

What We Mean by the West*

by William H. McNeill

The subject today is the meaning of “the West” in the sense of Western civilization. The first and most obvious point to make is that the meaning of the West is a function of who is using the word. Those who feel themselves to be part of the West—who think of the West as “we”—will surely have flattering things to say about their civilization. Those who think of the West as the “other” are likely to define it in less flattering terms. The basic meaning of the word is “where the sun sets”—one of the cardinal directions. Chinese geomancers drafted elaborate and codified rules about what that direction meant as opposed to the East, North, or South. But we in the West have nothing so precise as the Chinese: to us the West connotes all sorts of characteristics desired by some, eschewed by others.

In the United States, for instance, the West conjures up the Wild West of our historic frontier, a place of freedom, open spaces, new starts, and a certain manliness. But it was also a place where danger, loneliness (largely due to the paucity of women), and lawlessness often prevailed. At the same time, Americans have habitually embraced a contradictory meaning of the West. For inasmuch as all North America was the West vis-à-vis the Old World that colonists and later immigrants had left behind, the West was considered a “more perfect” place conducive, not to danger and lawlessness, but to liberty, equality, and prosperity. Americans were “new men under new skies,” as Frederick Jackson Turner proclaimed.

And yet, at the same time, Americans undeniably brought much of the Old World with them to the New. Hence, whatever qualities were to be found in both worlds tended to unite them and bespeak a broader notion of the West. At first, it encompassed the Atlantic littoral of Europe (the British Isles, Scandinavia, the Low Countries, France, and Iberia) plus America. In time, it came to

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encompass Australia, New Zealand, and all other European overseas settlements. The West, therefore, could be imagined as a civilization independent of locale. Finally, one hears today of a West that includes not only nations populated by European stock, but also non-Western nations that have assimilated Western institutions, techniques, and to some extent values: Japan, for instance.

What the West means in a given context, therefore, depends entirely upon who is invoking the term and for what purpose. But it is fair to say that virtually all definitions of Western civilization drew a line somewhere across Europe placing Germany (at times), Poland and Eastern Europe (at times), and Russia and the Balkans (at all times) beyond the pale of Western civilization. A Briton might joke that “the Wogs begin at Calais,” a Frenchman dub the Rhine the frontier of civilization, a German insist that “at the Ringstrasse the Balkans begin,” and a Pole that Asia begins with the westernmost Orthodox church; but wherever drawn, that line is the most enduring political/cultural demarcation in the history of Europe.

The meanings we give to the West today, in the United States, are by and large translated from the usage of Western Europeans in the late nineteenth century: the era when the British and French colonial empires bestrode the world and Germany and Italy were, by comparison, marginalized. But the outskirts of this Anglo-French core—Germany to the east and America to the west—might demand to be recognized as part of the West at the same time as they rivalled Western Europe for power and influence. The story of Western civilization in the twentieth century, in fact, might be organized around the theme of the alternative visions of Western civilization that Germany and the United States each pressed, by force, on the Euro-Atlantic core.

Perhaps the most profitable way to proceed, therefore, is to trace so far as possible where this Western European self-conception came from, how it was received in the United States around the turn of this century, and how it was subsequently embodied in our own high school and college curricula.

The Classical Cradle

The birth of a concept of a West as opposed to an East can be dated exactly to events that occurred on either side of the Aegean Sea in the years 480 and 479 B.C. That may seem exceedingly strange—to wit, that the West of Anglo-French imagination sprang from a Persian imperial invasion of Greece some twenty-five hundred years ago—but it is nonetheless so. The army of the Persian Empire crossed the Hellespont to assault a ragged confederacy of some twenty-odd city-states. The imperial side deployed perhaps sixty thousand professional soldiers with an abundant supply train stretching fifteen hundred miles. The Hellenic side could field mere militia forces composed of citizen-soldiers. And yet, against all odds and apparent reason, the Empire lost and the militias won. That they did so posed a logical quandary even for the Greeks. But the classical answer offered by Herodotus was simply that free men fight better than “slaves.” This classical explanation of Greece’s deliverance was so

