

# The Roots of Self-Doubt (and Self-Loathing) in the West

*Jonathan W. Pidluzny*

*School of Public Affairs  
Morehead State University  
Morehead, KY 40351, USA*

## ABSTRACT

Democratic self-doubt is manifest in many ways, some of them a threat to the perpetuation of the very political orders responsible for the exceptional appeal of life in Western societies. This paper begins by defining the phenomenon and proceeds to examine its roots. Five contributing factors are identified, all of them in some way a constituent element of the very way of life, our confidence in which they threaten to erode. The factors discussed are the following: first, the value neutral nature of experimental natural science and its effect on the liberal arts; second, European romanticism and its suffusion through the entire cultural life of the West; third, a *mania* for equality which, although a fundamental principle of healthy republicanism, can (when pushed to the extreme) erode citizens' pride in their own regime; fourth, materialism and material abundance, which distract citizens from the innately human longings and cut them off from participation in public life; fifth, egalitarianism desiccates the liberal arts—one of the greatest legacies of the West—and enervates the democrat's capacity to be moved by them. The paper ends by considering a more insidious form of self-hatred that emerged from the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche and Karl Marx.

**Keywords:** Western Civilization, Crisis of the West, Democratic Self Doubt, Alexis de Tocqueville, Egalitarianism

## INTRODUCTION

The modern West suffers from a remarkable lack of self-confidence. Never in the annals of history have so many stable, prosperous and powerful states—each devoted to the protection of individual liberties, ruled according to the consent of the governed, internally stable with abundant economic opportunity for all, at peace with one another and content with established national boundaries—existed simultaneously. And yet, even as an almost unlimited number of emigrants and would-be emigrants for the privilege of building a life in the developed countries of the Western world, Westerners themselves doubt the superiority, even the choice-worthiness, of the very way of life they enjoy. This paper examines the crisis of the West. Why are Westerners, especially Western elites, so harshly self-critical? What are the dangers of this pervasive self-doubt? And what are its roots?

## WESTERN CIVILIZATION

It is impossible to talk about Western self-doubt or a crisis in Western civilization without first defining two

Cross-Cultural Decision Making (2019)

pregnant terms: Western and civilization. When we say “The West,” we collapse the terms together, not to indicate a geographical reference, but rather, to denote a confluence of a particular culture and community (Berman 1983, 2-3). Let us say, preliminarily, that an individual’s most deeply ingrained opinions, convictions and *mores*—his habits of heart and mind—are in some sense an artifact of, and constitute his membership within, a community that is generally broader than a single state or nation. As Samuel Huntington has put it, “a civilization is thus the highest cultural grouping of a people and the broadest level of a cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species” (Huntington 1993, 24). Angelo Codevilla gets at the definition from the angle of the constituent member: a civilization “is a package of habits and precepts that not only affects the way people live but to some extent defines what it means to be happy” (Codevilla, 50). Put another way, a civilization is the authoritative moral, ethical and aesthetic convictions its members share: communal dedication to notions of right and wrong, good and evil, noble and base, decent and obscene, permitted and impermissible, beautiful and ugly—judgments in the context of which an individual conceives of his happiness and the sort of life it is worth aspiring to. Civilizations thus set boundaries for statecraft: the kinds of political regimes and laws that will succeed in a given place and time must suit the spirit of the people, or at least not make spiritually implausible demands of them. (Matching regime type to civic character is especially important in polities that employ majoritarian institutions. If the people are, in effect, required animate a institutions in a certain way to maintain the constitutional arrangement—pushing back against an encroaching executive, for instance, by electing guardians of their rights to the legislative branch—it is vital that the people understand their political role thus or they are unlikely to play it.)

Western civilization is more or less coterminous with a particular cluster of evolving moral and intellectual commitments that have laid the foundation for the way of life enjoyed by inhabitants of the North Atlantic states. In defining “Western,” Leo Strauss emphasizes our Greek and Judaic roots: “Western man became what he is, and is what he is, through the coming together of biblical faith and Greek thought” (Strauss 1967, 45). At his best, Western man believes that it is possible *to know* and worthwhile *to be good*. If a few perceive a tension between the Greek and biblical conceptions of wisdom and goodness—and even the bases upon which they are apprehended and realized—they nonetheless remain “open to both and willing to listen to each” (Strauss 1967, 46). Where a civilization remains moored to both propositions—the possibility of science (or philosophy) *and* the choice-worthiness of moral action—remarkable polities can be built. The best among them open a way to, and sustain, the heights of human achievement, while they simultaneously provide fertile ground for a broad range of decent and fulfilling lives. If such a state becomes powerful, it exercises its power with restraint and even benevolence; it might even sacrifice blood and treasure to build, or try to build, a better world order—to spread science and the blessings of liberty.

