

Western Civilization

Part 3: Western Civilization in Modernity

by Sophie Dulesh

This is the last of a three-part series on the origin and evolution of Western civilization. Part 1, “Cradle of Western Civilization,” and Part 2, “From the Cradle to Modernity,” were published in the Spring, 2017 (#200), and Spring, 2018 (#204), issues, respectively.

Modernity or the Modern Age is defined as the post-medieval historical period; central to *modernity* is the emancipation from religion, specifically from the hegemony of Christianity, and the consequent secularization (Wikipedia).

“The last 300 years are often depicted as an age of growing secularism, in which religions have increasingly lost their importance. If we are talking about theist religions, this is largely correct,” says Yuval Harari.¹ And a defining part of modernity has been the Western struggle for separation of church and state. Though there existed some areligious rulers, the states themselves were manifestly religious – and for good reason: the union with religion cemented the rulers’ physical and spiritual powers over the people, despite the endless fights for dominance and religious wars that devastated and decimated populations. The Reformation wars were deadlier than the Black Death or World War II.

The turmoil unleashed by the Reformation was mostly relieved with the 1555 Peace of Augsburg, expanded in 1648 with the Peace of Westphalia: rulers were allowed to decide on the religion within their borders and the Catholic Church was not to

interfere. It was an early watershed in the emergence of the modern nation-state. The Reformation (1517) and the Industrial Revolution, the invention of the printing press (1455) and of firearms (1503) gave the nation-state an enormous push forward. Still, formal separation between religion and state was not achieved until 1789 in America and 1790 in France. It is as yet an unresolved problem in many countries even outside the Islamic world. Islam has never undergone this separation of state and religion, vital for any social progress. It has ever been, in the words of Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan Al-Banna, “a religion and a state.” “Islam encompasses all domains including law and the state... the state and religious community are one and the same... and an Islamic state is a type of government primarily based on the application of shari’a...” (Wikipedia).

In the words of Pankaj Mishra:

[Western civilization] made the modern world in the sense that the forces it helped to disseminate – technology, economic organization and science – are still shaping millions of lives... Over the last two decades, elites even in many formerly socialist countries have come to uphold the ideal of cosmopolitan liberalism: the universal commercial society of self-interested individuals that was originally advocated in the 18th century by such Enlightenment thinkers as Montesquieu, Adam Smith, Voltaire and Kant. The particular “experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life’s possibilities and perils” that the critic Marshall Berman called *modernity* has become universal, cutting across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology.²

The 20th century, with its colonial imperialism, two world wars, Holocaust, horrors of the Belgian Congo and “rape of Nanking,” nuclear bombs and mass migrations, marked the beginning of a retreat from the major moral values of the Renaissance despite the continued victorious march of the natural sciences that provided mass prosperity but not security. The total number of absolute poor in the world decreased by more than 700 million between 1981 and 2008, even as the world population rose by 48 percent. Harari writes:

Whereas in ancient agricultural societies human violence caused about 15 percent of all deaths, during the 20th century violence caused only 5 percent of deaths, and in the early 21st century it is responsible for about 1 percent of global mortality. In 2012 about 56 million people died throughout the world; 620,000 of whom died due to human violence (war killed 120,000 people, and crime killed another 500,000). In contrast, 800,000 committed suicide, and 1.5 million died of diabetes... Between 1950 and 2000, the American GDP grew from 2 trillion to 12 trillion. Real per capita income doubled. In Japan, average real income rose by a factor of five between 1958 and 1987. The international economy has been transformed from a material-based economy into a knowledge-based economy. ¹

Yet, as Mishra points out:

The postcolonial world since the mid-20th century has experienced multiple insurgencies by people who have felt cut off from their share of power and privilege: Tamils in Sri Lanka, Kashmiris and Nagas in India, Muslims in the Philippines.²

New Natural-Law Religions

Some Working Definitions:

An idea accepted by the human community as something intrinsic and not subject to change by individual choice is a new **natural-law religion**. It asserts that we humans are subject to a system of moral laws that we did not invent and cannot change.

