of Ideas

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By most measures, the West ought to declare victory in the process of globalization. Political institutions that developed in the West—representative government, liberal democracies, the rule of law and the core catalog of rights—have become normative throughout the world. While few societies always meet all these expectations, and some fail miserably, the standards by which political systems anywhere are measured are products of western historical developments. Parallel claims can be made about the capitalist economy and advanced technological development: these too are social practices that emerged in the West and that have become global. One can also add forms of cultural expression to this victory march of the West. Especially popular culture—and above all American popular culture—has grown ubiquitous. Western culture is sweeping the world, as are expectations about life style: Mass migration takes place into the West, not out of it.

Of course these matters are not one-dimensional. Despite the magnetic attraction of western paradigms, distinctly non-western traditions continue to thrive, producing alternative cultural forms and social structures that we in the West sometimes experience as substantively rich and at other times as bizarrely strange. Their difference can exercise a compelling appeal, especially artistic expression from outside the western tradition. Yet when it comes to emphatically non-western social practices, the West tends to regard them as backward because they fail when measured against the normative expectations of western liberal democracy and human rights. For example, in parts of the world outside the West, very different attitudes prevail concerning gender equality or individual liberty. In some societies, free speech may be curtailed in the name of blasphemy laws, incongruous in the contemporary West. More broadly, outside the West, a post-democratic sensibility sometimes defends authoritarian political rule on the basis of specific cultural claims, such as “Asian values.” Much the same applies to aspects of Putinism, whose apologists celebrate it as an alternative to a decadent West. While the West has, through a long historical process, come to view human rights as a legitimate claim of all humans everywhere, critics of the West diminish them as suspect, little more than an imperialist program for the imposition of western norms on the rest of the world.

Yet despite the durability of non-western values legacies in parts of the globe, it remains the case that the West predominates, in the sense that its norms have become the standard by which everyone else is measured. Globalization *is* westernization. The various social structures inherited from the western historical experience—liberal democratic governance, the market economy, and free artistic expression—provide the metrics by which all societies are judged. The West is the lingua franca of the world. When world leaders gather, at the UN or at Davos, western fashion is nearly universal, and the few exceptions appear as folkloric outliers, reaffirming the primacy of western expectations, in clothing as much as in everything else.

Still this western victory has turned out to be more complicated than one might expect. A strange sense of insufficiency pervades the West, more so in some countries than others, but overall one finds a hesitation to articulate western values positively, and even a tendency toward resentment and recrimination, the insistence on the misdeeds of the West while ignoring its accomplishments. So we face a paradox: If western institutions have become so predominant, why this self-doubt? Whence the discontent with western civilization? Why no triumph, why no victory parade?

Part of the answer has to do with external forces, really existing adversaries to the West. Globalization is incomplete. The West does face genuine opponents on the outside, barbarians at the gate, who, hostile to the normative aspirations of the liberal democratic project, nonetheless take advantage of some achievements of the West in order to oppose others. They use the tools of modernity for anti-modern purposes. The most salient example involves the strains of jihadism which appeal to an ancient source text and idealize archaic, allegedly original cultural practices, while simultaneously appropriating features of advanced technology to do battle: the airplanes used in the September 11 attacks or the deployment of the internet for ISIS recruitment. While not specifically jihadist, the Iranian nuclear program belongs in the same category. By turning western science and technology against the West, this radicalism engages in a selective modernization, a willingness to embrace advanced Western tools to use against civilizational progress in a fanatic pursuit of backwardness.

There is no better example of an external adversary taking advantage of western institutions than Russia's glaring misuse of the United Nations. The political paradigm of an international order of sovereign states, the Westphalian system, emerged in the West and has spread, with mixed success, across much of the globe. The structure of the UN is based on that array of sovereign states, on to which a set of normative ideals was grafted. Those ideals emerged from the experience of the Second World War, while also building directly on a deeper western legacy, bequeathed by the American and French Revolutions via the European revolutions of 1848 and culminating in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. Russia has however been able to use its position on the UN Security Council systematically to protect abuses of human rights and war crimes, most recently in Syria. It knows how to manipulate the international body precisely in order to prolong the suffering and protect a corrupt regime. Of course the illiberal character of the UN is not only a matter of the Russian seat on the Security Council. Fortunately, the new American Ambassador, Nikki Haley, has begun to call out these problems with an eloquence and moral clarity reminiscent of former Ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan.

Yet the discomfort with globalization is not only a function of such external resistance. There are also internal complications that impede the western project and undermine the capacity to build free societies and to uphold the normative standing of liberty, which lies at the heart of the West. We are bedeviled by a lack of self-confidence and a predisposition to an exaggerated self-criticism, that sees only western failings, which have surely been real, but denies all accomplishments. Within the West, we face a structural unwillingness to articulate western

values—and the value of the West—in a globalized context. This internal resistance to the West constitutes an ongoing cultural deficiency that operates in three different ways.

