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America, the West, and *The American Review*: Challenges and Opportunities in the Continuing Conversation

By **Ronald J. Granieri**



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These are difficult times in the United States and Europe, the primary interest of FPRI's Center for the Study of America and the West. The combination of economic malaise, demographic gloom, and geopolitical chaos have encouraged an increasingly depressing, defensive, and fractious political climate. Voices from across the spectrum rail against a political establishment that has failed to provide stability and security, and look for solutions to self-proclaimed outsiders who claim to offer new ideas unfettered by conventional pieties.

Worries about the future of the West range from the mundane to the eschatological, providing a bull market for predictions of disaster as well as for purveyors of political panaceas. In such gloomy times, it's understandable that many elevate outsiders to savior status. But the transitory bromides of political campaigns offer sparse comfort, and fewer real solutions. If we hope to understand both the nature of the challenges we face and possible solutions, we need to seek the broadest and deepest conversations. *The American Review* aims to provide a forum for just such a wide-ranging, continuing conversation. The conversation will be political, but its approach to politics will extend beyond immediate electoral practicalities, to embrace discussions of culture and society, and how they shape and are shaped by the politics of the day.

Goodness knows there are significant practical issues facing the West, in this election year and for many years to come. Each will require practical responses. To list just a few is to appreciate their complexity and their interconnection:

1. How can we construct sensible immigration policies? The political, economic, and social success of Europe and the United States have made them magnets for people seeking a better life, especially as neighboring regions—from the Middle East to Central America—collapse into violence and chaos. This should be a source of pride for a West that has built stable, prosperous societies. Indeed, it could be seen as a validation of claims that Western models have universal appeal and deserve general respect. But any pride at what has been accomplished pales before persistent fears that too many new arrivals will cause fundamental, even frightening, social change. Permanent walls make little sense in a global economy, especially when European states in particular face the specter of demographic collapse and desperately need literal infusions of new blood. At the same time, simply throwing the gates wide open makes little sense. Clearly, the European Union, like the United States, needs sensible and transparent laws to regulate immigration and to police the boundaries of citizenship, as well as the political will to enforce those laws. Such laws, and the necessary political will, depend upon the development of a respectful, pragmatic, and non-alarmist political climate in which such questions can be debated.

2. Will the states of the West find ways to manage their finances sensibly? Mounting public debt competes with mounting need for public investment and the mounting costs of existing welfare and pension systems for the attention of policymakers. The Western public and political class both continue to dodge difficult questions about spending, taxation and reform. Neither the United States, with its structural deficits and federal budgets where nearly 60% of spending (and growing) is non-discretionary and where anti-tax ideology clouds every discussion about revenue levels, nor Europe, with its haphazard combination of a semi-common currency and failure to coordinate nearly three dozen national fiscal policies, is in any position to lecture the other on this score. In capital cities across the West, cans are kicked down the road, and unsustainable budgetary policies are left to plague the next generation. Citizens are promised solutions sometime after the next election, yet public's own reluctance and inability to discuss necessary sacrifices and tradeoffs feeds the political class's natural reluctance to rock the boat.
3. What about foreign policy? There is a mounting political consensus on both sides of the Atlantic that there are and should be limits to what western states should expect to do in the world. Any confidence in the power of Western material might and moral suasion to change regimes has collapsed in the chaos of Iraq and Afghanistan. The age of imperialism has passed, and it could very well be that the age of liberal internationalism is passing as well, leaving in its wake a world very much like the world of the nineteenth century so dismissively described by [Secretary of State John Kerry](#). This would be a world where great powers compete as regional hegemony, each seeking to defend its interests at the expense of smaller neighbors and also at the expense of each other, as we have seen Russia behave in Ukraine, or Iran in Syria. But even in a world of realist restraint—indeed, especially in such a world—there will be a need for sensible defense policies that apply and use hard power when needed, in order to deal with small problems before they become large conflagrations. Realism and rejecting the role of “world policeman” can't be an excuse for ignoring the world. Merely ignoring ongoing problems can lead to festering conflicts that produce follow-on effects at home, such as possibility that failed states would be incubators for non-state actors, as Afghanistan was for Al-Qaeda leading up to 9/11, or the link between the Syrian conflict and Europe's migration crisis that fills today's headlines. Politicians and pundits can say that they do not play world policeman, but they will still need some kind of coherent strategy to maintain security and stability.
4. Related to all of these is the question of how the West will restore faith in representative government. Despite the fact that the West includes some of the oldest and most stable constitutional orders in world history, from the Atlantic to the Urals we see the breakdown of political consensus, resentments against “elites” and “establishments” and the rise of populist movements that promise to sweep away all encrustations by placing faith in a strong leader. This would be dangerous enough, and an echo of the 1930s, if it were simply a matter of individual demagoguery. What is worse, however, is that many of these movements, though they claim to want to unite people, are based on division and retreat—representing regional particularism, or appealing to certain segments of the population and treating the rest of society as an enemy. Technology and economic globalization have made it possible for ever-smaller groups to speak only to the like minded, and have deepened the sense of alienation and powerlessness felt by so many. The more individuals believe they are subject to forces beyond their understanding or control, the less they feel the possibility, let alone the need, to work together with their fellow citizens for solutions within existing political structures. To recover the vitality of constitutional, representative government, citizens have to rediscover their sense of their own power and their faith in the idea that self-government has a purpose. They also need to think about what they expect from their fellow-citizens, and how they intend to work with those whose political preferences clash with their own. Successful representative governments, after all, depend not unanimity, but on the peaceful, successful management of disagreement, from the individual level up to the highest reaches of government.