powerful, persuasive, and it must be said, flattering to the Greeks that it echoed throughout the rest of Mediterranean antiquity. The only life worth living, it held, was that of a free citizen who might take part in the public deliberations that affected his fate up to and including the risk of death in battle in defense of freedom. So mighty was this ideal that it survived the conquest of the city-states themselves and entered into the public consciousness of their conquerors, Macedon first, and then Rome. And even though those empires liberated the Greeks themselves from their internecine warfare, the Greeks never ceased to mourn their lost freedom.

The republican spirit born of the love—and power—of liberty pervaded most of the classical texts that have come down to us: not only the histories of Herodotus, Tacitus, and Livy, but the oratory of Demosthenes, Cicero, and Cato, and the theater and poetry of Greece and Rome. The same spirit burst forth again in Renaissance Italy when city-states similar to those of the ancients reemerged, and in time it came to infuse the educational systems of all western Europe thanks to the Humanist revival of the classics. Indeed, that spirit could still be descried in the early twentieth century, playing on the minds and the feelings of Europe's elites, calling them to honor its collectivized ideal of heroic virtue.

I say “collectivized” because the republican spirit always extolled, not personal heroism, but heroism and sacrifice in the service of polity and country. To live, and perhaps to die, for the *patria* was the only way to fulfill human destiny in its most complete sense. So it was that the French revolutionaries would consciously imitate the Roman Republic, nineteenth-century Germans consider their land the modern equivalent of ancient Greece, and the British Empire invoke the universality and virtues of ancient Rome.

But the phrase “so it was” is a loaded one. It may indeed appear natural that Renaissance Italy would notice its resemblance to Classical Greece, but trans-Alpine Europe was a region of dynastic territorial states, even national kingdoms, and thus hardly an analog to the original West of Athens, Sparta, and republican Rome. What is more, the Christian heritage, which was much stronger in northern Europe than in Italy (“the nearer the papacy, the farther from God,” quipped Machiavelli), was utterly at odds with the heroic republican ideal of antiquity. The Church taught obedience and humility as the paths to holiness and salvation, and a life and death given to God, not the state. How was it then, that republican *virtú* born at Thermopylae and reborn in Italy's glorious *quattrocento*, in effect inspired the West as nineteenth-century English and French defined it?

The West of the Renaissance

To address that question, however inadequately in a short talk, we must stretch our minds back beyond even Athens and Sparta to the megalithic cultures of the second millennium B.C. Little is known about them and their mysterious monuments, but it is clear that they spread around the shores of

Europe from the Mediterranean to the North Atlantic, carrying with them the message that when a human being died, the soul migrated west to the Isles of the Blessed, to follow the sun and, like the sun, to rise once again. This doctrine of immortality most likely originated in Egypt, but it took root among many peoples, the Celts especially.

In time, of course, an overlay of Christianity obscured the older megalithic cultures of Western Europe, but the dream of the West as a sort of heaven, the place one goes to escape the crowding, pain, and heartaches of mortal life in an imperfect East, lived on. To the peoples residing near the coast of Atlantic

Europe folk wisdom taught that the West is always a better place, a place whither one's ancestors went, a place to be reborn.

To view the East as impure, even dark, could not have clashed more sharply with the early Christian aphorism *ex oriente lux*: enlightenment comes from the east, the land of the rising sun. And indeed the initial political cleavage between a self-conscious West and East dates from the division of the Roman Empire under Constantine, the first Christian emperor, in the fourth century A.D., and the removal of the imperial capital from Rome to Constantinople (Byzantium). Within a century and a

half the Western Roman Empire fell before the barbarians, but the Eastern Roman (or Byzantine) Empire survived for a thousand years as a center of power, wealth, and Classical culture.

