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### *Why we must believe in Western Civilisation*

On Tuesday, December 3, 1940, Winston Churchill read a memorandum by the military strategist Basil Liddell Hart which advocated making peace with Nazi Germany. This argued that otherwise Britain would soon see, 'Western Europe racked by warfare and economic hardship; the legacy of centuries, in art and culture, swept away; the health of the nation dangerously impaired by malnutrition, nervous strains and epidemics; Russia ... profiting from our exhaustion.' Churchill nonetheless courageously concluded that 'we should be wrong to hesitate' in rejecting any negotiation with Adolf Hitler.

It's illuminating - especially in our own time of 'nervous strains and epidemics' - that in that list of horrors, the fear of losing the 'legacy of centuries' of art and culture rated above almost everything else. For Churchill, the prospect of losing the legacy of Western Civilisation was worse even than succumbing to the hegemony of the Soviet Union.

Yet today, only eight decades later, we have somehow reached a situation in which Sonalee Rashatwar, who is described by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* as a 'fat-positivity activist and Instagram therapist', can tell that newspaper, 'I love to talk about undoing Western Civilization because it's just so romantic to me.'

How have we come this far? For Ms Rashatwar and the cohorts who genuinely want to 'undo' Western Civilisation are now succeeding where Adolf Hitler and the Nazis failed. The evidence is rampant in the Academy, where a pre-emptive cultural cringe is 'de-colonizing' college syllabuses - that is, wherever possible removing Dead White European Males from it - often with overt support from deans and university establishments. Western Civilisation courses, insofar as they still exist under other names, are routinely denounced as racist, 'phobic' and generally so un-woke as to deserve axing.

Western Civilisation, so vital to our forefathers' sense of who they were and what they existed to promote, is being ridiculed, abused and marginalised, often without any coherent response. Of course today's *non*-Western colonizations, such as India's in Kashmir and China's in Tibet and its exterminationist war against the Uighurs, are not included in the sophomores' concept of imperialism and occupation, which can only ever be done by the West. The 'Amritsar Massacre' only ever refers to the British in the Punjab in 1919, for example, rather than the Indian massacre of ten times the number of people there in 1984.

Nor can the positive aspects of the British Empire even be debated any longer, as the closing down of Professor Nigel Biggar's conferences in Oxford eloquently demonstrates.

We all know the joke that Mahatma Gandhi supposedly made when he was asked what he thought about Western Civilisation, 'I think it might be a good idea.' The gag is apocryphal, in fact, first appearing two decades after his death, but very many people have taken it literally, arguing that there really is no such thing as Western Civilisation, from ideologues such as Noam Chomsky to the activists of the Rhodes Must Fall movement at Oxford University who have succeeded in pulling down the statue of the benefactor of the Rhodes Scholarships from Oriel College.

Increasingly clamorous demands by African and Asian governments for the restitution of artefacts supposedly 'stolen' from their countries during colonial periods are another aspect of this attack, an attempt to guilt-shame the West, even though the taking of booty has been seen in every war throughout history.

This belief that Western Civilisation is at heart uniquely morally defective has recently been exemplified by the *New York Times*' inane and wildly historically inaccurate '1619 Project', which essentially attempts to present the entirety of American history from the Plymouth Rock to today solely through the prism of race and slavery. 'America Wasn't a Democracy Until Black Americans Made it One,' was the headline of one essay in the *New York Times Magazine* launching the Project, alongside, 'American Capitalism is Brutal: You Can Trace That to the Plantation' and 'How Segregation Caused Your Traffic Jam.' When no fewer than twelve – in the circumstances very brave – American Civil War historians sent a letter itemising all the myriad factual errors in the Project's founding document, the *New York Times* refused to print it, yet the Project plans to create and distribute school curriculums that will 're-center' America's memory.

