
REVIEW ESSAY

What Is the West?



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Despite its brevity—or perhaps precisely because of it—Philippe Nemo’s book *What Is the West?* (translated by Kenneth Gasler [Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005]) is an elegant and intriguing combination of a scholarly review of the historical and philosophical foundations of what is usually termed “Western civilization” and a political manifesto for this broad cultural area in the “civilizational geography” of the world today.

The basis of Nemo’s reflections, although never explicitly stated as such, is the perception of an unsettling tension between the cosmopolitanism of Western culture and the apparent self-containment of other historical cultural identities. The West not only differs from other cultural spaces, but differs in a way that they do not differ from one another. Western identity has an antinomic character: although its essence is defined by *universalistic* liberal values, it is nonetheless the result of a *particular* historical process of cultural genesis. Because of this paradox, the author, an accomplished French historian of ideas, is compelled not only to highlight its uniqueness, but also to inquire into its contemporary political implications. Thus, what begins as an investigation into the history of ideas turns out to be an investigation into geoculture.

The morphogenesis of the West consists, in Nemo’s view, of five chronological stages of equal importance. The first is the “Greek miracle”—the emergence of the Greek polis at the end of the eighth century B.C., an epochal event responsible for generating the idea of a free society ordered by law, reason, and education. The law is then perfected in the Roman cosmopolis and becomes an abstract set of rules concerned with determining and guaranteeing individuals’ private property. But in

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the course of this prosaic process, the subjects of the law become much more than simple members of a tribal group: they become for the first time persons—unique, autonomous, moral agents. The invention of the person, of the irreducible individual ego, Nemo regards as the source of the later Western humanism. The third stage in the building of Western culture is the advent of Christianity, which introduces a new ethic and a new relationship with time. The biblical ethic is one of compassion, which makes everybody responsible for whatever is bad in the world, be it poverty, war, or human suffering. Unlike the ethic of the Ancients, compassion does not settle for striking a balance in one's duties. Instead, the Christian ethic of love, Nemo maintains, incites men to a permanent rebellion against the idea that evil is a normal condition in the world. This permanent rebellion is closely related to Christianity's second contribution: the substitution of linear time for cyclical time, a cultural innovation that makes possible the idea of progress. Time is no longer an eternal revolving; it now has a beginning and an end. The biblical eschatology empowers the individual's historical existence. His transforming actions in the present have a past and are oriented toward a future. Man's efforts in history gain a new value because of this cultural metamorphosis of time.

These three stages in Nemo's morphogenesis are uncontroversial and highlight the synthesis between the Greek, Roman, and Judeo-Christian strata that underlie Western culture. The third stage, however, brings with it a significant reevaluation of the late Middle Ages and the contribution of the Scholastics, in contrast to the traditional cultural history provided in the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth century—illustrated, for example, by the work of Jacob Burkhart, who preferred to emphasize the revolutionary role of the Renaissance and the Reformation in the advent of modern liberal, individualistic culture. Following the work of Harold J. Berman on the history of law, Nemo holds that the Gregorian Reform and the broader "Papal Revolution" of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries are the locus of the real synthesis of Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem. The result is a new *weltanschauung* in which Greek science and Roman law are thereafter put to work *within* History. Thus, during this period, the Catholic Church replaces the Augustinian theology of original sin with Anselm's doctrine of free will and later introduces the doctrine of the purgatory. These theological innovations emphasize that each individual human being's efforts matter in the "economics of his salvation" and therefore stimulate him to play an active, as opposed to a contemplative, role in the world. This stage in the morphogenesis of Western culture, which is also characterized by the recovery of ancient philosophy, marks the separation with the Eastern (largely Orthodox) Christian area. In fact, the expression *Western culture* originally denoted this distinction between Western Christianity and Eastern Christianity.

Until the Papal Revolution, cultural evolution was largely symmetric in the Christian East and West. (The schism between the Church of Rome and the Eastern churches took place in 1054, and the division was cemented only after the Latin crusaders' conquest of Constantinople in the thirteenth century.) The Eastern, or

Orthodox, culture also rested on the same three strata—Greek, Roman, and Judeo-Christian—although even before the official separation, the Eastern and Western churches embraced different mixtures of or placed different emphases on these strata. What differentiates Eastern Christianity from Western Christianity in Nemo’s view is its undervaluation of men’s temporal action and its lack of emphasis on human reason and progress. To illustrate the difference between western Europe (and its extra-European cultural colonies) and eastern Europe, he singles out a famous passage in Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov* in which the Great Inquisitor (a metaphor for the Catholic Church) condemns to death Jesus Christ, who happens to be on a second coming to the earth, because his religious pathos threatens to disturb the peaceful and happy existence to which the people have become accustomed since his first coming. In the parable, Jesus Christ embodies what Dostoyevsky considers to be the heroic and authentic faith of the Christian Orthodox, but for Nemo it simply proves the Orient’s deep-seated skepticism and contempt of reason and its overvaluation of the transcendent.