The West, by comparison, was laggard, poor, and soon divided into semicivilized Germanic or Celtic kingdoms. Even after Charlemagne revived the Western empire in the late eighth century, Western Europeans remained threadbare country cousins to the magnificent, grandiose Byzantines. And yet, as is always the case when less "civilized" peoples encounter comparatively richer, mightier, and more highly skilled cultures, the West felt a deep ambivalence toward the East. Yes, those "Greeks"—as they referred to the Byzantines—may be grander than we in material terms, but they are also decadent, corrupt—and heretical. For whatever its other shortcomings, the Catholic West could boast of the papacy and the maintenance of true religion and virtue. The pope, as successor to Peter the Prince of the Apostles, was the guardian of correct Christian doctrine both in theory and, as ecumenical councils invariably recognized, in practice as well. The papacy, therefore, became the sole principle of unity and authority and the focus of consciousness and self-assertion in Catholic Europe, and the line that resulted from the peripatetic activity of missionaries from Rome on the one hand and Byzantium on the other came to divide Europe more deeply and lastingly than any geographical, ethnic, political, or economic one. The West meant Latin, Catholic Christendom, and a balance between church and state; the East meant Greek Orthodoxy and caesaropapism.

But however much the reach of papal authority defined the West, the very tension between spiritual and secular authority in a disunified West meant that the papacy had to cope with enemies within. The Holy Roman Empire, ruled by Charlemagne's heirs, embodied the imperial principle in the West; the autonomous city-states of Northern Italy (that grew rich, ironically, off the

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Crusades) embodied the republican principle, and both opposed papal pretensions to Western unity based on a hierarchical church and dogmatic faith. Their long-simmering rivalries boiled over in the Renaissance and split all northern Italy into the warring camps of the pro-papal Guelfs and pro-imperial Ghibellines, purporting to incarnate the civic humanism of the ancients.

What made the conflicts of Renaissance Italy of surpassing importance to Europe and the world was that the Italians of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were the cultural, intellectual, and, not least, economic leaders of all Europe and the Mediterranean (the Byzantine Empire having shrunk to a rump besieged by the Turks). The Italian project was nothing less than to organize the western promontory of the Eurasian landmass into a single, integrated market economy through commerce, specialized production, new credit mechanisms and new means of mobilizing capital such as the joint-stock company. The city-states themselves pioneered tax systems that allowed them to mobilize relatively enormous resources, floating public debt that allowed them to amortize the cost of wars and public works over decades, and efficient new political/military administrations that magnified the power of civil government (in Florence and Venice at least; in Milan the military escaped civilian control).

This was the achievement—this congeries of skills enhancing power and wealth—that accounts for the otherwise anomalous fascination for things Italian that gripped trans-Alpine Europe from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. The kingdoms of Spain (and through Spain, the Low Countries), France, and England imported Italian methods and so developed such powerful central monarchies that the Italian city-states themselves were soon eclipsed. The French invasion of 1494 sounded the death knell for Italian independence, and yet the wars that followed only hastened the diffusion of Italian knowledge to the north and west of Europe, including the Classics, the ancient philosophies about how to lead a good life, the ideal of collective patriotic effort in war and in peace, a curiosity about (and glorification of) the natural world, and the pursuit of Humanist, not strictly Christian, virtue.

Not surprisingly, this spreading and eager embrace of what appeared to be secular values provoked a backlash among the pious. We call it the Reformation, and it occurred just where one would expect, in the region of Europe that had not absorbed nor benefitted from the new Italian ways of life, but in fact felt exploited by them: Germany. Luther thus represented a reactionary movement, but even so, he and Calvin employed Humanist literary techniques in their effort to elevate the authority of Scripture. The imperatives of survival in the so-called Religious Wars that lasted more than 150 years then forced Protestant and Catholic states alike to learn and use the tools of power forged in the Renaissance. But the concepts of citizenship and republican virtue were the special province of Calvinists, first in Geneva, then in the Dutch Republic, and in Cromwellian England.