And yet, the pursuit of truth has always been dangerous. Vainglorious men who believe they have apprehended it, whether by reason or through their reading of revealed scripture, have not hesitated to try to instantiate it. The history of tyranny is almost identical to the history of government; the worst tyrannies are those which join force to ideology, with the most horrifying examples—*totalitarian* examples—closest in time to the present. In ushering in the era of modern science, the Enlightenment made human beings more powerful than ever before, but not, it appears, any better nor any wiser.

Sensing, perhaps, that there is something else about Western civilization than can, in principle, limit the scope of government, other commentators have emphasized the distinctiveness of Western law—a body of legal strictures separable from tribal custom or religious command. In this context, Berman notes the significance of the development of a “body of legal principles and procedures clearly differentiated from other processes of social organization” (Berman, 50). Long before Westphalia, the establishment in Western countries of professional courts and judiciaries, legislative bodies, legal professions, and legal literatures began to sunder the moral traditions and religious inheritance of a place from the laws enforced by the coercive power of the state. This embryonic separation of church and state—and the concomitant establishment of a private sphere—is a second important feature of Western civilization, something which distinguishes the West from both pre-modern societies as well as the Eastern (Talmudic and Islamic) alternatives.

The new conception of law permitted a sundering of the merely legal from that which a political community believes to be moral, right, and just. The communal acknowledgment that not every immoral act need be proscribed by law and punished by the community’s coercive apparatus constitutes an important root of limited constitutional government, that hallmark of the *modern* West. After all, individual freedoms are only secure where government

remains limited; there can be no durable check on governmental authority where the governed themselves believe *everything* is properly within the purview of the law and, therefore (today), the state.

Western civilization is roughly coterminous with Christendom because the ideas that lie at its foundation—the legacies of Greece and Jerusalem, along with the example of Roman law (which could exist simultaneously with Christianity, even as its moral empire grew)—were spread by the Roman Empire to the edges of the known world. Rome’s political primacy disintegrated, but its moral and intellectual legacy endured, in a variety of shifting forms thanks to Christianity and the Church. With the rebirth of Greek philosophy during the Renaissance and Enlightenment, the tension between reason and revelation could be restored in the West, its garden larger than ever before insofar as Christianity had homogenized *mores* through much of the known world.

On these bases, a bloc of countries emerged that have, for centuries, dominated the globe. At their best, the North Atlantic states establish and protect an enviable way of life, never before so durably, or so widely, instantiated. Within them, individual liberties are secure; science is pushed forward, more quickly than at any other point in man’s history; the humanistic arts are cultivated, or at least celebrated, studied, and enjoyed; and the stable political environments they provide is conducive to the generation of levels of abundance and comfort unimaginable outside of the West. It is not for nothing that the political form generally associated with all of this, constitutional democracy, is today presumed to be the only legitimate political regime. It is, on the face of it, quite strange that we are not willing to do more to protect it. Stranger still, Western elites tend, today, not only to depreciate the West’s tremendous accomplishments; they frequently blame the West for problems that exist, problems that have always existed, in distant hemispheres.

## THE CRISIS OF THE WEST

It has become commonplace to speak of “the ‘crisis’ or ‘decline’ of the West” (Hail, 377). Crisis and decline are, of course, separable (if ultimately related) problems. The concern of this paper is not so much “decline”—in the sense of the diminution of power and influence of the Western states, their *exhaustion* in the face of a rising East—but a crisis emanating from Westerners’ shaken confidence in (even their utter ambivalence to) the purposes or aims of their political regimes. As Strauss puts it, “The West was once certain of its purpose... it had a clear vision of its future as the future of mankind. We no longer have that certainty and that clarity” (Strauss 1964, 44).