Future essays in this journal (not to mention elsewhere within the FPRI stable) will deal with many of those practical problems. In an effort to start us off, this essay will take up a fundamental question: If we agree that the West is in crisis, and that it needs to be revived, then what is the most basic definition of the West?

For many conservatives, defending the West is built around a vision of the West as the embattled heir of a medieval heritage. Bret Stephens offered a pithy example of this in the *Wall Street Journal* back in October. Stephens' "[In Defense of Christendom](#)" combined a critique of European immigration policy and the European Union's general political and economic failures with a larger jeremiad about the decline of Europe's sense of its historical purpose and identity, with baleful consequences for the West.

Stephens quite correctly identified the disturbing weakness and blind spots in contemporary European politics, especially the failure of Europeans to define their collective identity, or to make sacrifices to protect their heritage. Those are precisely the sorts of practical topics that we will address in future issues of the *American Review*, as noted by our laundry list above. After making that case for a more self-assured Europe, however, Stephens then attempts to define that heritage, and sets a trap for himself. "What Europeans no longer believe in," he asserts, "are the things from which their beliefs spring: Judaism and Christianity; liberalism and the Enlightenment; martial pride and capability; capitalism and wealth."

This is a lovely and contradictory catalogue that quite nicely encapsulates the variety of elements in Western Civilization, but it can lead us to conclusions contrary to what Stephens may have intended. For it is indeed true that Judaism and Christianity provide the religious and cultural roots of so much of European and Western society, but "liberalism and Enlightenment" which provided so much of the modern foundation of Western intellectual life sprang up in large part in opposition to that religious foundation. That being the case, what makes the West strong is not the perfect fit between the elements of its cultural heritage, but rather the strength that emerges from internal conflict and contradiction—not uniformity, but multiplicity, and not merely the cultivation of the old, but openness to the new.

One can argue that Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire (who devoted his life to "wiping out the infamous thing" that was Christianity in the name of a vague Deism) or Thomas Jefferson (who declared, "It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg") were both products of the religious traditions that educated and nurtured them. But the intellectual monuments they built on that foundation offered spirited challenges to it. Western thinkers have not sung in unison over the centuries. The Western tradition has drawn its strength from counterpoint. The variety and cacophony of Western Civilization, with its traditions of freedom of individual conscience, is its greatest strength, and compares favorably against alleged stifling uniformity or frightening dogmatism of other civilizations.

The greatest strength of the West over the centuries has been its contradictions. The West has embraced both the orthodox and the heretical; indeed, its growth and success has depended on the ability of western civilization to find new combinations and mixtures within this never-ending dialectic. This has been true not only intellectually, as such seminal Western thinkers as Hegel have described it, but also physically in the ability of European and American society to absorb the new, the outsider, the stranger. Over time those strangers have become part of the West, making their contributions to the development of the societies and institutions that now seem so in need of protection. As William McNeill put it in an essay reflecting on his classic text, *The Rise of the West*, "the principal factor promoting historically significant social change is contact with strangers possessing new and unfamiliar skills." As McNeil notes there (and in his 1997 FPRI essay, "What do We Mean by the West?"¹), the West's relative success has depended upon that openness to new ideas, from without and within.

This lesson has repeated itself over time, and yet is just as regularly forgotten by its beneficiaries, who want to deny their own arriviste history, pull the ladder up behind them, and put an end to the conversation. Thus in the United States we have the irony of Irish-Americans—whose ancestors were treated as dangerous criminal degenerates with strange religious practices and suspicious loyalties to a foreign prince—in the forefront of the movement to restrict immigration. Meanwhile, in Europe we have leaders such as Viktor Orban of Hungary, who presents himself as the defender of Christendom, advocating closed borders and restricted political debate, even though he is himself the leader of a people that once came out of Asia to threaten Europe, and only settled down after being defeated at the Battle of Lechfeld in 955. The very fact that the Magyars can (and indeed should) see themselves as part of the West today is an argument against fearfully closing borders, and an argument for encouraging the lively confrontation between ideas and traditions that continues to enrich the West.

