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Civilization: The Six Ways the West Beat the Rest

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The way we evaluate Western civilization is deeply influenced by our political views.

Niall Ferguson is known in leftist circles as a ?right winger,? even a ?super-conservative'. He has always resisted this characterization: ?I'm just a doctrinaire liberal at heart. Quite why I keep getting called rightwing is only mysterious to me?. True; he is not a conservative. He is a liberal right winger, a neoconservative. Wikipedia's entry on neoconservatism [2] correctly includes him as one of its proponents. The Western world has moved so far left that a committed believer in the spread of individual rights, free markets, enlightenment values around the world, including feminism and gay rights is now seen as a conservative. Certainly, what the left finds ?highly problematical? is Ferguson?s objections to the welfare state combined with his approval of American military interventions.

The intellectual history of neoconservatism cannot be reduced to Iraq, but calling for aggressive ?regime change? is clearly a radical idea in line with France's Jacobin/imperial efforts to create a ?universal? rational human by exporting the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. John Gray was not way off the mark in suggesting that neoconservatism represents the continuation of the Marxist-Leninist internationalist project. (1)

It is common for neoconservatives to contrast the excessive egalitarian policies of the French Revolution with the moderate goals of the Glorious Revolution and the American Founders; the philosophes? obsession with abstract principles conceived in isolation from historic circumstances with Burke's preference for ?ancient liberties? and inherited prejudices.(2) Ferguson plays up well this trope. But neo-conservative politics are barely consistent with the principles of classical liberalism embodied in the Bill of Rights of 1689 and the American Constitution, which call for small government, and nowhere for the Westernization of the world through deficit-inducing nation-building ventures. They are certainly inconsistent with the so-called ?paleo-conservatives? of today, who tend to be nativists, non-interventionists, and sympathetic to the loyalties and particular identities of different cultures.

Ferguson reduces the uniqueness of the West to the question: ?how it came to dominate the Rest?? According to him, the West rose above the Rest through the development of six ?killer apps?: i) a more fragmented political setting that worked to encourage competition and innovation both between and within states; ii) a predilection for open inquiry and a scientific attitude towards nature; iii) property rights and the representation of property-owners in elected assemblies; iv) modern medicine, v) an industrial revolution based on both a supply of sustained innovations and a demand for mass consumer goods; and vi) a work ethic that included more productive labor with higher savings and capital accumulation. Ferguson does not claim originality here, but credit is due for his command of the subject and his ability to engage a wide audience of lay readers and students alike with ease, intelligence, good judgment, and a keen command of comparative history.

Regrettably, Ferguson?s idea of the West is devoid of any pre-modern past. Less historically literate readers will wrongly think that the West came into existence sometime in the 1600s with the arrival of these apps. He writes early on that the West is merely ?a set of norms, behaviors, and institutions with borders that are blurred in the extreme? (p. 15). This idea is consistent with his neoconservative universalism. Westerners are no more than individuals who have managed to download successfully the killer apps ? regardless of location, religion, ethnicity, and historical background. The world, after all, has been converging with the West, or so he argues, with only a few bothersome radical Muslims standing in the way.

We are made to think that until Europe started to advance economically in the 1500s this continent could not have been anything else but an undeveloped ?backwater?. What about the unsurpassed intellectual and artistic achievements of Westerners going back to ancient times: the Greek invention of dialectics, the *polis*, philosophy, historical writing, prose writing, and tragic poetry; the Hellenistic ?revolution? in the natural sciences, Aristarchus and his heliocentric hypothesis, Eratosthenes and his estimation of the earth?s diameter, Archimedes and his foundations of hydrostatics, Euclid and his *Elements* (called by Bertrand Russell ?one of the greatest books ever and one of the most perfect monuments of the Greek intellect? (3)), the new philosophies of Cynicism, Epicureanism, Stoicism; the Roman republican style of government and their invention of a legal persona, Livy?s massive history of Rome, Tacitus?s *Annals*, the essays of Seneca, the comedies of Plautus, and the poems of Virgil, Ovid, and Lucretius; St Paul and his new dispensation and religion for all humans, St Augustine and his confessional penetration into the individual?s inner space, Capellanus and a vernacular literature dealing with love, romance, and seduction, El Cid and a vernacular poetry dealing with the epic, Dante and the placement of vernacular literature on a par with biblical and classical literature, Chaucer and the freeing of poetic diction, the use of participial constructions, and a wider vocabulary with polysyllabic words, Ockham?s nominalism and the view that universal essences are nothing more than concepts in the mind, Cistercians, Victorines, Franciscans, Dominicans and the proliferation of heterodox religious movements, and the democratization and laicization of mystical experience?