A crisis of this nature is dangerous for a number of reasons, not least because it fuels and accelerates decline; timid Westerners, especially Western elites, will neglect to take steps, difficult though within their power, which might slow the West’s decline. They would behave differently if they not doubt the righteousness of the Western way of life. There are other reasons for concern as well: prudent political judgment, rare in the most favorable situations, will be rarer still where policymakers do not know what they are aiming at. In matters of war and diplomacy, especially, it becomes difficult to know when and how to deploy the state’s resources, military and otherwise, when no one is sure what the state ultimately stands for. When is war worth it? Or to bring the problem closer to home, at what point do our politicians decline to sacrifice further American liberties and privacy for one more increment of security from a potential terrorist threat? Security is *a* good. But it is not the highest good. When is the cost of peace or domestic security too high? There can be no principled answers to these questions where Americans themselves are unsure of their own regime’s ends and principles, questions bound up with the country’s civilizational inheritance. Strauss’ cogent encapsulation is illustrative on this point too: “a society which was accustomed to understand itself in terms of a universal purpose cannot lose faith in that purpose without becoming completely bewildered” (Strauss 1964, 44).

It is appropriate to consider a distinctly American example of the transformation insofar as America holds a special space among Western nations by virtue of its preponderance of power and its uniquely liberal founding. The old clarity of purpose is beautifully captured in Thomas Jefferson’s last letter, prepared on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Writing to Roger Weightman, Jefferson’s pride in the country’s founding work of political poetry is inspiring.

May it be to the world, what I believe it will be, (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all), the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-

Cross-Cultural Decision Making (2019)

government. That form which we have substituted, restores the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion. All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man (Jefferson, 1517).

It is hard to imagine any such celebration of American principles today, not least from American politicians. President Obama himself publicly dismissed the notion that the United States is exceptional in any determinative respect: “I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.” His point: national attachments aside, there is nothing distinctively praiseworthy about America, about the civilizational legacy the U.S. inherited and had helped to perpetuate in the world. It is unusual for an American president to minimize the significance of his country’s history, in particular, the remarkable success of America’s republican experiment. As Alexander Hamilton hoped it would, the framing of this country proved an important point to the world—that government “by reflection and choice” is possible, that there is an alternative to government by those who dominate through force or by accident. As James Ceaser has suggested, the Founding generation believed America had a “mission” to help defend and disseminate polities devoted to the advancement of science and the protection of man’s natural rights in the modern world—both offspring of Western civilization—though they had not worked out a particular policy to achieve it (Ceaser 2012, 13-16).

The 2008 election is illustrative for a number of reasons. For the first time, Americans elected a truly cosmopolitan president, even, in important respects, a post-American president. Far from praising Americans’ bold sacrifices over the course of the twentieth century, which did more to spread freedom and democracy and any other force in human history, President Obama has instead personally apologized for its actions abroad—as though the United States has done more harm than good in the world. On the campaign trail, similarly, candidate Obama promised nothing less than a wholesale transformation of the country. All criticism of President Obama’s policy and rhetoric aside, however, his election is significant insofar as the tremendous public support he amassed reveals a pervasive wobbliness and confusion in the citizenry. A people with a healthy attachment to their guiding ideals—a confidence that they are just and good—would not be moved to support a president promising to eschew them in favor of a grandiose transformation of society and state.

To dwell on the foibles of the current president is not to imply that this problem falls along the ordinary Republican-Democrat divide. That President Bush came across as a stronger partisan of America and the West does not mean he understood the critical features of Western civilization terribly well. If anything, his enthusiasm to disseminate constitutional democracy to the far reaches of the Middle East reveals a misunderstanding of its character and prerequisites (cf. Pidluzny 2012). It is possible, after all, to sense or intuit the value of a thing without quite understanding it. Enthusiasm itself is usually immature, even childish. It is possible to arrive at a mature appreciation for the virtues of Western civilization without feeling compelled to devote the resources of one’s state to spreading them willy-nilly. Take John Quincy Adams’ proud endorsement of liberal democracy, which he coupled with a prudent foreign policy realism.

America, with the same voice which spoke herself into existence as a nation, proclaimed to mankind the inextinguishable rights of human nature, and the only lawful foundations of government. America, in the assembly of nations... has uniformly spoken among them, though often to heedless and often to disdainful ears, the language of equal liberty, of equal justice, and of equal rights. She has, in the lapse of nearly half a century, without a single exception, respected the independence of other nations while asserting and maintaining her own. She has abstained from interference in the concerns of others, even when conflict has been for principles to which she clings, as to the last vital drop that visits the heart. Wherever the standard of freedom and Independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her heart, her benedictions and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy.

