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## WATCH ON THE WEST

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### THE WEST AT THE DAWN OF THE 21ST CENTURY: TRIUMPH WITHOUT SELF-BELIEF

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*This essay is an abridged version of a presentation by Alan Charles Kors on November 13, 2000 to FPRI's InterUniversity Study Group on America and the West, chaired by Professor James Kurth. Dr. Kors is Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania, Senior Fellow at FPRI, and President of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. For information about the Study Group or about our larger body of work on America and the West, contact William Anthony Hay, Executive Director of FPRI's Center for the Study of America and the West, [wh@fpri.org](mailto:wh@fpri.org) or call 215-732-3774, ext. 210.*

The willingness to contain Communism, to fight its expansion overtly and covertly, to sacrifice wealth and often lives against its heinous efforts of extension was, with the struggle against Nazism over a much briefer period, the great gift of American taxpayers and the American people to planet Earth. As England under Churchill was in 1940, the United States from 1945 to 1989 was the West, drawing from its values to stand against what was simultaneously its mutant offspring and its antithesis. In the twentieth century, the West met and survived its greatest trial.

On the whole, however, Western intellectuals do not revel in these triumphs. Where is the celebration, and, just as importantly, where is the accounting? The absence of celebration, of teaching the lessons learned, and of demands for accountability is perhaps easily understood on the Left. Convinced that the West above all has been the agent of creating artificial relationships of dominance, subservience, the commodification of human life, and ecocide, Left intellectuals have little interest in objective analysis of the manifest data about societies of voluntary exchange. Nor do they have interest in coming to terms with the slowly and newly released data about the conditions of life and death under the Bolsheviks and their heirs, or in the confirmation and disconfirmation of various theories in the outcome of the Cold War (let alone, given their contemporary concerns, in analysis of ecological or gender politics under Communist or, indeed, third-world regimes). Less obvious, but equally striking, in some ways, has been the absence of celebration on so much of the intellectual Right, because it is not at all certain something worth calling Western civilization did, in fact, survive the twentieth century.

The view that Western civilization has ended has had various incarnations, with the most sensitive souls of many epochs imagining themselves to be the last bearers of the Western torch. One needs perspective in such things: the question, in many ways, was more compelling when Athens fell; when Christian Rome was sacked by barbarians; when the Norsemen ravaged settled Europe; when feudal warlords reigned unchecked; when, at the end of the first millennium, all signs indicated a divine disfavor that seemed to presage the end of the world; when the Black Death left soul and society without mooring. Indeed, imagine the question posed to Catholic and Protestant apologists of the sixteenth century, viewing each other's religions as the Antichrist and seeing Western Christendom rent first in two and then into a multitude of competing sects. How fragile, if not spent, the West seemed during the religious civil wars, or, indeed, during the devastation of the Thirty Years War. There were lamentations in profusion during the Terror, the decades of Revolutionary and then Napoleonic Wars, and again, with gravitas, there were the inward and outward sermons on the West uttered on the slaughterfields of World War I, or at Auschwitz, or in the Gulag.

The West is resilient beyond all seeming possibility, and something gives it that resiliency. The West has survived its barbarians without and — more dreadful yet— its own barbaric offspring within. If it could outlast Attila the Hun and the armed ideologies of the Third Reich or Stalin's Russia, it surely can outlast Jacques Derrida, Stanley Fish, and Michel Foucault. At each moment of seeming dissolution, there were diverse profound voices who analyzed compellingly the depths to which we had fallen; the almost infinite remove we were from any light; the loss of something that we never could recover, and yet the West survived. There was something about its mind, its spirit. Greece fell, but its philosophers conquered the minds of those who conquered its soil, and its natural conceptual categories still organize our understanding of reality and knowledge. Rome fell, but its language became the lingua franca, and, thus, the natural definitional universe of Christendom; its history became the great drama by which to understand the glory and the baseness of political life. The barbarian tribes believed that they had conquered Rome, but Rome, in greater part, had conquered them, and their descendants called their realm the Holy Roman Empire, and these terms were not, until much later, empty words. When the Norsemen came, learning fled to monasteries, and that learning, and, indeed, those monasteries, eventually conquered the Norse, whose Norman descendants, in Britain, founded universities that live to this day. It is the last thing that any frightened monk taking desperate shelter in the eighth century ever could have imagined.