None of this would amount to much if only schools and colleges in Britain, America, Australia and across the English-speaking peoples were not so keen to apologise for and deny Western Civilization, and to abolish or dumb down the teaching of important aspects of it. The classics faculty at Oxford University, to take one example of many, has recently recommended that Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid* be removed from the syllabus in ancient literature, history, and philosophy, giving as their reason the difference in recent exam results between male and female undergraduates, and the difference in expertise in Latin and Greek between privately and publicly-educated students. One of the supposed guardians of the discipline are therefore willing to put social experimentation before the best possible teaching of the Humanities, a disgraceful position to have been adopted by Britain's second-best university.

Yet instead of apologizing for Western Civilisation, we should still believe in it, be proud of it, and proselytize it. For all that we must of course take proper cognizance of other cultures, in terms of both its sheer quality and quantity the legacy of Western one is unsurpassed in human history. We are deliberately underplaying the greatest contributions made to poetry, architecture, philosophy, music and art by ignoring that fact, often simply in order to try to feel less guilty about Imperialism, Colonialism and Slavery, even though the last was a moral crime committed by only a minority of some few people's great-great-great grandparents.

As a result, future generations cannot be certain that they will be taught about the overwhelmingly positive aspects of Western Civilisation. They might not now be shown the crucial interconnection between, for example, the chapel by Giotto at Padua, which articulates the complex scholasticism of St Augustine in paint; Machiavelli's *The Prince*, the first work of modern political theory; Botticelli's *Primavera*, the quintessence of Renaissance humanism in a single painting; the works of Theresa of Avila and Descartes, which wrestle with the proof of discrete individual identity; Beethoven's symphonies, arguably the most complex and profound orchestral works ever written, and Shakespeare, whose plays Harold Bloom has pointed out 'remain the outward limit of human achievement: aesthetically, cognitively, in certain ways morally, even spiritually.' Even if they are taught about these things individually, they will not be connected in a context that makes it clear how important they are to Western Civilisation.

We cannot therefore know that once the present campaign against Western Civilisation reaches its goal, that our children and grandchildren will be taught about the living thing that intimately connects Europe's Gothic cathedrals, which are mediations in stone between the individual and the sublime; the giants of the nineteenth century novel, from Dickens to Flaubert to Tolstoy, where contemporary life realistically observed becomes a fit subject for art; the Dutch masters of the seventeenth century such as Rembrandt, who wrestled visually with the human condition in a fashion which still speaks to us across the centuries; Versailles, the Hermitage and the Alhambra, which, though bombastic, are undeniably ravishing expressions of the human will. Faced with the argument that Western culture is no longer relevant, it's tempting to adopt Dr Johnson's argument, aim a good kick at the nearest neo-classical building, and announce, 'I refute it thus.'

Mention of the Alhambra in Grenada prompts the thought that any course in Western Civilisation worth its name ought also to include the Ummayyad Caliphate, of which Cordoba in modern-day Spain was the capital between 756 and 929 AD. In the wake of the conquest of Spain and the establishment of the Muslim Confederacy, Cordoba became a flourishing, polyglot, multicultural environment, in which religious tolerance, despite Jews and Christians being obliged to pay a supplementary tax to the state, produced an atmosphere of intellectual progressiveness which made it one of the most important cities in the world. Discoveries in trigonometry, pharmacology, astronomy and surgery can all be traced to Cordoba. At a certain point then, a very particular set of historical circumstances produced an equally particular set of intellectual ideas, which had significant material consequences. The study of Western Civilization is therefore emphatically not solely that of Christian Dead White European Males.

What the old Western Civ university courses really did was to root a people in their past and their values. The trajectory of Western culture was shown to have run from Greece via Rome to Christendom, infused by Judaic ideas and morality along the way via Jerusalem, but then detouring briefly through the Dark Ages, recovering in the Renaissance, which led to the Reformation, the Enlightenment and thus the scientific, rational and politically liberated culture of Europe and European America. 'From Plato to Nato', as the catchphrase went.

