
Is Western Civilization Worth Defending?

By Philip Carl Salzman

"An anthropologist is someone who respects the distinctive values of every culture but his own. We in the West are all anthropologists now."

--Roger Kimball, *The Fortunes of Permanence: Culture and Anarchy in an Age of America*--

Soon after arriving at McGill University in 1968 from a year of ethnographic field research in Iran, I met an intelligent and sincere young man, an anthropology student, who told me that North American culture was the most corrupt culture in the world. I asked him where else had he been in the world, where presumably he had found less "corrupt" cultures. He said he had not been anywhere else, perhaps taking my point that he did not really have evidence for a comparative judgment.

Our "counterculture" cultural revolution of the 1960s was formative, and has set the tone for social criticism and condemnation ever since. Reverse ethnocentrism, rejection of one's own people, country, or culture, has ever since been rule of the land, at least in universities and among self-appointed intellectuals and cultural critics. In the subsequent half century rebellious students have themselves become teachers, professors, journalists, lawyers, legislators, and judges, which means that many among our elite assume negative judgements against our heritage cultures, and strive to counter and block our traditional principles and institutions.

Contributions of the West

Before exploring the criticisms that purportedly justify a condemnation of the West, I would like to set out some of the contributions of the West to the world.

The European Enlightenment expanded the realm of knowledge from sacred texts and traditional understanding through the application of human senses of observation to gather new information about the world. The human senses were extended through the technological innovations of telescopes and microscopes. New working assumptions, such as "uniformitarianism," the heuristic hypothesis that the phenomena of nature operated according to natural laws and were constant through history, contributed to the development of empirical and theoretical science, which hitherto had not existed in the modern sense. Observation and experimentation provided a new basis for scientific knowledge, stimulating technological innovation. The social corollary was that knowledge had become open to criticism and disputation, theories and hypotheses had to be tested by evidence. Contrary positions were no longer heresy, but important parts of scientific debate.

As Ayaan Hirsi Ali¹ describes it, "Holland was in many ways the capital of the European Enlightenment. Four hundred years ago, when European thinkers severed the hard bands of church dogma that had constrained people's minds, Holland was the center of free thought. The Enlightenment cut European culture from its roots in old fixed ideas of magic, kingship, social hierarchy, and the domination of priests, and regrafted it onto a great strong trunk that supported the equality of each individual, and his right to free opinions and self-rule.... Here, in Leiden, was where the Enlightenment had taken hold. Here, the Dutch let each other be free."

Science invented in the West has become universal science, adopted by individuals, countries, and cultures around the world. Yet, the West today remains the stronghold of scientific progress, as can be seen by the awarding of scientific Nobel Prizes and other indices.²

During the 18th century, Western European countries, but especially England, made innovations and inventions that

¹ In her autobiography *Infidel*, Free Press, 2007, pp. 238-39.

² <http://www.scimagojr.com/countryrank.php>

<https://www.phdstudies.com/article/What-Are-The-Best-Countries-For-Scientists/>

transformed economic production. During the first half of the 18th century, there was an agricultural revolution based on a scientific approach to cultivation and rearing livestock. Rotation of crops, drainage, and fertilization were among the elements that increased crop production by magnitudes. Selection and nutrition doubled the size of domesticated animals. At the same time, less labour was needed, and half of the agricultural workers moved off the land.

The second half of the 18th century in Western Europe saw the industrial revolution based on steam engines and factories, the initiation of mass production. Labour was provided by the agricultural workers who had left the land. But at the same time, human labour began to be replaced by machines, and products were produced with much greater efficiency. The scene was set for modern industrial societies.

These innovations and inventions were the West's gift to the world, and they have been borrowed, adopted, and adapted by countries and cultures around the world. Scientifically-based technology has transformed production in every country around the world. For the first time in history, prosperity became possible; material goods have become widely and inexpensively available.

One consequence of the agricultural and industrial revolutions was that it was now cheaper and easier to produce things than it was to take them from other people, as had been the case throughout most of history. For example, slave labour was no longer necessary to produce a surplus, and England banned the slave trade at the beginning of the 19th century.

Industrial development was made possible by capitalism. The basic principle of capitalism is that part of the proceeds from sales of products, part of the profits, should be reinvested in the company. The result of this is that there is an expansionary tendency in companies; they are able to improve efficiency and/or the quantity of production through the resources reinvested in the company.