The Thirty Years War seemed to sensitive and moral observers the end of civilization, but its battles are mostly forgotten, and what is it that remains of that seventeenth century? Bacon. Galileo. Descartes. Hobbes. Pascal. Bayle. Boyle. Fenelon. Harvey. Huyghens. Newton. Locke. Louis XIV is a tourist attraction at Versailles; his wars changed precious little. The conceptual revolution of the West, however, changed a great deal in that same seventeenth century. It arose from the very dynamics of the West's models of learning — disputation, accounting for appearances, refining inductive and deductive logic— now linked to expanded education and to printing. What happened in the minds of the graduates of Europe's Christian universities changed the human relationship to nature, to knowledge, to the rights of inquiry and conscience, and to political and economic life. The Christian West kept the traditions of Greek mind alive, and, thus, from its own debates, it overthrew the presumptive authority of the past in matters of natural knowledge and its application. The West believed that we were not cast fatally adrift in this world, but that we could learn new things and that we could alter the sorry scheme of experience closer to the heart's desire for knowledge, order, and well-being. It was not Faust who dreamed of occult knowledge that would make him a demigod, but Bacon, who commanded that knowledge proceed from humility and charity, who became the prophet of the great scientific revolution of the West. Louis XIV is a statue; Bacon is a living force wherever the West touches minds.

It is odd that conservatives question whether Western civilization has survived the twentieth century, at the very time that so many academics on the cultural Left define that civilization as a singular hegemony that stands astride the globe. What, after all, is the "multiculturalism" so ardently but desperately proclaimed in higher education but the belief that there is a hegemonic Western civilization that, unchallenged, frames all issues and that provides almost all modes of understanding? For the so-called multiculturalists, the question is not whether what they see without complexity as Western civilization will survive into the twenty-first century, but whether anything other than Western civilization will so survive. What, after all, do they mean by the hegemony of the West? It is not physical colonialism and imperialism that concern them anymore. No, they see as far more ominous what they term the cultural colonialism and imperialism of the West, a triumphant colonialism of the mind by a civilization that believes in universal categories that transcend its own civilization. The West believes its values to be accessible to all human souls. The West believes its science to be a method by which all human beings, everywhere, can rise above ignorance, superstition, helplessness, and prejudice. The West believes that there are rights and obligations that belong to humanity qua humanity, beyond the power of governments and political wills. Conservatives despair about the disappearance of that West; the cultural Left despairs about its transcendent success.

There are profound ironies about the multiculturalists, so many of which testify precisely to the dynamism and inescapable appeal of precisely that Western civilization to whose dismemberment they are in theory committed. Theoretically, they are all moral relativists, but in fact, they sound, most of the time, like Biblical prophets, calling power to categorical moral duty; or, most commonly, like traditional Western social critics who in this case have not thought out either their facts or their logic terribly well. The postmodern canon, despite its proclaimed alienation from Western thought and values, derives not from any non-Western culture, but from the internal debates of the West and the products of its educational vitality: from Marcuse, Gramsci, Marx, Hegel, and Rousseau — from, in short, the debates that the West always has had with itself. When the issue is involuntary female circumcision, for example, post-modernists seek asylum in America for the victims of such customary rites, citing our notions of legal

equality and of universal human dignity, not their alleged commitments to the relativity of all human values and cultures. They seek tenure at universities with medieval traditions of what the West called “philosophical liberty.” In the first and in the final analysis, so-called multiculturalists are simply Western radicals, in the Western radical tradition, with the most imperial, dogmatic, and absolutist aspirations of all.

The current barbarians within also remind us that the West is, again and again, the author of its own worse follies and abuses, compared to most of which the postmodernists pale into virtual insignificance. We are the authors of our own religious wars and persecutions, our own enthusiastical superstitions, our own conquests of lands and peoples over which and whom we had no rights, our own ultimate nightmares of National or Leninist Socialism, which drowned our world in blood unimaginable in any century but the twentieth, and which truly threatened to bring this civilization to an awful end. We have had the will, however, to learn from depravity and from reality, and to bear ultimate witness to the higher sides of our being. What civilization ever has engaged in more searing analysis and soul-searching of its own sins? Having defeated the National Socialists and the Communists within, the bearers of the best of this civilization have reason for a moment of optimistic pride. What often denies us both optimism and pride, however, is the very stringency of our self-judgment untempered by historical realism. It is a dangerous intellectual error to imagine that goodness, wisdom, order, justice, peace, freedom, legal equality, mutual forbearance, and kindness are the default state of things in human affairs, and that it is malice, folly, disorder, war, coercion, legal inequality, murderous intolerance, and cruelty that stand in need of historical explanation. The West, in theory, always has understood that man has a lower side to which he is drawn, that man is a wolf to man, and that we are governed more by prejudice and passion than by the rational capacity of our minds.