Morality is a psychological mindset that evolved biologically and culturally to advance human cooperation and is expressed largely at an intuitive emotional level. However, in modernity unlike the ancient world, the basic governing philosophy was conceived and chosen before being implemented and is grounded in reason as opposed to being intuitive.

Moral right means equal respect for all humans who respect the rights of others.

The study of morality, of right versus wrong, is a separate branch of intellectual activity with its own subdivisions, such as moral constructivism (people create morality that becomes the obligatory norm to all and has ‘superhuman power’) and moral relativism (various cultures create their own systems of morality which cannot be compared to one another and are usually incompatible, but which are all equally valid).

Harari writes:

The modern age has witnessed the rise of a number of new natural-law religions, such as liberalism, communism, capitalism, nationalism and Nazism. These creeds do not like to be called religions, and refer to themselves as ideologies. But this is just a semantic exercise. If a religion is a system of human norms and values that is founded on belief in a superhuman [note: NOT supernatural!] order, then Soviet Communism was no less a religion than Islam...Today, the most important humanist sect is liberal humanism...For 300 years the world has been dominated by humanism, which sanctifies the life, happiness and power of *Homo Sapiens*...[Hence] the inner core of the individual gives meaning to the world, and is the source for all ethical and political authority...The chief commandments of liberal humanism are meant to protect the liberty of this inner voice against intrusion or harm. These commandments are collectively known as ‘human rights’... Until the 18th century, religions considered death and its aftermath central to the meaning of life...[Later] liberalism, socialism and feminism lost all interest in afterlife...The only modern ideology that still awards death a central role is nationalism... ¹

And all of those new ideologies, as is natural for religion, have been the source of enormous emotional impact with profound and sometimes violent public responses. Below is Bertrand Russell’s rather curious account of the emotional impact of the then new ideology of feminism:

I took to working for women’s suffrage... It must be quite impossible for younger people to imagine the bitterness of the opposition to women’s equality. When, in later years, I campaigned against WWI, the popular opposition that I encountered was not comparable to that which the suffragists met in 1907...The crowd would shout derisive remarks...Rotten eggs were aimed at me and hit my wife. At my first meeting [two] rats were

let loose to frighten the ladies, and ladies who were in the plot screamed in pretended horror with a view to disgracing their sex...The savagery of the males who were threatened with loss of supremacy was intelligible... [But the females?]. The most prominent opponent of political rights for women was Queen Victoria.³

Liberal Democracy

Since Plato and Aristotle, many great thinkers up to the 19th century regarded democracy as the rule of the ignorant mob. Hegel (1770 – 1831) already considered liberal democracy as the embodiment of human freedom. But only in the mid-20th century did the idea of democracy gain real popularity following the successful wave of liberation movements that swept the world and caused the European colonial empires to collapse.⁴ Notably though, colonialism as we know it would have not been possible without the collaboration of Muslims – from their leaders to the hundreds of thousands of their soldiers who died for their colonial rulers. Francis Fukuyama writes:

[There is a] complete absence of coherent theoretical alternatives to liberal democracy...Industrial maturity cannot be the cause of the latest widespread democratization: liberal democracy is compatible with but it is not necessary for industrial maturity because it is as compatible with a bureaucratic-authoritarian regime...There is nothing inherently incompatible between nationalism and liberalism...There is no inherent conflict between [theistic] religion and liberal democracy [either], except...when religion ceases to be tolerant or egalitarian...Outside the Islamic world, there appears to be a general consensus that accepts liberal democracy's claims to be the most rational form of government...The Islamic revival is a nostalgic re-assertion of the values of some distant past, not discrediting...of the Western values. In this respect, Islamic fundamentalism bears a more than superficial resemblance to European fascism... Liberal democracy should qualify as the most just regime, the ultimate goal of global human historical development.⁵

Harari agrees:

Although we experience occasional economic crises and international wars, in the long run capitalism has not only managed to prevail, but also to overcome famine, plague and war... Humankind is today not only far more powerful than ever, it is also far more peaceful and cooperative... Liberalism has adopted various ideas and institutions from its socialist and

fascist rivals, in particular, a commitment to provide the general public with education, health and welfare services... In the early 21st century, it is the only show in town... There is no serious alternative to the liberal package of individualism, human rights, democracy and a free market.¹

The global achievements of liberal democracy have been outstanding. The United Nations (UN), an intergovernmental organization to promote international cooperation, had only 51 member states in 1945. By 2014, there were 93, of which the 80 smallest members represented less than 10% of the world's population. In 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted. As late as the 1990s, there was still a widespread belief that democracy for all would inevitably come as some law of nature. Alas, it turned out to be mere wishful thinking: even on such transnational issues as disease, poverty, and climate change, the UN Security Council consisting of 15 members has forever been sharply divided among competing powers.