It is hard to imagine a similar union of prudence and principle today. One of the main reasons for this is the state of civic and liberal education. One need not look any further than the state of the country’s leading colleges and universities today for confirmation that the West is indeed suffering from a crisis of confidence. The priorities of Cross-Cultural Decision Making (2019)

higher education are one of the best indicators of the health and direction of a civilization not simply because the academy molds a polity's future leaders. More than this, educational institutions are paramount because they have the power to perpetuate or transform entire cultures—by educating teachers, journalists, government administrators, novelists and filmmakers. The academy effectively *shapes* the character and concerns of subsequent generations.

A recent report by The National Association of Scholars, entitled *The Vanishing West*, is thus an urgent cause for alarm. The study of 50 leading colleges and universities chronicles a “decline and near extinction of the Western Civilization history survey course” (iv). In 1964, every one of the elite curricula investigated “made students familiar with Western civilization in some form” (whether by requiring classes in Western civilization, or through a general education or great books curriculum; 1). In 2010, not one of the same fifty institutions required students to complete a class in Western civilization in order to graduate; only 32% made one available as an optional part of the general education curriculum. The study found, furthermore, that even history majors are seldom required to study Western civilization today.

What explains this startling, and counterintuitive, neglect? Why are colleges and universities, which have done so much to build and sustain Western civilization, so apparently unconcerned with teaching it today? In what follows, I argue that Western self-doubt has five distinct roots.

## MODERN SCIENCE

The depreciation of the liberal arts, of genuinely liberal education, has coincided with the ascendancy of the natural sciences. The ascendancy of the latter is one of the reasons for the West's current crisis. Whereas a healthy liberal arts program introduces students to alternative ways of living and organizing political communities through the world's great works of literature, philosophy, religion and art—all with the aim of evaluating them, of determining which best instantiate justice—the sciences treat a more limited subject matter with clinical detachment. A civilization that loses sight of its place in the annals of history—in favor of petri dishes and electron microscopes—is destined to lose sight of its distinguishing features and their value. Somewhat perversely, modern science has undermined the West's dedication to science.

One important distinguishing feature of Western civilization is its consciousness, dating to ancient Greece, of two important dichotomies: the distinction between nature and convention, and the distinction between knowledge and opinion. The twin recognition that some beliefs are true and others mistaken (however deeply held, however rooted in tradition), and that the touchstone by which knowledge is distinguished from opinion is *nature* (understood broadly as the *cosmos* or ruling order), constitute the very root of science. Indeed, science would be rare, not to say impossible, in a political community that considers established beliefs to be inviolable—true for being old or inherited—or one which denied the existence of a reliable standard by which to evaluate a polity's opinions. To do their work, scientists and philosophers *must be* cognizant that most opinions are conventional (the product of human art, culture, history, etc.), and they must have confidence in their rational faculties; they must believe themselves intellectually competent to separate truth from mistaken and incomplete opinion. Thus, they (slowly) add to what is actually known—either by an individual knowledge-seeker, or collectively by a collective group of inquirers.

Until the seventeenth century, the terms science and philosophy were interchangeable: both terms described the endeavor to *know* the natural order. The hard distinction we draw between natural science and philosophy today is one reason for the West's shaken confidence (even while simultaneously responsible for its tremendous economic and scientific prowess). Put simply, experimental science has, by its technical success, led us to doubt the possibility of solid answers to normative questions. Its new methods were first proposed as a coherent alternative to the classical (contemplative) approach by philosophers with an agenda in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes sought nothing less than to render man “master and possessor of nature” with the ultimate goal of “[relieving] man's estate” by their proposed reorientation.