If that is so, however, then we err grievously in our assumptions of what it is that requires particular explanation in the world. We understand the defaults; what should astonish us is the ability to change them. Rousseau and the postmodernists have it all backward in this domain. It is not aversion to difference, for example, that requires historical explanation, for aversion to difference is the human condition; rather, it is the West’s partial but breathtaking ability to overcome tribalism and exclusion that demands explanation. Anti-Semitism is not surprising; the opening of Christian America to Jews is what should amaze. It is not the abuse of power that requires explanation— that is the human condition — but the Western rule of law. Similarly, coerced religious conformity should not leave us groping for understanding, but the forging of religious toleration. It is not slavery that requires explanation because slavery is one of the most universal of all human institutions; it is the values and agency by which the West identified slavery as an evil and finally abolished it. Finally, it is not relative pockets of poverty in the West that should occasion our wonder, for we termed almost infinitely worse absolute levels of poverty as simply “the human condition”; rather, what is extraordinary are the values, institutions, knowledge, risk, ethics, and liberties that created such prosperity that we even notice such poverty at all, yet alone believe it is eradicable.

We are surprised, in a failure of intellectual analysis, by all of the wrong things, and as a tragic result we lose our wonder at the accomplishments and aspirations of our civilization. Depravity never should startle us; rather, the identification and naming of depravity should amaze us, and the attempt, frequently successful, to contain it should fill us with awe. Indeed, that attempt has been so successful in the West, relative to the human condition, that the other world fantasized by the multiculturalists seeks entrance, again and again, at our doors, and the multiculturalists are not riding leaky boats to the otherness of the Third World. Most obviously, the multiculturalists’ ostensible rejection of the West’s philosophical realism, their vaunted “social constructionism,” does not stay with them past their medical doctor’s door.

In the final analysis, it is that last trait, the West’s commitment to a logically ordered philosophical realism, that undergirds its ways of thinking, valuing, and, indeed, worshiping. Such philosophical realism was defended by Augustine, Aquinas, and almost all fathers and doctors of the Church. While various extreme epistemological and ontological skepticisms and various radical irrationalisms have flourished, sometimes with brilliance and profundity in our history, Western civilization always has had at its core a belief that there is a reality independent of our wishes for and ideas of it; that natural knowledge of that reality is possible, and, indeed, indispensable to human dignity, and that such knowledge must be acquired through a discipline of the will and mind; and that central to that discipline is a compact with reason. The West has willed, in theory at least, to reduce the chaos of the world to natural coherence by the powers of the mind.

Indeed, the belief that truth is independent of particular time and place is precisely what has led the West to borrow so much from other cultures, such that, ironically, whole schools of tendentious thought decry Western “thefts,” as

if the recognition of compelling example and argument in others were a weakness, not a strength. The West recognized and adopted Eastern systems of number superior to that of the Romans; it took the Aristotle of its high Middle Ages from the Islamic scholars who had preserved and interpreted it in manners superior to the schools of the West; it took music, art, forms of expression, and new foods from around the earth that, in large part out of restless curiosity about realities beyond its own, it had explored. The West always has renewed and revitalized itself by means of recognizing superior ways to its own. It did so, however, with a commitment to being a rational culture.

The Greek principle of self-contradiction as the touchstone of error, and thus, its avoidance as a touchstone of truth, is the formal expression of a commitment to reason that the Christian West always understood to separate us from beasts and madmen. To live with self-contradiction was not merely to fail an introduction to philosophy, it was to be less than human. Induction from experience always had a logic, and the exploration of that logic was one of the great and ultimately triumphant pursuits of the Western mind. To live with error was to deny oneself the fruits of that human light. Again, the core philosophical assumption of Western civilization is that there is a reality that exists independently of our will and wish, and that this reality can be known by human inquiry and reason. There were many radical ruptures in the history of certain disciplines in the West; there were no radical ruptures with the Western compact with reality and reason. It is that compact that led to a civilization of self-scrutiny and honest borrowings; to a civilization in which self-criticism gave rise to a critical scholarship that could question and either strengthen or repair the West's received beliefs themselves; to a civilization in which the mind could appeal to the rational against the irrational with ultimate success; to a way of understanding that led to the sciences that have changed both the entire human relationship to nature and our sense of human possibilities, always tempered by our knowledge of human nature.

The fruits of that civilization have been an unprecedented ability to modify the remediable causes of human suffering, to give great agency to utility and charity alike; to give to each individual a degree of choice and freedom unparalleled in all of human history; to offer a means of overcoming the station in life to which one was born by the effort of one's labor, mind, and will. A failure to understand and to teach that accomplishment would be its very betrayal.