All the while, of course, the great Age of Exploration, the invention of printing, and all the discoveries of the Scientific Revolution gradually persuaded Western Europeans, for the first time in history, that they might actually know more than the ancients, and if so, know more than anyone in the world! To

be sure, those annoying Ottoman Turks seemed to belie this new Western conceit. The largest and most enduring of the “gunpowder empires” of the Early Modern centuries, Ottoman Turkey swallowed almost all of Araby, Byzantium, and the Balkans, and cast its shadow over Central Europe. A religious interpretation of the Ottoman phenomenon might dismiss it, not as a sign of Western inferiority, but as God’s scourge for the sins of the Christians. Certainly, neither the Turks nor the Europeans believed they had aught to learn from the other and an intense mutual *disregard* was their preferred posture. But whether one viewed the Turks as punitive agents of God or (like Voltaire) as an interesting, if frightening Asian apparition, no Westerner doubted that his civilization was freer, truer, and in the long run stronger than that of the East, notwithstanding the fact that Protestants and Catholics within the West fought for differing definitions of freedom, truth, and strength.

Birth of the Anglo-French West

Now, so far as the future United States is concerned, the intense (or intensifying) conflict between a definition of the West based on republican virtue and liberty, and a definition based on true doctrine as upheld by the papacy, threw up two major landmarks. They are utterly familiar to Anglo-American audiences, but still worth recalling. The first was the series of English Revolutions from 1640 to 1660 and 1688. In one sense these were as reactionary as Luther’s revolt in that they rejected the efficient “modern” royal government crafted by the Tudors and Stuarts in the name of Parliament’s medieval powers, not to mention sectarian strife. Yet in another sense—by one of those slights of hand by which history is so often turned inside out—after 1688 the “reactionaries” in Parliament invented what amounted to an entirely new kind of sovereignty in what came to be known as Great Britain. It was government by consent of the taxpayers, representative government that asserted rights over the crown and thus preserved a private sphere for differences of religion and much besides, that made private property sacred and thus pulled the sting from the arbitrary tax collector, and that rested, though a monarchy still, on a vigorous dose of republican virtue and liberty. For the English system could not have functioned for a season without the recognition by the enfranchised possessing classes that they must pay, they must serve, as the legal forms of parliamentary consent prescribed. The Glorious Revolution proved to be a remarkably effective compromise that preserved a broad zone of personal freedoms and security against the power of the state, yet permitted the state to mobilize the nation for common action under parliamentary cabinet government.

So successful was Britain in its wars, mostly with France, after 1688, and so alluring was its economic expansion, that the British system became a model for many other European reformers. The English Revolution was a dramatic demonstration of how a movement that began by kicking against the pricks of modernity ended by inventing a sort of supermodernity that left all its foreign competitors gasping for breath. (The leaders of Japan’s Meiji Resto-

ration, who overthrew the shogunate in the name of seclusion only to launch a crash modernization campaign, provide a later example.) By the late eighteenth century, therefore, the French in particular recognized that the institutions established by the Bourbon kings were hopelessly superannuated, laying the groundwork for the second great landmark, the French Revolution. Many Enlightenment thinkers, such as Montesquieu, proposed that France reform its institutions along British lines, but others sought to get to the very roots of things, which is what being “radical” means. What the British called “the rights of Englishmen” the French radicals set out to improve upon by invoking “the rights of all mankind.” Where British liberalism meant oligarchical rule by taxpayers, French radicalism would mean democratic rule by all male citizens, displaying (even imposing) the republican ideals of Athens and Rome: a worship of reason, virtue, liberty, equality, and fraternity. And where the British practiced a certain tolerance and reconciled their freedom with an established Christian church, the French revolutionaries explicitly repudiated the Christian tradition and replaced it with a secular, civic cult.