At the centre of this transference of values across time and space was democracy, of which Winston Churchill famously 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.’ The generations who grew up knowing that truth, rather than weltering in guilt and self-doubt about ‘false-consciousness’ and so on, were the lucky ones, because they were allowed to study the glories of Western Civilisation in a way that was unembarrassed, unashamed, and not saddled with accusations of guilt in a centuries-old crime that had absolutely nothing to do with them. They could learn about the best of their civilisation, and how it benefited – and continues to benefit - Mankind.

As Ian Jenkins, the senior curator of the Ancient Greek collection at the British Museum, put it in his book on the Elgin Marbles – somewhat politically correctly entitled *The Parthenon Sculptures* – ‘Human figures in the frieze are more than mere portraits of the Athenian people of the day. Rather they represent a timeless humanity, one which transcends the present to encompass a universal vision of an ideal society.’ The Parthenon itself set out the architectural laws of proportion which still obtain to this day, and later in the book Jenkins points out how the sculptures ‘transcend national boundaries and epitomize universal and enduring values of excellence.’ It was no coincidence that interest in them permeated the Western Enlightenments of the eighteenth century.

While the Parthenon was being built, Pericles contrasted the openness and moderation of Athenian civic life with the militaristic, secretive, dictatorial Spartans in his Funeral Speech of 430BC, and this struck a chord with the Enlightenment thinkers of twenty-three centuries later, just as it should continue to with us today, reminding us why Western values are indeed superior to those that actuate the leaders of modern China, Russia, Iran, Venezuela, North Korea and Zimbabwe. And yes, we know that the architect Phidias employed slaves and metic foreigners in building the Parthenon, not just Athenian freemen.

‘Carved around the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC,’ writes Neil McGregor, former Director of the British Museum, the Elgin Marbles ‘are the product of a creative culture that is credited with the invention of such aspects of modern Western civilization as democracy, philosophy, history, medicine, poetry and drama.’ Of course no-one is claiming that ancient Oriental, Persian and Arab civilizations did not have all of those listed - except democracy, which they did not then and most still do not today - and no-one suggests that South Sea Islanders, the Aztecs and Incas, Ancient Egyptians or the Khmer Empire that build Angkor Wat for the god Vishnu did not have their own worthy civilizations too.

Yet even the very greatest achievements and physical creations of those other civilizations simply cannot compare with what the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian Western Civilization has produced in philosophy, history, medicine, poetry and drama, let alone democracy. Anyone reading Charles Murray’s superb and unanswerable book *Human Accomplishment* cannot but accept that the contribution made to Mankind – the whole of it, not just the West - by DWEMs has statistically utterly dwarfed that made by the whole of the rest of the world combined. This is demonstrable in terms of its cathedrals, concertos, Nobel Prizes, medical breakthroughs and the fact that there is no-one in any other civilization who can objectively match the sheer body of poetic and dramatic work of Shakespeare. To deny

that is to start going down the route of the 1970s dictator of Chad who was reduced to claiming that the light bulb, television and telephone were all invented there.

‘From the constitution drafted by the founding father of the American republic to the wartime speeches of Winston Churchill,’ Jenkins writes, ‘many have found inspiration for their brand of human liberalism, and for a doctrine of the open society, in the Funeral Speech of Pericles.’ If Pericles had lost an election or was ostracized in the annual vote of Athenians, he would have stood down from office in the same way that Boris Johnson, Angela Merkel, Scott Morrison and Emmanuel Macron would after a defeat in a free and fair election in their countries, whereas that is inconceivable in many totalitarian countries not infused by the ethics of the West.

That is ultimately why we should still believe in Western Civilization, not apologize for it, why it should be proselytized around the world, and certainly taught as a discrete discipline in our schools and universities.

The West never pretended that the West *invented* civilisation, as the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss emphasised in his 1951 Foreword to the UNESCO *International Social Science Bulletin*. Considering some of the most ancient sites of human habitation in the world, such as Harappa in the Indus Valley, he observed straight streets intersecting at right angles, industrial workshops, utilitarian housing for workers, public baths, drains and sewers, pleasant suburbs for the wealthier classes; in short, what he called ‘all the glamour and blemishes of a great modern city’. Five thousand years ago, therefore, the most ancient civilisations of the old world were giving their lineaments to the new. The inhabitants of Egypt, China and Persia were creating sophisticated art and architecture, legal and numerical systems, literary and musical traditions while the peoples of Europe were still covered in woad and living in mud-huts.