These, and so many other achievements, are exceptionally Western [3] and can never be downloaded by other cultures. Ferguson mentions a few great men like Mozart, Montaigne, Spinoza, and Schubert, but only to marvel at the additional works they might have created had they enjoyed the longevity of the average global consumer today. He is unmindful of Nietzsche's Last Man [4], or Jacques Barzun's *From Dawn to Decadence [5], 1500 to the Present, 500 Years of Western Cultural Life* (2000). He values the ?peculiarly Anglo-American? contribution to the rule of law, the sanctity of the individual, and the security of property

rights, ?ensured by representative, constitutional government? (p. 97). This seems to be the ?killer app? that made the others possible. But one is left wondering how China and the East Asian ?tigers? achieved their higher levels of competitiveness without downloading the West's political pluralism. His argument on the rapid ascendancy of Asia over the Western world is made efficiently. The rise of China is no longer reducible to cheap labour goods, but involves a set of carefully crafted policies backed by some solid institutional templates: ?China has increased expenditure on research and development by a factor of six in the past decade, has more than doubled the number of its scientists and is now second only to the United States in its annual output of scientific papers? (p. 318). In the realm of education the shift is ?most compelling? with students from Asian countries outperforming students from all the Western countries in standardized tests of mathematical aptitude.

Yet Ferguson ends the book emphasizing the value of Western individual freedom, and calling upon Westerners to re-introduce a liberal education that teaches history in a substantial way, ?that can bolster our belief in the almost boundless power of the free individual human being? (p. 324). Ferguson calls the catching up in wealth and power by the ?resterners? the ?Great Reconvergence?. But if the Chinese are becoming Western (he observes, additionally, that 40 million Chinese have converted to Christianity), why be bothered if they are ascending? Why find fault in China's authoritarian style if this same style ? as Ferguson implies (306) ? accounts for China's ascendancy over a liberal West that lacks the ?authoritative? character, the boldness and resolve, to require students to study their own history? And if he really thinks that the liberal app is the most important one, why not concentrate on the promotion of human rights and democratic reforms in China? Why would it matter then if the Oriental side of a uniformly cultural economy rose slightly above the Occidental side?

My sense is that Ferguson knows, in his heart, that the East is hugely different from the West. It is very difficult, almost contradictory, to highlight the universalistic aspects of Western modernity, focus on the ?Great Reconvergence?, and then portray China?s rise as an epochal shift with serious implications for Western culture. He writes that ?the biggest threat to Western civilization is posed not by other civilizations, but by our own pusillanimity? (pp. 323?4). But what can he mean by this other than his frequent calls for decisive interventions in the Near East? The Iraq war has been a costly failure: almost 5,000 American soldiers killed, over 33,000 seriously wounded, hundreds of thousands of Iraqi dead, $1 trillion in military expenses, and a political situation that is still uncertain ? to put it mildly [6].

He is clearly worried by the lack of assimilation of Muslims in Europe, and the key role being played at universities and elsewhere by Islamic centres. He tabulates that if the current Muslim population of the UK continues to grow at the current rate, its share of the total population would pass 50 per cent in 2050 (p. 290). So, it looks like the West needs to show resolve on Muslim immigration and assimilation ... by teaching kids Western liberal arts? I doubt a population built on mass migration from non-Western lands would be enthusiastic about Elizabethan England, Homer, Chaucer, Aquinas, or even Shakespeare. He says that ?mass immigration is not necessarily the solvent of a civilization, if the migrants embrace, and are encouraged to embrace the values of the civilization to which they are moving? (p. 290). It is worth noting that only westerners are inviting resterners to come to their homelands; there is no ?reconvergence? whatsoever in this respect; this is one killer app Asia does not care for. If current trends continue, the West will become a less homogenous civilization, whereas China, Japan, and India will remain uniquely native.

The lack of spirit and boldness on the part of Westerners may well lie in their inability to reproduce themselves above replacement levels. G. K. Chesterton once said that a people that forgets its ancestors will care little for its descendants. Pat Buchanan, in *The Death of the West* *[7]* (2002), makes a more contemporaneous observation: in attacking its heritage as racist, imperialistic, and patriarchal, the cultural Marxist [8] establishment engendered a hedonistic and childless generation that welcomes mass immigration and cheap labor as the only ?realistic? solution to its affluent retirement.