The excesses and contradictions of the French Republic of Virtue need no elaboration. But it must not be forgotten that the methods of military and financial mobilization employed by the French Republic (and later by Napoleon) were so shockingly successful that Britain, Prussia, and the Austrian Empire had no choice but to copy French techniques or perish. In fact, the demonstration of what democratic government *à la française* could achieve in war was so compelling that even after Waterloo no part of the Western world could afford to neglect it. Taking the common people into active partnership with government and catering to social elites became, quite simply, an imperative of success and even survival in the competition among sovereign powers. Even tsarist Russia and Tokugawa Japan, after their respective humiliations at the hands of the Anglo-French in 1856 and by the Americans in 1854, were obliged to abolish legal inequality and embrace Western methods of national mobilization with all their implications for “citizenship.” Indeed, we may say that the mobilization of the masses became the principal political agenda of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

And that, of course, was the essence of the West—the Anglo-French West—that imposed itself on the rest of the world between 1750 and 1914, and loomed as a model when America’s national career began. It was a model to be imitated, but it also struck Americans as a seat of the corruptions that they yearned to cast off as they crossed the Atlantic and breathed Western air. The United States would be better, purer, freer, even though more ignorant, crude, and clumsy: the same ambivalence Medieval Europe felt toward Byzantium, that northwestern Europe felt toward Renaissance Italy, that Germany felt toward France.

But the United States caught up expeditiously. Favorable geopolitics permitted it to realize Manifest Destiny and build a continental state of enormous proportions by comparison to anything in Western Europe. It did not occur painlessly, as the Civil War graphically proved, but Americans caught up with the core European West by the late nineteenth century and developed that

chip on the shoulder born of an inability to decide whether we ought to imitate or repudiate the Old World. The crisis point came with the First World War. Should the United States join the Anglo-French West in its fight against Eastern barbarians and so merge into the West once and for all, or stay out? Under Woodrow Wilson, Americans chose to engage: and at that moment what we think of as Western civilization, Western Civ, was born.

The West of American Schools

The courses and curricula in the history of Western Civ that became ubiquitous from about 1930 to 1960 were first crafted in response to U.S. belligerence in 1917. Initially, at least at Columbia University, Western Civ was designed to teach soldiers what it was they would be fighting for in Flanders Fields. Imitations proliferated, textbooks were written to accommodate them, and the texts bred a certain standardized interpretation, which in turn formed the intellectual bedrock for two generations of American college students and governing elites. The West as understood in the United States, therefore, was a product of what those students heard in the lecture hall, read in the texts, and expressed in their own words in the essays and examinations assigned in Western Civ courses.

Now, by the time I myself took such a class in the 1930s, Western Civ had evolved (at the University of Chicago and elsewhere) into a powerful and frankly missionary enterprise. The curriculum was based upon a systematic polarity between reason and faith—"St." Socrates versus St. Paul—and the notion that truth was an evolving, discovered thing rather than a fixed, dogmatic certainty laid down once for all in the Bible or church doctrine. The effect of this on young people was to give them a sense of emancipation from old religious identities, often ethnically transmitted, a sense of common citizenship and participation in a community of reason, a belief in careers open to talent, and a faith in a truth susceptible to enlargement and improvement generation after generation.

This was indeed a liberating message for many Americans in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s: it conveyed membership in the great cultivated, reasonable, sophisticated world of "us", the heirs of a Western tradition dating from Socrates and surviving all the tribulations of the Medieval and Early Modern eras. World War II and the cold war only intensified, even as they perhaps narrowed, the agenda of a unified West led by America fighting for freedom and reason and tolerance, and mobilizing itself through an appeal to republican virtue, against new Eastern tyrannies, be they German or Russian.

Yet, oddly, the 1960s were the very moment when college courses in Western Civ began to be abandoned. One reason for this was that young teachers of history, be they graduate teaching assistants or junior faculty, simply refused to become apprenticed by their elders to serve as "slave labor" in the sections of large Western Civ courses. Instead, they tended to stake out their little private kingdoms built around the subjects of their Ph.D. theses. It does

not really matter what one studies, they insisted, for one piece of history is as good as another. What is more, the senior professors always teach courses around their projected next book, so why shouldn't I? After all, I must write books, too, in order to get promoted to tenure. So how dare you indenture me to somebody else's course whose naïve ideas I do not want to propagate anyway?