Some initiatives, such as the creation of the European Union, which was an experiment in 'post-nationalism' (the process of nation-states and national identities losing their priority relative to international entities), proved to be less than successful in some countries (like Britain, Hungary and Poland). In Russia, Latin America, and Turkey, the ascent of authoritarianism threatens democracy. But since the 1980s, democracy has become the most common form of government globally in the proliferating nation-states.⁶

However, the victorious march of global democracy has stalled since 2006; no new democracies have arisen in the last decade. The eternal problems of mutual antagonism between liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, and of how much individual freedom should be restricted for the sake of the collective good, persist. Humans evolved for getting along with a tribe (a survival technique for 'us') as opposed to all others ('them'), that is we evolved to be collective but exclusive (a group egoism). Our relevant emotions evolved as non-negotiable and "cognitively impenetrable," and hence are difficult to deflect by reason. Rather, it is reason that is routinely deflected by those all-powerful emotions through the process of rationalization:

that which is intuitively unpalatable is made acceptable through rationalization by our ever-obliging reasoning.⁷

But far too many people globally discovered with dismay that individualism and social mobility could not be realized in real life, and turned to revolt and the fantasies of a collective identity. In regions that historically lacked democratic traditions, what not uncommonly emerged instead were either local secular autocracies or theocracies, both exulting in extreme nationalism. By the 1970s, many pro-Western nation-states had descended into despotism. And the risk that unbridled capitalism will create unsustainable inequities has been on upswing. From the counterculture of the '60s to the feminism of the '70s and the postmodernism of the '80s, the Left has increasingly pushed the idea that rationalism is just a ploy to place the white straight male above anyone else.

Until the late 18th century, Asia (particularly India and China) was the global economic powerhouse. But then the West developed modern science and capitalism; both have ever since formed the most important legacy of European imperialism in the 21st century. Unlike all previous imperial projects, European imperialism pursued new knowledge along with new territories – and this difference turned out to be critical. Why is it that around 1500 the Scientific Revolution happened in then economically backward Western Europe rather than elsewhere? It's hard to tell.

Nationalism

Scholars have found it hard to define the nation. According to Benedict Anderson:

It is a cultural artifact, created at the end of 18th century and today it commands profound emotional legitimacy... Nation is an imagined political community... the pathology of modern developmental history... a built-in capacity for descent into dementia, rooted in the dilemmas of helplessness and largely incurable... Nationalism is not an ideology; it does not belong with 'kinship' and 'religion' but rather with 'liberalism' and 'fascism'... Nationalism thinks in terms of historical destinies while racism dreams of eternal contamination, transmitted... through endless... loathsome copulations... The dreams of racism actually have their origin in ideologies of class, rather than those of

[ethnic] nation; above all, in claims to divinity among rulers and... 'breeding' among aristocrats.⁸

Nationalism is a specifically modern phenomenon, the product of the democratic egalitarian traditions of industrialization absent in agrarian societies. It replaces the relationship of Hegelian master/slave with the long-sought equality – but exclusively within a given ethnic group as opposed to outsiders. Hence, nationalism is a good breeding ground for imperialism. Sometimes overtly hostile to democracy, nationalist movements have nevertheless been invariably populist in outlook and sought to attract the lower classes into political life. President Woodrow Wilson advocated the idea that national self-determination and democracy can bring peace “internationally” (meaning Europe). It took World War II to break this Euro-centrism. Pseudoscience (social Darwinism) “scientifically justified” the alleged genetic superiority of selected ethnicities, hence marking the “inferior ones” for hard labour or extinction. This European “liberal imperialism” has been particularly harmful: Islam, in the mass perception, became a tool of political resistance to it. And it has begotten Islamism with the global jihad that has exploded since 1990s.