¹ Reprinted in *The Best of FPRI's Essays on America and the West 1993-2015*, edited by Ronald J. Granieri (FPRI, 2015), 45-56. Available under <http://www.fpri.org/articles/2015/08/best-fpris-essays-america-and-west-1993-2015>

The West certainly needs a sense of its borders and contours, in order to understand how it should relate to the rest of the world. There is, however, considerable space between hermetically sealed individual communities and a generalized, deracinated globalism. There's no reason why a West that understands its limits cannot live in peace and harmony with other civilizations, celebrating their contrasts as well as their human commonalities.

Calls to defend Christendom, as articulated by Stephens, also run up against perhaps the single greatest geopolitical contradiction in the West—the tension between an overarching concept of a common civilization as embodied in such terms as “Christendom” and the equally strong attachment to defending the interests of individual nation states. Many commentators attempt to square the circle by claiming that the nation state is itself the highest product of Western Civilization. This will be the subject of a future essay of its own, but deserves some comment here.

Any defense of the West must be based upon a degree of practical cooperation and a commitment to shared values that require compromising the doctrine of national sovereignty. That was the position taken by such founders of the European Union as Konrad Adenauer and Charles de Gaulle. It was also the position of FPRI's Founder, Robert Strausz-Hupé, who called national interest and national security “false counsels” and the defense of freedom “a fraternal, a federative enterprise.” Even if deciding how to balance sovereignty and unity was then and remains a practical challenge, none of these conservative defenders of the West would have imagined that the best way for the states of Europe to deal with external challenges was for each of them to retreat behind their respective moats and castle walls. In other words, they would have resisted the siren call of Vladimir Putin, who has been encouraging Euroskeptics from Hungary to France to Britain in pursuit of Russian national interest. It is a sign of Europe's and the West's crisis that some of the strongest voices proclaiming the superiority of the West criticize Brussels as a far away and threatening superstate but are willing to take financial and political support from a foreign power that makes a mockery of Western ideals and is poised to profit from European weakness. Thus nationalism can be manipulated to undermine the freedom of nations, just as within the West, an excessive emphasis on individual autonomy can undermine the sense of community necessary to preserve a free society.

Which brings us back to the original point, about the abiding contradictions that give the West its vibrancy, and make it so difficult to define, so fascinating.

I can imagine some of the criticisms already emerging from these observations. It is all well and good to discuss the theoretical value of new ideas and impulses, and the need to be open to them, but what about the alleged threat of waves of immigrants who will refuse to integrate (at best) or who may at worst be actual sleeper agents of an Islamist invasion? What should the actual shape of European integration be? Does it make sense to have a European Union at all? What should be the role of national sovereignty and national interest? What sort of cooperation should exist between the United States and Europe? Should it be any different than cooperation between the United States and other regional partners? How can individual freedom and self-government be protected in a global economy that places increasing power in the hands of transnational economic actors? What is the place of traditional religious beliefs or social practices in a society built around individual autonomy?

These questions, and many more, will occupy future issues of the *American Review*. Our essays and reviews will range widely, and we hope to encourage discussion among our authors and between our authors and our readers. Consider this an invitation to decide how you would like to participate in the ongoing conversation. Feel free to contact the editor at rgranieri@fpri.org with your responses to what you have read, your suggestions for future topics, and your proposals for contributions of your own.

The floor is open. Let the conversation begin!

Conservative Heart? Liberal Soul?

By Mark Brennan



Mark Brennan is a historian living in New York.

Arthur Brooks, *The Conservative Heart: How to Build a Fairer, Happier, and More Prosperous America* (New York: Broadside Books, 2015). Hardback, 246 pp. \$27.99.



Donald Trump’s popularity in the primary marathon has upended several campaign truisms. Whereas media-enforced rules of political behavior require candidates to avoid mocking their opponent’s low energy or proposing outrageous solutions, Trump has done both—without apology. His shoot-from-the-hip edicts have catapulted him to the top of the Republican polls. Straight talk from straight shooters wins supporters. Middle class Americans overlook Trump’s privileged birth, content in their knowledge that instead of squandering his youth in anticipation of his inheritance, Trump worked. And worked. And worked. After reading Arthur C. Brooks’ *The Conservative Heart: How to Build a Fairer, Happier, and More Prosperous America*, one might even conclude that Trump moonlighted as a ghostwriter between episodes of *The Apprentice*. Brooks’ thesis—“Conservatives have the right stuff to lift up the poor and vulnerable—but have been generally terrible at winning people’s hearts” (179)—looks like a conundrum whose solution The Donald may ride right into the White House.