That attitude was, I believe, a highly destructive and narrowly careerist response to what were real deficiencies in the way Western Civ was taught at the time. But more recently, perhaps since the late 1970s, the debate has taken a different twist as more and more historians agree that the overspecialized "smorgasbord" curricula of the 1960s were disastrous, but disagree about the nature of the survey courses that ought to be reintroduced. Some call for a revival of Western Civ, albeit updated in such a way as to accommodate new historiographical trends. Others insist on world history courses as necessary to introduce young Americans to the globalized, multipolar world they live in today. Unfortunately, world history itself has often been contaminated by what I regard as patently false assertions of the equality of all cultural traditions. Every flower has an equal right to bloom, say the multiculturalists, just as the young rebels of the 1960s said that every subspecialty had equal value in the curriculum. Neither of these propositions is true.

One cannot know everything, hence one must make choices. And just as some facts are more important to know than others, so certain cultures have displayed skills superior to others in every time and place throughout history. Simply imagine living in proximity to a competitor—be it a business, tribe, ethnic group, or nation—possessed of skills greater than yours. There is no use asserting that your culture is just as good as his. It palpably is not, and you must do something about it. Perhaps you will borrow from your rival in an attempt to catch up, in which case your differences shrink, or perhaps you will rally your people to repel the rivals to keep them at a distance, in which case your differences magnify. But one way or another you must change your own ways.

Superiority, real and perceived, and inferiority, real and perceived, are the substance of human intercourse and the major stimulus to social change throughout the course of history. Those actions and reactions, ambivalences and conflicts born of perceived disadvantage, have made human beings what we are and conditioned our behavior. Now, in terms of Western Civ and what our young people need to know about themselves and their world, it seems to me that the obvious globalization of human contacts and interactions means that the study of civilizations in isolation no longer suffices. We must teach and learn world history so as to prepare ourselves to live in a world in which the West, no less than "the rest," must respond to challenges from abroad. World history must make space for all the peoples and cultures in the world, but it must also recognize the fact that events in some places and times were, and are, more important than others. And the principle of selection is simply this: what do we need to know in order to understand how the world became what we perceive it to be today?

Thus, we must focus the attention of our students on the principal seats of innovation throughout history, while remaining aware of the costly adaptations and adjustments, and in many cases the suffering of those conquered or displaced by dint of their proximity to those seats of innovation. The main story line, therefore, is the accumulation of human skills, organization, and knowledge across the millennia, which permitted human beings to exercise power and acquire wealth through concerted action among larger and larger groups of people across greater and greater distances until we reach our present era of global interaction.

Now, in the last four or five centuries the West defined as the European core plus overseas periphery is certainly the major player. But it has not been the only one, and lately we see signs that the center of highest skills may indeed be migrating to the Pacific Ocean littoral, just as it shifted from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic littoral after the year 1650. A proper history of the world needs to make clear that such shifts have occurred in the past and may occur again in the future, and that the mechanism by which they occur is successful borrowing from the prior centers of superior skill and incorporation of such skills into a different cultural context able to make new use of them, innovate further, and so become a new center of superior skills.

That is how the West became dominant in the first place, by borrowing from China above all. China had, quite transparently, been the leading center on the globe between 1000 and, say, 1450: just think of gunpowder, printing, and the compass. Francis Bacon was the first to state explicitly that those borrowed skills were the principal secret to the rise of the West, and he was certainly correct to a large degree. One ought to add the Chinese notion of meritocracy, the examination system for recruitment into a bureaucracy, imported to Europe in the eighteenth century. These four tools of power, technology, and organization Europeans took from China, domesticated into European culture, and exploited in more radical and far-reaching ways than the Chinese themselves had done.