The last stage in the morphogenesis of Western culture, according to Nemo, is the creation and promotion of modern liberal democracy, beginning with the English Revolution in the seventeenth century and developed further by the American Revolution and the French Revolution in the late eighteenth century and by the Italian Risorgimento and similar events all over Europe and elsewhere in the nineteenth century. This last stage marks the advent of intellectual liberalism, political liberalism—as embodied in modern representative democracies—and economic liberalism. In all of these three cases, the new paradigm is a self-regulated or self-organizing order along with pluralism, which is not only tolerated, but also starts to be positively valued. As these words themselves suggest, Nemo relies on the works of F. A. Hayek and Karl Popper to illustrate the content of this paradigm, which is synonymous with classical-liberal philosophy and which he believes fully encapsulates Western culture’s salient traits. His willingness to identify Western culture with liberalism is so strong that he simply rejects, for example, the idea that the totalitarian regimes in the West had anything to do with Western culture as such. According to Nemo, they simply reflect an episode of collective regression to a previous atavistic and tribalistic layer of the kind Hayek discussed.

Hayek’s theory of cultural selection also helps Nemo explain the spread of Western culture’s two great intellectual inventions—the rule of law and the market economy—into other cultural areas. The discovery of these two intellectual constructions, Nemo emphasizes, has brought all humanity extraordinary technical, scientific, and economic progress, although *Homo sapiens sapiens* has remained biologically the same for the past 150,000 years. The West invented them, but now the West exerts a competitive pressure in the world. Other cultural areas therefore imitate and adopt—sometimes with great success, as in the case of technology—the outer forms of the Western civilization. At this point, however, Nemo’s optimistic liberal universalism abandons him, and he becomes preoccupied with the West’s identity and with the

protection of that identity. The adoption of Western technology or Western political institutions in Chinese, Indian, and Muslim cultures, for example, does not alter the fundamental cultural gap between them and the West. Thus, Nemo's excursus in the history of ideas that I have succinctly sketched turns out to be a pretext for a geopolitical reflection.

His immediate concern, when the book was first published in French in 2004, was the enlargement of the European Union eastward (now a *fait accompli*). This movement amounted, in his view, to a dilution of the Western character—Greece being disregarded—of the former fifteen-nations club of the old continent by the inclusion of countries that have not passed fully or partially through one of the morphogenetic stages described earlier. This lack of passage is particularly the case for Romania and Bulgaria, two predominantly Orthodox countries that did not experience a Papal Revolution during the Middle Ages and, like the Catholic and Protestant countries in central and eastern Europe and Latin America, experienced a more or less incomplete “liberal-democratic revolution” in the nineteenth century. Moreover, the European Union's enlargement process now includes Turkey, a Muslim country, on its waiting list, which we may assume Nemo finds an even more worrisome development. He therefore proposes instead the creation of a Western Union, which would include all of the properly Western countries under his criteria: the Catholic and Protestant countries of western Europe, Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, various European dependencies overseas, and maybe Israel, if it chooses a Western instead of a Zionist identity. This Western Union should be a confederacy, less centralized than the current European Union and with a more balanced North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Although this proposal expresses a “clash of civilizations” mentality à la Samuel Huntington, Nemo asserts that the Western Union should promote “the dialogue of cultures” in its political dealings with other cultures.

Beyond its erudite historical analysis and its surprising policy proposal, *What Is the West?* is the epitome of a paradox—the paradox of twentieth-century liberalism. Although during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries liberalism emerged as a self-conscious political philosophy in opposition to tradition and conservatism, two hundred years later, after it reached the peak of its influence in the nineteenth century, its proponents seem to find that their closest ally is the sensibility of their former ideological adversaries. The challenge of promoting universal liberty has thus faded away in favor of prudence in the name of liberty; the forward-looking attitude has been replaced with archaeological pursuits of a Golden Age of Liberty or, in the case at hand, of a pure Western identity. To the extent that Nemo's fear of “cultural *métissage*” rests on a preoccupation with the liberal message that inspired the thought of Hayek and Popper during the twentieth century, we must hope—for the sake of both the Great Society and the Open Society—that this fear is unfounded and that liberal values remain universal and capable of transcending the peculiarities of history.

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