There is a risk, of course, for those who invest; if the company fails, they lose their investment. The other side of the coin is that those who invest in a successful company will be paid their share of the profits. While originally most companies were privately owned, today most large companies are publicly owned through the sale of shares in the stock market. The largest holders of company shares today are provincial, union, and university pension funds, which means that ordinary people indirectly own many public companies and receive a share of the wealth.

Civil and human rights in state societies are inventions of the West. Individuals are no longer subjects of the ruling authority, but are citizens with rights. The institutions of modern Western governments are democratic, with legislatures and many executives, and in some cases judges, elected in popular elections. As Winston Churchill said, "Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time..."³ From the time of the ancient Greeks, the West has been the repository of the idea and practice of democracy. Those who wish for freedom and for self-government, look to the West as an example.

The civil rights of equality before the law and of having a voice in one's government are complemented by the human rights of free speech and conscience, freedom of religion, freedom of movement, freedom of choice in marriage, and the many other basic rights set out by the United Nations in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

This Universal Declaration was, however, condemned by the American Anthropological Association as not being "universal," but being a document guided by Western values. Yes, guilty! It was Western Civilization that generated the idea and practice of "human rights." That is something to be proud of and to celebrate. Those around the world who are deprived of their human rights know where the better places are; just follow the paths of massive migration.

Western literature, art, music and architecture have been borrowed by countries and cultures around the world. It was my pleasure to attend an excellent concert of Western classical music by the Tokyo String Quartet. Western jazz and popular music is played everywhere; many people around the world learned English from listening to popular songs. Western literature, from the Greeks on, is translated into many languages and widely read. Western art is widely appreciated, and many examples purchased by people in foreign lands. Western architectural design and architectural technology have been borrowed and applied in many distant lands.

Western universities, in spite of some of their current bazaar practices, overwhelmingly remain the top educational institutions in the world, as demonstrated annually by the various ranking systems.⁴

³ <https://www.winstonchurchill.org/resources/quotes/the-worst-form-of-government/>

⁴ <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2018>

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/best-universities/best-universities-world>

Critique and Condemnation of the West

The West is accused by critics among its own people of many sins: imperialism, class oppression, sexism, racism, slavery, and religious intolerance.

The dominant theory today among university social sciences and humanities professors is called “postcolonial theory.” This theory is derived from marxism-leninism, flavoured with the work of Edward Said. It argues that all the world was a peaceful and egalitarian place with people mixing beneficently and happily, until the evil imperialists from Europe—the British, French, Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese—invaded the peaceful peoples of the world, murdering some and exploiting the remainder. Allegedly, cultural institutions of the wider world, such as castes in India and tribes in North America, the Middle East, and Africa, were invented and imposed upon luckless conquered populations in order to divide them so they could not resist the ruthless Western imperialists.

This make-believe postcolonial theory is based on a wilful blindness to the facts of history. Imperialism was a major phenomenon of world history for millennia prior to the venturing forth of the Europeans in the 16th century: the Akkadian Empire of 2300 BC⁵, the Hittite Empire of 1700 BC⁶, the Babylonian Empire of 1600 BC⁷, the Persian Empire of the 6th century BC⁸, the Chinese Empire 221 BC to 191⁹, the Arab Muslim Empire 632-1258¹⁰, the Mongol Empire of 1206-1405¹¹, the Ottoman Empire 1299-1922¹², the Russian Empire 1721-1917¹³, and dozens and dozens of others.¹⁴

So the impression that postcolonialists wish to impart, that imperialism was uniquely a product of the West, that Western imperialism was uniquely evil, and that it corrupted through violence and imposition a peaceful and happy world, has no basis in historical reality. In addition to all of the earlier empires, societies outside imperial reach were often tribal societies characterized by a constant jockeying, competition, conflict, and warfare among tribes for access to resources and for honour and glory.

Postcolonialism exhibits a double standard: the West is condemned for its imperialism, but Asian, African, and pre-Columbian American (Aztec and Inka) empires are ignored. This theory also offers a racism of low expectations in describing non-Western cultures and societies solely as victims, lacking in their own agency, subject only to the will of their Western conquerors. Postmodernism is false history.