One of the most visceral issues in our current debate over history curricula is how to reconcile this vision of the human past, which is true to the intellectual purpose of history, with the desire to preserve and pass on American institutions and cultural values, which is true to the civic purpose of history. That is no small problem because liberal multiculturalists are loath to admit the true inequality of cultures, and sometimes undermine our specific national heritage by denigrating it, while conservatives are loath to admit the contingency and possible inferiority of Western and American ways. Yet the conservative response is dangerous too. In fact, it makes the same mistake the Chinese made when confronted by the Europeans. Their past was so brilliant that they could not believe the “South Sea barbarians” mattered. Unfortunately, they found out after 1839 that it did not suffice to tell Europeans that they were immoral to trade in opium. They came anyway, bearing guns with which the Chinese could not cope.

The Turks had exactly the same history with respect to their confrontation with Europe except that it happened earlier, after 1699. They had steadfastly

paid no attention to the West until it was too late for them to catch up and adjust their institutions to the European challenge.

If we Americans likewise believe that we possess all the truths that matter—for instance, those expressed by the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and so forth—and need only recite them piously, we will not be able to react intelligently to changes that may occur, or are already in train, in the world around us. We must instead continue to adapt lest we, too, be left behind, and cultivate an open-mindedness towards the rest of world, and be at the ready to borrow ideas and skills of value. To do so, of course, may require that we adapt, adjust, and even reject treasured aspects of our past.

One obvious example is what I regard as Americans' almost obsessive individualism as compared to commitments made to primary groups in which fellow spirits may meet and share and make life worthwhile. I firmly believe that groups are needed to maintain that private sphere of freedom and fulfillment and creative variety that emerged so stunningly in seventeenth-century England. But the preservation of that zone of freedom requires that individuals in fact join in groups and

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choose to devote themselves to common undertakings conducive to the polity's health. That is not to say that groups organized around treasured grievances or anger against all who are different, as displayed by some of the militias and eccentric sectarians today, do not indeed threaten public order and perhaps even the wide world beyond. But for people to spurn all groups, even the family, in the name of individual satisfaction, is no less destructive of culture.

Thus, the choices we make every day about which groups to join and how fully, enthusiastically, and loyally to participate in them will shape the future of our country and the world. I must say that the Internet and other new forms of communication will presumably permit new groups to form around national, ethnic, political, professional, religious, even sports loyalties. Indeed, loyalty to everything from the nuclear family to nationhood to the human race and—if you want to get really cosmic—the DNA form of life—is the potential stuff for a group loyalty even as the rise and fall of groups is the stuff of history. Conflicts among loyalties pose the central moral problem of human life. We all belong to many groups and embody many identities, and how to reconcile them effectively one with another has been the ethical challenge to human beings ever since tight-knit, separate primary groups of hunters and gatherers ceased to be the sole form of human society.

In recent centuries the group called the “nation” has come to the fore. But there is nothing eternal about it, and no one knows what new forms of community may emerge and what new challenges they may pose. It seems to me, therefore, that understanding how groups have interacted in the past is the only preparation for responsible, effective action in the future. And that means that world history is a far better guide than Western Civ alone, which is, in the largest frame, a mere episode in the human saga: an important one, to be sure, which no rational world history would leave out, but an episode just the same.

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So insofar as a concept of the West excludes the rest of humanity it is a false and dangerous model. Situating the West within the totality of humankind is the way to go, and we should in our classrooms move as best we can in that direction, believing always in the ennobling effect of enlarging one's circle of sympathies, understanding, and knowledge, and aspiring to share that belief with our students. There can be no higher calling for historians, and above all, for teachers of history.



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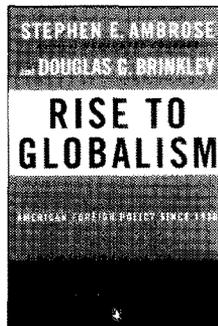
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