What might Homer have to say about being civilized? The *Iliad*, which describes the clash between the Greeks and the Trojans, is not a description of a conflict between two nation states. Adam Nicolson characterises the conflict in *The Mighty Dead: Why Homer Matters*, as ‘the deathly confrontation of two ways of understanding the world.’ In this four-thousand-year-old scenario, the Greeks are the barbarians. They are northern warriors, newly technologically empowered with ships and bronze spears, who want what the Trojans have got. They are pirates: coarse, animalistic, in love with violence. They are savage, rootless nomads who trade women as commodities (a three-legged metal tripod to put vases on is worth twelve oxen, a woman four) and lust after the treasure hidden within Troy’s walls.

The city of Troy is wealthy, ordered, graceful, stable, and the Greeks want it. In the climax of the poem, Achilles, the ultimate man of the plains, confronts Hector of Troy, the man of the city. In disarmingly exhilarating and violent poetry, the outsider slaughters the insider. The barbarians have won. Or have they? After the battle, Priam, Hector’s grieving father, visits Achilles in his tent. Troy is doomed but Achilles marvels at Priam’s humility, at his ability to respect the man who has murdered his beloved son. From the ‘mutuality and courage of that wisdom,’ writes Nicolson, ‘its blending of city and plain, a vision of the future might flower.’

The Crusaders of medieval Europe were no more bloody and cruel than the wars of conversion enacted by the expanding Islamic world in the seventh and eighth centuries. The

Ethiopian Empire (1270-1974) was founded upon slavery, as was the Ottoman Empire (1299-1924). If the history of the West needs to be taught critically, then so too does that of the East or the so-called 'global south'. No civilization has been morally pure.

'Competition and monopoly;' writes Niall Ferguson sagely in his book *Civilization: The West and the Rest*, 'science and superstition; freedom and slavery; curing and killing; hard work and laziness – in each case, the West has been the father to both the good and the bad.' Those early Western Civ courses never tried to argue that it was flawless – Karl Marx sometimes used to be taught in them, after all – but in the twentieth century students had better common sense and took that for granted, and were not looking for ever new ways to be offended.

Christianity, for all its schisms and intolerance, its occasional obscurantism and obnoxious iconoclasm, has been overall an enormous force for good in the world. The Sermon on the Mount were, as Churchill put it, 'the last word in ethics'. Christians abolished Slavery in the 1830s (or three decades later in America's case), whereas outside Christendom the practice survived for much longer, and identifiable versions of it still exist in some non-Christian and anti-Christian countries today.

The abolition of Slavery did not merely happen by votes in Parliament and proclamations from presidents, it was fought for by (and against) Christians with much blood spilt on both sides. That would not have happened without the Judeo-Christian values that are so central to Western Civilization. The Royal Navy ran its West Africa Preventive Squadron for over sixty years with the sole task of fighting slavery, during which time it freed around 160,000 slaves, and an estimated 17,000 British seamen died achieving that.

When considering 'the Rest' - those civilisations that did not produce what Western Civilization has - Niall Ferguson is unblushingly honest. 'We must resist the temptation to romanticize history's losers,' he writes. 'The other civilizations overrun by the West's, or more peacefully transformed by it through borrowings as much as by impositions, were not without their defects either, of which the most obvious was that they were incapable of providing their inhabitants with any sustained improvement in the material quality of their lives.' For all my earlier concentration on art and architecture, poetry and music, Ferguson is also correct to point out that, 'Civilization is much more than just the contents of a few first-rate art galleries. It is a highly complex human organisation,' which is why his book is 'as much about sewage pipes as flying buttresses.'