First, an adversarial rejection of western ideals developed as a result of the perceived distance between aspirations and reality. The failure to achieve western ideals completely turns into a complete rejection of the effort. The turning point in the United States took place during the Vietnam War when much public opinion shifted from understanding the US as a force for democratization to a fundamentalist critique of the US, and by extension the West in general, as the embodiment of violence and empire. While some of the public eventually recovered from the “Vietnam syndrome” during the Reagan years, a legacy suspicion of the West remains; it defined the policies of the Obama administration, and it is widespread in parts of academia, informing aspects of the curriculum, either as an explicit critique of the West or, less stridently, as an inability to design education around the positive transmission of a value tradition: we still cannot teach western culture. The impact on the education of new generations is enormous. One strategically significant consequence is the profound gap between influential parts of academia and government, depriving Washington of a deep bench of area experts specializing in, especially, the Middle East or Latin America. Leading colleges and universities, the institutions that set the tone, rarely mount core courses that presume an identification with the US or the West, a commonplace for earlier generations. On the contrary, the West is deemed to be *a priori* wrong and, by extension, there is no interest in any wrong in the world not deemed to be the fault of the West, always viewed as the ultimate guilty party in world history.

Second, if that anti-imperialist enmity toward the West was the legacy of the sixties, the seventies and eighties introduced different patterns of thinking associated with post-modernism, and especially a philosophical criticism of truth claims in general. Instead of advocating healthy skepticism—the obligation to examine assertions, subject them to doubt and test their veracity—this new wave rejected the very notion of truth itself. Forms of cultural relativism became common, according to which definitive judgments came to be viewed as impossible. If the adversarial opponents of the West during the sixties indicted it because of its alleged wrongs, for the post-modernists the very difference between right and wrong became untenable. This however quickly came to mean that the defining ideals of the West—liberal democracy, rule of law, human rights—lost their validity.

Third, there is an inherent tension between the West and globalization. The very designation “West,” as a term, references a locational specificity, even if the location itself has shifted over time: the western Roman Empire as opposed to Byzantium, the West as Europe versus the Orient in the age of imperialism, West and East in the Cold War, and so forth. Yet despite that specificity of place, the ideals of the West also make universal claims: western values emerged admittedly in one location, the West, but they claim validity everywhere, and this expansive inclination fueled the spread of western practices and paradigms around the world. Yet, precisely this process of global diffusion undermines loyalty to any particular place. For a budding participant in the globalized economy—a college student, for instance—the cultivation of local or even national identities—let alone patriotism—can seem to be counterproductive, a potential barrier to unlimited mobility. The semantic link to place implied by the term “West” is

ultimately at odds with the flexibility demanded by globalization, the disruptive consequence of which entails a programmatic anti-traditionalism that tends to sever local loyalties and therefore erodes forms of social solidarity.

All three components—the animosity toward the West, the relativism of judgment, and the dismissal of tradition—contribute to a multidimensional cultural problem. While cultural problems are certainly hard to solve, they are not impervious to influence. What is required is a reevaluation of values, a concerted effort to shift the cultural discussion in a direction more conducive to a positive self-understanding of the West and its free societies. There are answers to each of the three components of our values crisis:

- The structural animosity to the West in the education system needs to be corrected through institutional leadership that promotes non-ideological, objective learning and supports unbiased discussion that includes all points of views. The recent spate of violent eruptions on campuses across the country shows how far we are from guaranteeing opportunities for open inquiry. Equally if not more important is the need to diminish ideological biases in appointments and in university presses.
- Cultural and ethical relativism undermine the ability to form moral judgments. The capacity to distinguish between right and wrong requires cultivation, and it is the precondition for the civic life of a free society. Ethical judgment should be a goal of the education system. However, historically, moral sensibility benefited from religious instruction. Policies that strengthen the role of religion in education and in the delivery of other social services can contribute to the dissemination of ethical norms.
- The disruption of local communities through globalization processes undermines traditional social ties. Rebuilding the vitality of the life-world of communities requires vesting them with power through structures of subsidiarity and the devolution of decision-making to local levels. Of course international connections will not dissipate, but policies that bolster local communities against external forces can level the playing field. Despite globalization, national identity remains a potent force that can contribute positively to political life; loyalty to place deserves respect, especially in the age of global mobility.

We are now in the midst of an anti-globalist revolt against just that mobility. This populism reflects genuine economic and social anxieties, while also responding to the cultural contradiction of globalization. On the one hand, populism claims to defend threatened identities, communities and traditions; on the other, it runs the risk of losing precisely that dynamic normativity, the pursuit of freedom and equality, which we would give up only at the price of losing the core values that define the West. This conundrum will not be resolved until we recognize the connection between the West, understood as the local project of a few hardy cultures on the Atlantic coast, and the West as the pursuit of a free society on a global scale. Grasping that connection, between the local and the global, is the precondition for the West to articulate its values in order to transmit them. It might seem obvious that the educational

system should convey the inherited tradition and its emancipatory potential. Yet precisely globalization, the product of the boundlessness of western ambitions, contributes to the undermining of the western capacity for self-reflection. The result is a crisis of cultural reproduction: a West curiously reluctant to pass on its legacy to future generations. However, if the West lacks the will to embrace and promote its own project for liberty, its opponents will redefine the story of the West, misrepresenting the grand narrative of freedom into a long march to despotism. To prevent that distortion, we have to engage in the battle of ideas.