The West is also condemned as a slaving society. Of course, slaving around the world predated Western involvement in the Atlantic slave trade. It was common in virtually all ancient societies, and was a centerpiece of the Arab Muslim Empire¹⁵ and the Ottoman Empire that succeeded it¹⁶, and it continues in the Middle East today.¹⁷ Britain banned the slave trade in 1807¹⁸, and following that during the 19th century most other Western countries banned the slave trade and the holding of slaves.¹⁹

But critics of the West do not mention the longer term and more extensive slavery elsewhere in the world. The African tribes and kingdoms that provided slaves for the Atlantic slave trade are rarely, if ever, mentioned. Nor is the 1400 years of slavery in the Middle East, including slaves that are held today, mentioned. While we justly find slavery abhorrent, once again exclusively the West is condemned for an engagement with slavery that is much briefer and involves many fewer victims than other peoples who are much more culpable, and who today continue to justify the practice of enslaving other people.

⁵ https://www.ancient.eu/Sargon_of_Akkad/

⁶ <https://www.ancient.eu/hittite/>

⁷ <https://www.ancient.eu/babylon/>

⁸ https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/acha/hd_acha.htm

⁹ http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/main_pop/kpct/kp_qinhan.htm

¹⁰ <http://www.historyfiles.co.uk/KingListsMiddleEast/ArabicIslam.htm>

¹¹ http://web.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Mongol_Empire

¹² http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Ottoman_Empire

¹³ <http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/whic/ReferenceDetailsPage/ReferenceDetailsWindow?zid=dcc9d0d206242325281cfcee7a64562f&action=2&catId=&documentId=GALE%7CCX3048600073&userGroupName=seat24826&jsid=887400bc157db40d4db452da4506fcb4>

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_empires

¹⁵ <http://originalpeople.org/the-arab-muslim-slave-trade-of-africans-the-untold-story/>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_slavery_in_the_Muslim_world

¹⁶ https://www.academia.edu/23497500/Slavery_in_the_Ottoman_Empire_c._1500_-_c._1900

¹⁷ <https://www.globallslaveryindex.org/region/middle-east-north-africa/>

¹⁸ <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/rights/abolition.htm>

¹⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-slavery/chronology-who-banned-slavery-when-idUSL1561464920070322>

Capitalism is, of course, the main target of anti-Western critics. Its sin is unequal distribution of wealth, which violates the utopian idea of equal economic outcomes for all. This extreme idea of economic equality authorizes the condemnation of the wealthy, whether or not these people are wealthy because they have earned their income. Critics, inspired by marxism, regard capitalism as based on class exploitation, rather than upon the efforts of individuals and the risks that they take.

Critics favour the redistribution of wealth, without considering the production of this wealth. Advocates of socialism abound in the West, yet what we know of socialism in the real world, as opposed to utopian fantasies, is the socialism of the USSR, Mao's China, Cuba, North Korea, and today's Venezuela, and the picture is one of scarcity of goods and poverty in the context of political despotism.

In fact, the capitalist countries have the highest earned standard of living in the world, and the average person with a modern house with running water, sanitation, and appliances, and multiple high horsepower vehicles, has a standard of living not dreamed of by kings and queens a few hundred years ago. I would suggest it is the material abundance that allows critics of capitalism to forget the efforts and difficulty of bringing their prosperity into existence, and that allowed themselves to imagine utopian social perfection.

Western Civilization is also bitterly and continually condemned for patriarchy, the authority and power of men to control women. The case is presented as if the most extreme forms of patriarchy were still intact in the West today. Yet it is in the West that feminists have successfully claimed their rights, where "gender equality" is a dominant value, and increasingly institutionalized. Feminists now push for female ascendancy even far beyond gender equality, as in university enrolments, which are now dominated by females, even in such professional programs as law and medicine. But even as they condemn the West for anti-female sexism, they close their eyes to the continued and systematic oppression and violation of women elsewhere, in the Middle East, South and East Asia, and Africa, far beyond anything seen in the West. An encyclopaedia could be filled with oppression of women in these regions, but I will offer only one of today's little-known examples:

"Sipora, 60, was sentenced in absentia to death by public execution in 2013 by a Tehran court that convicted her of "violating Islamic rules [of the] Islamic Revolution" and "anti-regime activity." Her crime: running an underground organization that found housing solutions for women with abusive husbands who could not obtain a divorce.²⁰ Holland has refused to grant her asylum, and feminists and human rights organizations around the world are silent. Once again, the double standard is evident, and the feminist militants close their eyes to everything but the West.