Civic nationalism unites the country around common values and enhances mutual trust, helping to accomplish goals that could be unattainable for anyone alone. In contrast, ethnic nationalism – divisive, militant and nostalgic – refers to race or history to divide the population and has historically advanced wars.

In contrast to the Western view of separate nation-states as a desirable development, it is of interest that in China periods of political fragmentation along ethnic lines (equivalent to separate nations) were seen as dark ages of chaos and injustice to be avoided at all cost. China has historically struggled for unification, usually successfully.

However, Harari notes that

as the 21st century unfolds, nationalism is fast losing ground. More and more people believe that all of humankind is the legitimate source of political authority, rather than the members of a particular nationality... States are fast losing their independence... are increasingly open to the machinations of global markets, to the interference of international companies and NGOs

and to the supervision of global public opinion and the international political system.⁹

Social media plays an indispensable role in this development.

Yet, due to the “irreconcilable” differences in cultures, the existing nation-state system will not disappear in the near future; the nation will continue to be the core of mass identification. International life then may be seen increasingly as a competition not between ideologies but between *cultures*.

People continue to conduct a heroic struggle against racism without noticing that the battlefield has shifted, and that the place of racism in imperial ideology has now been replaced by “culturism”... We no longer say, It’s their blood. We say, It’s *their culture*... Imagined orders are not evil conspiracies or useless mirages. Rather, they are the only ways large numbers of humans can cooperate effectively... All large-scale human cooperation is ultimately based on our belief in imagined orders. They... created artificial instincts for it. The network of artificial instincts is called culture.¹

You cannot have a society without a shared moral code and cultural values; a foundation of mutual trust is crucial for survival, enhancing communications and trade and reducing wars. Morality is based on shared imagined beliefs. Below Harari recalls a curious historical episode, reflecting their power:

For decades, aluminium was much more expensive than gold. In the 1860s, Emperor Napoleon III of France commissioned aluminium cutlery to be laid out for his most distinguished guests. Less important visitors had to make do with the gold knives and forks.¹

Antisemitism, like racism, does not originate from nationalism. Barrie Wilson considers that:

[The Christian] Proto-Orthodoxy felt compelled to vilify Judaism, its leaders and its people in their quest for self-identity... The charges of Jewish collective guilt [for the deicide] and of super-sessionism [that Christianity replaced Judaism historically and as the heir to all God’s promises] are both the major contributing factors to Christian anti-Semitism.¹⁰

A toxic nationalism, absorbing racism, is currently on the rise across much of the world: think of the rise of Narendra Modi in India and of Vladimir Putin in Russia, of Marine Le Pen, who seemed to have won voters under the age

of 34. Donald Trump won the White House despite (partly because of?) his disdain for Latinos, Muslims and African-Americans and his anti-semitic undertones.

Moral Relativism

An upsurge of nationalism in socio-political thought at the beginning of modernity neatly corresponded to the upswing of moral relativism in philosophy. Moral relativism and postmodern deconstruction both flourished in the late 20th century, based on the belief that objective reality does not matter nor even exist. Harari writes:

Many of the developments of the past century – the decline of the moral self-confidence of European civilization after it encountered the Third World [with its different and varied hitherto unknown cultures] and the emergence of new ideologies – tended to reinforce belief in relativism. But over time... the idea of relativism may seem much stranger than it does now. For the apparent differences between peoples’ “languages of good and evil” will appear to be an artifact of their particular stage of historical development.¹

Postmodernism

Some far-left Western thinkers have adopted a so-called “post-postmodernism” (a reaction to postmodernism, which in turn can be defined as a reaction to the assumed certainty of scientific, or objective, efforts to explain reality). Maajid Nawaz describes how post-postmodernism was triggered by postmodernism’s political correctness and multiculturalism:

[In the West] a great liberal betrayal is afoot... I call them “regressive leftists,” they are in fact reverse racists. They have a poverty of expectation for minority groups... they censure liberal Muslims and choose to side instead with every regressive reactionary in the name of “cultural authenticity” and anti-colonialism... Among the left, this is a remnant of the socialist approach that prioritizes group identity [“identity politics”] over individual autonomy... Classical liberalism focuses on individual autonomy... The great liberal betrayal of this generation is that in the name of liberalism, communal rights have been prioritized over individual autonomy within minority groups [like] ex-Muslims, gay or feminist Muslims and other most vulnerable groups... Among the right, it is ironically a throwback

from the British colonial “divide and rule” approach... The concept of “identity politics,” envisions political liberalism as a coalition of diverse groups — black, gay, female, Muslim ones... It is often *illiberal* in its emphasis on group experience over individualism... Identity politics have created a Balkanized society where the content of someone’s mind is less important than their skin colour, gender, sexuality... Trump’s victory was a two fingers to the politically correct. It was a brutal rejection of the nonsense narrative which says Muslims who kill Americans are somehow victims. But just as the people of the UK took control back with Brexit, the people of America did likewise with their choice for president. It’s called democracy.¹¹

New Trends: Conflicts Within Rather Than Between Nations and International (“Global”) Terror

By the 21st century, new tendencies had sprung up across the globe: there are now more conflicts within than between the nations, and there is the threat of relentless international terrorism. Previous patterns of war between nation-states are being replaced with wars between different ethnic or religion-based cultural traditions (as in the Balkans and Africa).

The explosion of ethnic-religious nationalism after the Cold War confronted the UN with the new problems of humanitarian assistance, protection and intervention. One in every 122 people on the planet today is “fleeing a conflict.” We now have nearly 30 civil wars underway in various weak states; there are only eleven countries in the world not involved in a conflict at the time of writing.

Not only the US but even postmodern Europe set aside legal intricacies for what they regard as a higher Enlightenment morality. An example: in the spirit of cooperativeness, for the past six decades the US Navy has provided for the free and protected (from global terror) passage through international waterways for all nations, “and it does so even when the U.S. itself is at war.”¹² But the democracies have not yet been able to resolve the controversy between international law and liberal morality: to non-liberals, this liberal order is the violation of international laws.

Ross Douthat writes:

The election of Trump as the U.S. President signaled the arrival of what constitutes “new nationalism.” As the first since WWII, some great powers begin to yield to the pull of chauvinism. Leaders of Russia, China and Turkey just like Trump, turn inward to angry isolationism, preach that international interests compete with national ones. It creates a hostile dangerous world... Yes, shockingly, some young Muslims, even brought up in the West, have “democratically” voted for ISIS with their feet. But we must remember that the Nazi regime in 1933, too, was democratically voted in Germany; that the Americans at our times democratically voted for Trump in shocking numbers... Those mass votes for anti-civility, for legalizing violence, reveal how precarious, vulnerable is our thin “Renaissance” veneer even in the West, how intractable can be *tribe and culture* pull, how viable are the traditions of dualism leading to dividing the world once and for all to good versus evil [Us versus Them] that is to radicalization, – and, eventually, how much determination and vigilance is needed to defend reason and our values.¹³

Since time immemorial life has been rife with *domestic* terror, violence, and “might makes right.” In contrast, *global* terror, the mass-murder of unsuspecting strangers in foreign lands, is a recent development of our time. The Global Terrorism Database (GTD), the most comprehensive database on terrorist attacks around the world since 1970, expressed as the Global Terrorism Index, was created by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism in cooperation with the Global Peace Index expert panel; it covers 163 countries or 99.7% of the world’s population.

Their definition: “Global terrorism refers to terrorism that goes beyond national boundaries in terms of the methods used, the people that are targeted or the places from which the terrorists operate. *Since the emergence of Al Qaida in the 1990s, global terrorism has become largely synonymous with Islamist terrorism...*”

They note that “Between 1969 and 2009, there were 38,345 global terrorist incidents around the world; 7.8 percent (2,981) were directed against the US. Almost 5,600 people lost their lives and more than 16,300 people suffered injuries... *For the past 40 years [it] resulted in a number of victims more than 482 times the number of domestic terrorist fatalities.*”¹⁴ And this is before

they have even laid their hands on weapons of mass destruction.