Unfortunately, what’s good for the billionaire New York goose is not necessarily good for the think tank president gander, whose latest manifesto aims to, borrowing from Trump one more time, “Make America Great Again!” As head of the American Enterprise Institute, Brooks spends his workdays as an evangelist for “[expanding liberty, increasing individual opportunity and strengthening free enterprise](#).” Here, in seven enthusiastic chapters, Brooks explains how capitalism and free markets have produced “the greatest antipoverty achievement in world history.” (2) As he aptly notes, “Globalization, free trade, property rights, the rule of law, and entrepreneurship” have increased wealth worldwide and eradicated much of the suffering that had been mankind’s abject historical lot. And all this occurred, remarkably, despite the misdeeds of Pecksniffian central bankers, the sheer villainy of third world kleptocrats, the predations of Latin American *caudillos*, and the venality of Republican politicians more concerned with reelection than the solvency of the United States.

In a tone more reminiscent of a tent revival preacher than a thoughtful academic, Brooks urges his disciples to “concentrate each day on the happiness portfolio...resist the worldly formula of misery...[and] celebrate the free enterprise system.” His “Three Lessons for America” remind us that “Human dignity is not a function of wealth,” “All honest work is a sanctified pursuit,” and, *pace* Trump, “It’s not where you start out that defines you, it’s where you are going.” By the time I had finished his chapter on the “Seven Habits of Highly Effective Conservatives” and another one that included the four steps for conservatives to transition “From Protest Movement to Social Movement,” I was wondering if I had been redirected to listicles.com where I was reading a fusion of Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* and the latest GOP talking points. Rhetoric that succeeds when shouted from a podium in Council Bluffs, Iowa, often doesn’t transfer well to the printed page.

But while Republican readers may applaud Brooks’ style, the conservatives addressed in his title will recoil from his substance. He warns again and again that the great American “core safety net” will break unless society makes some hard financial decisions. (142) Brooks cites a 45% increase in food stamp use since 2009 and other alarming poverty statistics as forces soon to rip a giant hole in the safety net. His solution? Exclude from entitlement spending those “people who aren’t really poor.” You mean like millionaire retirees whose monthly Social Security checks fund their fine dining and country club dues? No, not them. Those needy folks donate to the American Enterprise Institute and have been taught by AARP to shriek “We earned those benefits!” should a means test or other reasonable effort be made to stop the transfer of wealth from their struggling, working grandchildren. Brook’s safety net, ideally designed to help those in *times* of need, has morphed into another opportunity for rent-seekers (the bane of true, limited government conservatives) to manipulate their way to undeserved riches.

Nowhere does Brooks consider conservative objections to that same core safety net as destructive of higher conservative principles, such as, for example, the primacy of the family. The conservative safety net starts with the family, extends out to friends and neighbors, and then looks to civic and religious institutions before ever asking for help from any government agency. New York’s visionary senator Daniel Moynihan warned fifty years ago about the social and individual pathologies destroying the American Negro family. By comparison, Brooks says little about rampant divorce or profligate out-of-wedlock births in rebuilding the conservative heart. This is especially odd coming from an author who reminds us throughout the text of his deeply held Roman Catholic faith.

True conservatives may finally see the merit in trigger warnings as they read on. Europe’s childless, aging population only worries Brooks from a fiscal perspective. Although he bemoans the Continent’s empty churches, he fails to address the tectonic cultural shift now that its “mosques are full on Fridays.” He takes umbrage at Joe Biden’s 2014 pandering question on *The View*, “How many of you are single women with children, in a dead-job?” for all the wrong reasons. Brooks blanched, not because Moynihan’s nightmare vision relegating unlucky fatherless children to lifelong poverty has come true, but rather because “elite society” frowns on McJobs.

Instead of proposing conservative solutions as implied by the book’s title, Brooks’ prescriptions come straight from the textbook of nineteenth century Classical Liberalism where a few technocratic tweaks can set us on the path to soulless abundance. Christianity and Islam appear as just two peas in the same cozy religious pod in Brooks’ view, while each child born into poverty and its attendant social pathologies is nothing more than a rational, self-interested, profit-maximizing *homo economicus* larva. Classical liberals who have read their Smith, Bentham, List, and now Brooks, know their supply and demand curves; small “c” conservatives like Moynihan and Trump know their history and culture. More importantly, orthodox conservatives will dismiss the economic remedies promoted in *The Conservative Heart*, aside from having little relation to a conservative disposition, for amounting to nothing outside their proper historical and cultural context.