To the extent that Western civilization survives, then, the hope of the world survives to eradicate unnecessary suffering; to speak a language of human dignity, responsibility, and rights linked to a common reality; to minimize the depredations of the irrational, the unexamined, the merely prejudicial in our lives; to understand, with the possibility of both interest and charity applying that knowledge for good to the world in which we find ourselves.

The contest on which the triumph of the West depends, then, ultimately, is between the realists and the antirealists. The failure to assess the stakes of the struggle between the West and its moral Communist adversary always came from either a pathological self-hatred of one's own world or from a gross undervaluation of what the West truly represented in the history of mankind. The West has altered the human relationship to nature from one of fatalistic helplessness to one of hopeful mastery. It has made possible a human life in which biological atavism might be replaced by cultural value, the rule of law, individuation, and growing tolerance. It also created an intellectual class irrationally devoted to that adversarial stance. Its view of the West, in the past generation at least, had become a neo-Gramscian and, thus, neo-Marxist one, in which the West was seen as an unparalleled source of the arbitrary assignment of restrictive and life-stultifying roles. The enemies of the West represented a fictive make-believe that supposedly cast grave doubt upon the West's claim of enhancing freedom and dignity and opportunity.

With the triumph of the West in reality and with the celebration of Marxism and the Third World shown more and more to have been truly delusional, the adversarial intellectual class appears to be retreating increasingly into ideologies and philosophies that deny the very concept of "reality" itself. One sees this in the growing strength in the humanities and soft social sciences of critical theories that view all representations of the world as text and fiction. When the world of fact can be twisted to support this or that side of delusion (as in astrology or parapsychology), pathology tries to appropriate what it can of the empirical. When the world of fact manifestly vitiates the very foundations of pathological delusion, then it is the very claim of facticity or reality per se that must be denied. This is what we now may expect: the world having spoken, the intellectual class, the Left academic wing of it above all, may appropriate a little post-Communist chaos to show how merely relative a moral good the defeat of Stalin's heirs has been, but it will assail the notion of reality itself. In Orwell's 1984, it was the mark of realistic, totalitarian power to make its students say that all truth was political, "a social construction," as intellectuals would say now, and not objective; that, in the specific case,  $2+2=5$ . By 2004, making students in the humanities and soft

social sciences say the equivalent of  $2+2=5$  will be the goal of adversarial culture. They will urge that all logical and, one should add, all inferential, inductive truths from experience are arbitrary, mere social constructions.

The ramifications of that effort will dominate the central debates of the Humanities in the generation to come. Until there is a celebration and moral accounting of the historical reality of “the triumph of the West,” that “triumph” will be ephemeral indeed. Academic culture has replaced the simplistic model that all culture was functional, a model that indeed could not account for massive discontents or revolutionary change, let alone for moral categories, by the yet more astonishing and absurd model that virtually all culture is dysfunctional. Whole disciplines now teach that propositions are to be judged by their therapeutic value rather than by their inductive link to evidence, that, in the final analysis, feeling good about saying something determines the truth-value of what is said.

Understanding human weakness, however, the West always has believed that it is precisely when we want to believe something self-gratifying that we must erect barriers of experiment, rigor, and analysis against our self-indulgence and our tendency to self-serving error. The human ability to learn from experience and nature, so slighted in current humanistic theory, is not merely an object of cultural transmission, let alone of social control, but an evolutionary triumph of the species, indeed, a triumph on which our future ultimately depends. There is nothing more desperate than helplessness, and there is no more inveterate cause of helplessness than the inability to affect and mitigate the traumas of our lives. If the role of both acquired knowledge and the transmission and emendation of the means of acquiring knowledge is a “Western” concern, then it is a Western concern upon which human fate depends.

In the current academic climate of indoctrination, tendentiousness, and fantasy, the independence of critical intellect and the willingness to learn open-mindedly from experience of a reality independent of the human will are the greatest hopes of our civilization. Has Western civilization survived? That is to ask, has a human relationship to the world based upon the assumption of a knowable reality, reason, and a transcendent value to human dignity and responsibility survived? Has a will to know oneself and the world objectively survived? Has a recognition of human depravity and the need to limit the power of men over men survived? I do not think that free men and women will abandon that hard-won shelter from chaos, ignorance, parochial tribalism, irrationalism, and, ultimately, helplessness.

Has Western civilization survived, its principle of reality justified and intact? Yes indeed, though it requires constant defense. The demand for perfection is antinomian, illogical, and empirically absurd. The triumph of the West is flawed but real. Recall how everything depends on realism in our understanding, and rejoin the intellectual struggle.