Meritocracy and Income Inequality

Other problems exist and demand urgent attention as well. Liberal democracy has the same built-in meritocracy that defines capitalism: it is assumed that the equality of opportunity, not the end-result, is fair enough for all. But this presumes that the “needless to mention” inherent differences in intellectual and physical abilities are a just and fair reason that the majority will fail to attain the highest levels of prestige and income. Will they accept this “justification”? The American Founding Fathers argued that the government ought to “protect the opulent minority against the majority.” In 2011, ballooning economic inequality begat the Occupy Wall Street protests and the movement of the “99 percent,” both of which arose in the US and spread globally. Fukuyama writes:

The Marxist project sought... an extreme form of social equality at the expense of liberty, by eliminating natural inequalities through the reward not of talent but of need – at the cost for a society [of the loss of incentive to be productive]. The excess of freedom... is much more visible than the evils of extreme equality like creeping mediocrity or the tyranny of the majority.⁵

There must be better ways of social arrangement that would eliminate this inequality. Switzerland tried but failed and Finland is currently experimenting with the introduction of a guaranteed minimum income for every adult. Leif Wenar writes:

The years since 1945 have seen many horrors: the partition of India, China’s Great Leap Forward, the Vietnam War, the Biafran crisis, the Khmer Rouge and the Rwandan genocide, wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, mass slaughters, famines... Yet this has also been the most prosperous time in human history by far. And, by a long way, the time with the greatest increase in democracy around the world. It has also been the most peaceful era in recorded human history... During a recent 20-year stretch... the percentage of the developing world living in such extreme poverty shrank by more than half, from 43 to 21 percent.¹⁵

The world’s GINI coefficient, a measure of income distribution (the higher the value

from 0 to 1.0, the greater the inequality), dropped from 0.69 in 1988 to 0.63 in 2011. And if adjusted for population, the improvement is even higher: the GINI coefficient declined from 0.60 in 1988 to 0.48 in 2014. The share of the world’s population living on up to \$1.25/day — which the World Bank defines as absolute poverty — fell from 44 percent to 23 percent. “We may be witnessing the first period of declining global inequality since the Industrial Revolution,” according to ex-World-Bank economist Branko Milanovic.¹⁶

The information revolution has turned the world into a global village and populists are a rapidly growing international force. The urban/rural divide is another intractable problem: globally, urbanites mostly protest corruption and cronyism while less educated but numerically superior rural populations support populist, nationalist leaders like Iranian theocrats, Putin, Le Pen, and Erdogan – who often win.

Yet another hot problem is the one of “fake news” being disseminated by social media. These sites, called alt-right, originally were a more nationalist alternative to the more globalist mainstream conservatism but by now they are the mainstream; alt-left sites have explosively proliferated as well. They all disseminate misinformation that undermines tolerance and democracy and promotes racism. It could be argued, however, that the rise of the alt-right is a response to the errors and omissions of the mainstream media, which many see as a tool to promote globalization and open borders and which often minimize or even fail to report on the negative impact of migration on host populations.

Summary

No social contract can ever make everyone happy. For the happiness of the majority (utilitarianism), however, the answer for our times strongly favours liberal democracy as the best social contract. Justin Trudeau suggested that “shared values – openness, respect, compassion, willingness to work hard... to search for equality and justice... make [Canada] the first

post-national state.”¹⁷ Is there any evidence that humanity is moving toward liberal democracy and post-national states that bring most happiness to the most people? Lawrence Summers praises globalization:

The broad program of international integration has been more successful than could reasonably have been hoped. We have not had a war between major powers. Global standards of living have risen faster than at any point in history. And material progress has coincided with even more rapid progress in combating hunger, empowering women, promoting literacy and extending life. A world that will have more smartphones than adults within a few years is a world in which more is possible for more people than ever before.¹⁸

Harari⁹ concludes his futuristic forecast by saying that humankind is now poised to replace natural selection with an “intelligent design,” and to extend life from the organic realm into the inorganic. If we take a grand view of life, all other developments are overshadowed by three interlinked processes:

1. Science is converging on an all-encompassing dogma, which says that organisms are algorithms and that life is data processing. Is it so?

2. Intelligence is decoupling from consciousness. What consequences are to be expected?

3. Non-conscious but highly intelligent algorithms may soon know us better than we know ourselves. What happens then to a society and daily life?

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