

SUBSCRIBE NOW AND RECEIVE *CRISIS AND LEVIATHAN** FREE!



"*The Independent Review* does not accept pronouncements of government officials nor the conventional wisdom at face value."

—**JOHN R. MACARTHUR**, Publisher, *Harper's*

"*The Independent Review* is excellent."

—**GARY BECKER**, Noble Laureate in Economic Sciences

Subscribe to [*The Independent Review*](#) and receive a free book of your choice* such as the 25th Anniversary Edition of *Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of American Government*, by Founding Editor Robert Higgs. This quarterly journal, guided by co-editors Christopher J. Coyne, and Michael C. Munger, and Robert M. Whaples offers leading-edge insights on today's most critical issues in economics, healthcare, education, law, history, political science, philosophy, and sociology.

Thought-provoking and educational, [*The Independent Review*](#) is blazing the way toward informed debate!

Student? Educator? Journalist? Business or civic leader? Engaged citizen? This journal is for YOU!



*Order today for more **FREE** book options

SUBSCRIBE

Perfect for students or anyone on the go! *The Independent Review* is available on mobile devices or tablets: iOS devices, Amazon Kindle Fire, or Android through Magzter.



Etceteras . . .

The Drama of Modern Western Identity

Ask scholars and intellectuals, and they will tell you that Americans and citizens of other countries normally thought of as part of the West live in an era of *posts*: post-cold war, postmodern, postindustrial, post-Christian, post-ideological, post-materialist, post-Eurocentric. It is as though everything has already happened; all the political, ideological, religious, strategic, and emotional options of human life have been discovered and tried; hence the denizens of the *post*-era can look forward only to endless rounds of trying on one familiar suit of clothes after the other: rationalist, romantic, revolutionary, reactionary, multiculturalist, American, pagan, Christian, liberal, conservative.

Ask economists who instruct developing and former communist nations how to achieve capitalist growth, however, and they will tell you that far from being over, the best of the modern era, whose hallmarks are progress and universality, is yet to be. In their optimistic vision, which differs so radically from the *post* mentality of our universities, talk shows, and magazines, the Western inventions of capitalism, science, and liberal democracy have not only been astonishingly successful in their culture of origin, but are on the verge of embracing the vast majority of the world's people. As the great bulk of humanity enters irrevocably on the path of democratic and capitalist development, the prospects for peace, prosperity, and stability will become better than ever before. *Post*modernism? Hah! Not only is the modern age not over, it has not even properly begun.

Modernity Does Not Equal Westernization

Both mentalities are right on their own terms—they are simply not looking at the same reality. In America the late 1990s are undeniably a post-Western age, yet it is also true that the Western-born ideas of democracy and capitalism seem headed for a glorious future. Does this mean that even as America de-Westernizes her culture, pedagogy, society, and religion, China and East Asia are rapidly Westernizing? Is it true, as the optimists claim, that the West is becoming a universal civilization and/or will reincarnate itself in the East? The answer is no. The optimists confuse two different things when

they point to American strategic and technological hegemony and to the spread of democracy and capitalism and conclude that Western civilization is becoming universal. Science, democracy, and capitalism—the three pillars of modernity—may have arisen in the West (to be precise, in England and Holland) but are not in themselves bearers of substantive culture. That modernity had a particular origin in a particular culture is something that has to be explained in terms of that culture, but the virtue of modernity is that, once invented, it is universal and does not require that other civilizations adopt the European form of culture that happened to serve as modernity's cradle. The history of Chinese capitalism may ultimately show that some cultures are better than the West at modernizing, even though they did not themselves invent modernity.

Modernity dissolves all existing civilizations and creates a matrix for future civilizations that do not yet exist. It is not Westernization, but a universal change in the fundamental conditions of any and all civilizations. A fully modern world may have as many, or more, civilizations as did the premodern world because a civilization is not just a matter of democracy, science, and capitalism, but of ritual, manners, literature, pedagogy, family structure, and a particular way of coming to terms with what Christians call the four last things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell. Modernity will not change or remove the basic human condition, to which each culture provides its own distinct answers.

American strategic and technological hegemony is a function of mere instruments, procedures, and methods, not of a culture or civilization. Technology and strategy may be powerful, pervasive, and universal, but by the same token they convey no fixed civilizational pattern, Western or otherwise. Likewise, democracy and capitalism, as elements of modernity, do not equate to Westernization, because there is nothing necessarily Western about them, even though the West invented them.