Where does the anti-West double standard come from? The refusal to criticize other societies and cultures for things that only the West is criticized for doing is the result of cultural relativism. Originating in the anthropological technique of suspending one's own values and judgements in order to understand other people's culture from their own point of view, cultural relativism has evolved into moral and ethnical relativism, on the grounds that all values are cultural, and therefore there is no objective basis for judging customs or practices across cultural lines. So, if our democracy is imperfect, or electors elect a candidate not loved by all, we can denounce our political system and its officials; but we dare not criticize despotic regimes elsewhere, even when they engage in genocide. Similarly, our imperfect gender equality is constantly subject to the most extreme disparagement, while even the most radical feminist dares not remark on the full-fledged subordination of women in other regions and cultures. At the same time, the cultural differences of the West over time, such as 18th century American colonial culture or 19th century Canadian culture of the British North America Act, do not stop some "presentist" critics from condemning those individuals and cultures based on 21st century values and perspectives. When it come to disparaging the West, apparently even cultural relativism may be set aside.

In fact, everyone judges others by their own values. This is true of all individuals and also true of all cultures. Many organizations, Western and international, apply values and rank countries accordingly. The United Nations assesses countries according to "human development," ranking all the regions in the world. The OECD and other groups rank economies for productivity. Other groups rank countries for corruption. Freedom House ranks countries according to their citizens' degree of freedom. Students' school performance is assessed, and countries ranked; so too are universities of the world.

Western literature, art, music, and architecture are disregarded on feminist and racial grounds. In this moment of identity as the highest value, the great works of Western culture are dismissed because they are the work of "dead white men." The value of these achievements may be angrily disregarded because, so the shouts seem to suggest, women only care what women have done or said. The few women authors, painters, and scientists are not sufficient to save Western culture in feminist eyes. So, all of Western culture must go. And while blacks can rightly claim major contributors to jazz and popular music, too much of the rest is the work of whites to be acceptable by blacks. That the awesome accomplishments of Western scientists, philosophers, writers, and artists are dismissed on sex and racial grounds is more

²⁰ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/jewish-grandmother-sentenced-to-death-in-iran-holland-wont-grant-her-asylum/>

a commentary on those criticizing than on Western culture. These anti-Western judgements on the basis of sex and race are deeply illiberal. The treatment of human beings as members of categories, rather than complex individuals, is inhumane and a common cause of atrocities. This is very backward thinking; I would say “tribal,” but I do not wish to disparage tribes.

Ibn Warraq, as escapee from the Islamic World, has written a book entitled *Why the West is Best*.²¹ We could continue to argue the case, but I suggest we end by considering what people around the world actually choose. Leave aside people’s words; what do their feet tell us? For centuries immigrants have flowed to the West, escaping from Asia and Africa. Those are real life choices, often entailing great effort, discomfort, and risk. Immigrants to Canada and the U.S. in past centuries assimilated to Western culture, striving to become Canadians and Americans. What does that tell us about whether Western Civilization is worth defending?²²

About the Author



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Experience (1999), *Black Tents of Baluchistan* (2000), winner of the Premio Pitr–Salomone Marino, *Understanding Culture: An Introduction of Anthropological Theory* (2001), *Pastoralists: Equality, Hierarchy, and the State* (2004), *Culture and Conflict in the Middle East* (2008), *Postcolonial Theory and the Arab-Israel Conflict* (2008), and *Thinking Anthropologically 3rd Ed*, (2010). His latest book publication is *Classic Comparative Anthropology: Studies from the Tradition* (2012). In public affairs, he was a member of Middle East Strategy at Harvard (2008-2010), a member of the Board of Directors of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (2004-2012), and is currently a Senior Fellow at the Frontier Centre for Public Policy, a member of the Academic Council of the Canadian Institute for Jewish Studies, a Fellow of the Middle East Forum (2015-), and a member of the Board of Directors of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (2016-). His articles have been published by the Frontier Centre, the Middle East Forum, the Gatestone Institute, the Canadian Institute for Jewish Research, the Macdonald Laurier Institute, and *Areo Magazine*.

²¹ https://www.amazon.com/Why-West-Best-Apostates-Democracy/dp/1594035768/ref=la_B001JPADHK_1_10?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=151957427sr=1-10

²² The challenge today is the invasion of millions of uninvited and illegal incomers who wish to impose their African, Asian, and Latin American languages, cultures, and religions on the West. What these people tell us is that the West is worth conquering and destroying. Western leaders, who have set aside Western culture for multiculturalism and diversity, are colluding with them in the delusion that surrender is the higher humanitarianism.

<https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/11542/multiculturalists>

<https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/11625/mass-migration-uninvited-guests>