Ferguson handles immigration in the manner that is expected in polite liberal society ? lest one faces illiberal reprisals [9]. He eulogizes over the fact that with mass migration ?a single American civilization is finally emerging? (p. 139) ? a mixed-race species. Why ?finally emerging?? Because both left and right liberals

believe that the mass influx from Africa, Latin America and Asia represents the fulfilment of Western egalitarianism. The emergence of a ?homogenized humanity? (p. 198) fabricated through the ?democratic? blending of races, religions and cultures is the end of history. Ferguson thus notes that the number of mixed-race couples in the United Sates ?quadrupled between 1990 and 2000?, and that ?whites will probably be a minority of the US population? (pp. 138?9).

These ideas have little in common with the same Burke that Ferguson otherwise defends against the singular and abstract citizen of the French Revolution. Calling for the merging [10] of races, the dissolution of the age-old European ethnic character of the West, and the imposition of universal citizenry across the Islamic world, is a revolutionary idea drastically at odds with Burke?s emphasis on the particular customs and folkways of different cultures, and the ?ancient liberties? of *Englishmen*. Burke was a ?traditional conservative? [11] and a liberal by the standards of his day. He would have rejected the rationalist contempt for the past contained in the anticipation that the United States will soon become a white-minority country. The core of Burke's conservatism is fear of rootlessness, and revolutionary agendas that disregard ancestry and hierarchy, loyalty and duty, inherited habits and prejudices.

Neoconservatives and libertarians alike are continually making the claim that the U.S. is a ?propositional nation? founded not on ancestry, past customs, and ethnicity, but on universal ideas. One of the passages often cited in support of this claim is this famous one from the Declaration of Rights: ?We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?. Another set of well-known words, cited by Ferguson, is contained in Abraham Lincoln?s Gettysburg Address, stating that the United States was a nation ?conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal?. But as critics [12] have argued, the Constitution, which is the law of the land, and the Federalist Papers, which articulate key ideas upon which the American government was founded, are really a ?diverse? mixture of Greco-Roman ideas, Christian beliefs, Lockean natural-right ideas, conservative French ideas from Montesquieu and other sources. The concept of people-hood ? ?We the people? ? as it was understood at the time, is also essential; it referred to the habits, ancestries, ethnicity of the founders, rather than all the peoples of the planet. As John Jay, writing in the *Federalist*, observed, ?Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country to one united people, a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs?.

Wishing that the nations of the West retain their cultural character in historic continuity with their ancestors, reproducing their own populations, with some influx from outside, but not mass migration, is not racist (4); it is conservative. A conservative idea of Western civilization would include the Enlightenment as well as the Christian tradition, the Greco-Roman principles of natural aristocracy, and the age-old ethnic character of European peoples. Conservatives don't accept the premises of the ?end of history? and the unchallenged ascendancy of a liberal global system that discredits and neutralizes local loyalties, historical communities, and family life. The liberal enlightenment did promote a radical and universalizing side of the Western heritage. But this enlightenment was nurtured by a particular historical setting, religion and community, and without these traditions the heritage of the West amounts to nothing more than a set of killer applications.

Notes

1. John Gray, ?Utopianism redux?, *The American Interest*, (Summer 2006). For a recent French study that carefully examines the intellectual roots, or the ?three ages of neoconservatism?, see Justin Vaisse, *Neoconservatism. The Biography of a Movement* (Cambridge, MA, 2010).Back to (1)
2. See Gertrude Himmelfarb?s *The Roads to Modernity , The British, French, and American Enlightenments* (New York, NY, 2004).Back to (2)
3. Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (London, 1974), p. 221.Back to (3)
4. As it is, left multiculturalists can never be satisfied; although Ferguson dedicated pages condemning the negative aspects of Europe's (particularly Germany's racial) imperialism, Pankaj Mishra associated

Ferguson?s approach to the West with Theodore Lothrop Stoddard?s book, *The Rising Tide of Color against White World Supremacy* (1920), which is another way of calling Ferguson a racist.Back to (4)

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[4] http://www.nietzschespirit.com/files/The_Most_Despicable_Man_is_Coming...the_Last_Man.html
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