Exploring the Roots of Western Identity

Despite the recent American trend to identify as a post-Western, multicultural society, Western civilization may survive in some form or other, but if so, one of the preconditions is informed reflection on its past that is neither unjust nor arrogant. And this is where the *post-* ideologues and the optimists again conspire, unwittingly, to muddy the waters. For different reasons, each group has an interest in undermining Western identity in America, reducing it either to a litany of past evils or to a glorious gospel of democracy and capitalism.

Let us attempt to address, therefore, the concept of Western identity as rooted in the “grand narrative” of Western civilization that held sway in most schools and universities from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century. That narrative may have been flawed insofar as the story it told was one of unbroken liberal progress from poverty and superstition to prosperity and the rule of reason, but it was by no means wrong.

In its basic form, the grand narrative followed an axis that spanned five millennia, from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia to mid-twentieth-century America. Its authors

assumed that progress was real, objectively definable, and universally desirable. Being free was better than being enslaved, wealth better than poverty, health better than disease, enlightenment better than superstition, peace better than war, and progress meant the movement toward the better in both civil and international life. The grand narrative told how a fortunate part of the human race found the keys to such progress, and then shared them with others.

The grand narrative of Western civilization provided a cultural and historical basis for a liberal consensus about the merits and potential of the West that was unapologetically rationalist, progressive, and confident of the benefits of science and industry. It was meant to foster excellence in education, common ground in politics, and harmonious assimilation in society. It was, in sum, a construct of American liberalism as it existed before American liberals themselves stopped believing in excellence, reason, and assimilation, and in the grand narrative that underpinned those beliefs. This faith in progress was both a strength and a weakness. By tracing the remote origins of contemporary institutions and doctrines, the grand narrative provided, at its best, a sweeping, eagle's-eye view of the long haul of history that was often inspiring to students and citizens. On the other hand, by looking at the past mainly, if not exclusively, to find the origins of the superior present, the authors of the grand narrative unhistorically ignored those features of past cultures that were not compatible with a modern liberal West. The grand narrative assumed what it set out to explain: that the West existed, and that it was good.

Misinterpreting the West

The grand narrative and its late-twentieth-century fate symbolized and reflected the anguished history of Western identity itself during that period, as it moved from liberal self-assertion through radical critique to liberal self-doubt. However, the grand narrative, even in its triumphalist, midcentury version, was more than simply an ideological scaffolding for contemporary interests. Its authors honestly wanted to express what they thought the West should and could be: a civilization able to diagnose and correct what people saw as its own injustices, and one that promised its members more peace, prosperity, and fairness than others. According to the grand narrative, the West was unique in another way as well. More than other civilizations, it had developed within itself ways of living, thinking, and doing that were universally valid and useful to all, including science, democracy, human rights, and prosperity. The optimists of the 1990s agree. They believe that the time has now come for the principles of the West to form the basis of an international political and economic order based on democracy, free markets, and individual initiative.

But this is a misleading interpretation of the real world today. The grand narrative of the West grew out of an era that was making the uneasy transition from thinking of itself as “civilization” to one in which the West was merely one of several

civilizations. It was thus based on a contradiction: it told a story of universal validity which was nevertheless the story of but one part of mankind.

The ideologues of *post* reject Eurocentrism and claim also to reject any overarching story of how to be or what to do. Their paradox is that they cannot escape the modern story, which is, as the French historical sociologist Jean Baechler put it, simply the arithmetic of reality. The optimists, however, are no more right than the ideologues of *post*, for they, too, mistake the part for the whole. They mistake modernity for the West and think that because modernity is on the march, so also must be the West. Even more inaccurately, they mistake American technological and economic hegemony for the West.

The conclusion of these considerations is that Western civilization is both more and less than the ideologues and optimists think. A fuller story of the West will take into account Victor Hanson's critique of Greek military ideology and Tzvetan Todorov's insights into the clash of Indians and Europeans—still the clash of civilizations par excellence, and one that will never be repeated. Even more important, a fuller story of the West must address the biggest black hole in the liberal grand narrative, the hole that is left when religion disappears from the landscape of civilization. As indicated above, the grand narrative's view of the synthesis of classical and Christian culture that produced the West was an instrumental one. As the narrative had it, this synthesis had to happen in late antiquity for the later North Atlantic civilization of the West to emerge. But if even defenders of the West now realize that its fate is not to be universal, then they have no choice but to seize the chance that scholarship and reflection provide to reconsider the entire history of the West, its religion included, as something other than merely a history of progress toward a now defunct and debilitated liberalism. The house of culture has many rooms, and we owe it to the dead, the living, and the yet unborn to explore it. The world is not flat, and new worlds of consciousness wait to be rediscovered.

DAVID R. GRESS
Foreign Policy Research Institute

Reprinted from *Watch on the West*, December 1997, by permission of the Foreign Policy Research Institute.