In response to the issuing of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1947, the American Anthropological Association released a critique, which asked, 'How can the proposed Declaration be applicable to all human beings and not be a statement of rights conceived only in terms of the values prevalent in the countries of Western Europe and America?' The question assumes that the thirty Articles of the Declaration could not be universal, since universality of human rights was of necessity, a 'Western' assumption. That this was intended as a criticism, not an endorsement.

Yet the 'West' has not stolen these values, as the Greeks stole the Trojans' gold; it had not appropriated or co-opted them. Rather they are seen as objectionable because they do, indeed,

according to their detractors, inhere in Western culture. So given that a belief in human rights is, apparently, predicated on 'Western' culture, is not that culture worth examining and teaching?

Instead, there is an entire industry devoted to trying to topple DWEM heroes from their pedestals – literally so in the case of the British activist Afua Hirsch's attempt to have Admiral Nelson removed from his column in Trafalgar Square in London, on the grounds that he did not actively campaign to abolish the Slave Trade (which was not abolished by Britain until two years after his death).

The self-hatred virus is a particularly virulent and infectious one, and has almost entirely overtaken the Academy in its attitude towards Western Civilization.

Once again, Charles Murray is invaluable here in enumerating in numbers and places and names and statistics the contribution made in every field by Jews over the millennia, around one hundred times what it ought to be in relation to their demographical numbers on the planet. Writing of Max Warburg's daughter Gisela in his book *The Warburgs*, Ron Chernow recalls how, 'Once asked at a birthday party whether she was Jewish, Gisela refused to answer. When her mother asked why, Gisela stammered confusedly, "You always told us not to boast."' That might be true of her, but philo-Semitic Gentiles like me enjoy boasting about the contribution the Jews have made to Western Civilization in every sphere. Beware the hater of Western Civilisation; very often there's an anti-Semite not very far away.

French postmodern theory refuses to distinguish between high and low culture, attempting to make it futile even to discuss whether this or that work of art is or is not lovely or important. If you want to argue that Kanye West's lyrics are as good as Shakespeare, or Mongolian yurts are as valid a form of architecture as the Sydney Opera House, then Foucault will support you all the way. But if you want to understand why we do not have child slavery in the West, or disenfranchised women, or imprisonment without trial, or the imprisonment of newspaper editors, you simply have to study the cultural history that produced such an unusual and extraordinary situation in human history. It is inescapable, and not susceptible to postmodernist analysis. It's not about the aesthetic or literary superiority of certain artworks, but about the unequivocal good of human dignity. If Ms Sonalee Rashatwar really finds the idea of losing her human rights so 'romantic', she is always welcome to move to Saudi Arabia, which is still awaiting its Enlightenment.

The late, very great Gertrude Himmelfarb identified three separate Enlightenments – English, French and Scottish – at different though overlapping stages of the eighteenth century, with different emphases in different places at different times. Chartres Cathedral was not dedicated until 1260, so there were five centuries between then and the Enlightenments, but they were the moment that people began to throw off superstition and belief in magic and witchcraft, to look at the world afresh, unafraid of what they might find and where it might take them, even at the risk of Unbelief. If the Islamic world had had such a moment, it would not have been left behind in so many areas of accomplishment since it was turned back from the gates of Vienna in 1683, with the result that its fascist-fundamentalist wing not have existed to lash out in such fury and resentment on 9/11.

The recent Security Conference in Munich took as its theme and title 'Westlessness' – an ugly word in English, worse in German – intending to prompt international decision-makers into thinking what might happen if the Trump Administration were ever to get as tough over NATO underfunding as it has long threatened to do. Another fear of Westlessness, however, should be about the eclipse of Western Civilization as a subject for study, as a result of a hugely successful Gramscian march through the institutions.

For far from becoming a Kumbaya touchy-feely place, a truly Westless world would be a neo-Darwinian free-for-all in which every state merely grabbed what it could, a return to the world Hobbes wrote about in *Leviathan*. The Left should beware what it claims to wish for, and Western Civilization should be taught once more in our schools and colleges. For as Churchill knew as the bombs were falling and London was burning in December 1940, it is still worth believing in.