They were successful. And there is certainly a difference between science and philosophy today. The species of knowledge ascertained by the investigation of the permanent natural order by way of repeatable and falsifiable experiments in a laboratory *is* distinguishable from the kind of understanding Socrates and the great moral

Cross-Cultural Decision Making (2019)

philosophers could claim. It is even natural to suspect that the findings of the natural sciences are *firmer* than the conclusions of social scientists. This aspect of the difference is clear: the knowledge yielded by physics permits engineers to build airplanes and nuclear reactors; political scientists have trouble forecasting an election result. The hard line has been drawn between hard science and soft science in recent centuries, with the more useful sciences occupying the place of pride in the eyes of Westerners, is thus hardly a surprise. We benefit from the advancement of learning in innumerable obvious ways. The philosophy of science implicitly teaches only questions amenable to investigation by the positivistic methods of the natural science are answerable with any degree of scientific certainty.

This presumption—that only the hard sciences can discern the hard truth—is politically pernicious, however, no matter how glorious its technical fruit. Where people doubt that knowledge of good and evil, noble and base, decent and obscene, beautiful and ugly is even possible, it becomes difficult to defend the choice-worthiness of one’s way of life, his regime, even his civilization. Indeed, what reason is there to prefer freedom to despotism if one presumes social scientists cannot discover *truths* about justice and the principles of political legitimacy? What reason is there to prefer a political community that permits scientific inquiry? Natural science is silent on value-laden political questions because its methods are inapplicable to subject matter (human action and their motivating beliefs) that does not behave in predictable, unchanging and law-governed ways. The rigid assumption that the methods of natural science are nonetheless the *only* way to *know* thus abets the emergence of “value relativism”—the lazy presumption that opinions on normative questions *cannot* be refined but are irredeemably subjective, the product of this or that time, culture, or socio-economic situation, or personality (Malcolmson, Myers & O’Connell 1996, 20; cf. Lange 2011, 121).

The separation of fact and value, and its implicit rejection that knowledge in the sphere of “value judgments” is possible, has a dangerous twin. To doubt there are compelling *reasons* to live a good or just life, to doubt the possibility of *proving* the superiority of one’s way of life or regime—(say) limited government (built on egalitarian principles and devoted to the protection of individual rights)—inevitably spawns a pervasive wishy-washiness in the face of the most important human concerns. It can even lead to outright nihilism. For if one presumes that there are established facts in the arena of the hard sciences—but that when one moves from the behavior of electrons to the behavior of human beings one enters a subjective realm of values, where it is possible to opine, to emote, to will, to feel, *but never to know*—it is impossible to justify the choices one makes. A paralyzing helplessness, encapsulated in a question, follows fast upon that realization: *Why bother?* What a schizophrenic endeavor!—to seek to live well at once believing it is impossible to justify one’s way of life. Ambivalence is the natural result. But ambivalence to what have long been believed to be the perennial human questions is dangerous—not only personally, but from the perspective of the regime as well. If a civilization is properly defined as the highest cultural grouping—participation in which requires that one share the moral, ethical and aesthetic judgments that separate one’s own from alternative civilizations—the relativist’s outlook would seem to make genuine participation in one’s culture or civilization impossible.

## EUROPEAN ROMANTICISM

It is commonly held that the modern West—a strange fusion of Greek, Jerusalem and Rome—emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century as a result of momentous revolutions in thought aimed squarely at the intellectual dominance of Christianity and the Church. And yet, the opinions put forth by Enlightenment and Reformation thinkers—though sufficient to depoliticize Christianity—did not alone suffice to build the social consciousness of the contemporary West. In particular, the Enlightenment and the Reformation do not account for the West’s ethic of toleration. After all, the presumption that certainty on the most difficult questions is possible—whether it is achieved by reason or revelation—leads inexorably to attempts by the ambitious to instantiate those truths by force.

Enlightenment thinkers believed all of nature—its natural laws and its moral laws—could be discovered by rational investigation, that human beings were sufficiently endowed to discover those laws without divine help, and that all of nature’s truths were consistent. What they did not sufficiently appreciate is how little room they had left for disagreement among those who were absolutely certain their opinions were the right ones. Or put another way, the assumption that an ordered nature can be known entirely by unaided human reason opens the way to fanatical

attachments to *rational* accounts of what is best for mankind, while at an instant undermining centuries of tradition—the moral convictions built over time on the authority of revealed teachings—that might otherwise have stood in the way of this new species of certitude.

The aspiration to certainty on the most important moral and political questions, even when it is sought by reason, can inspire utopian political treatises and dangerous political ambition—quite as well, in fact, as professed religious certainty can lead to fanaticism when political authority is intermingled with it. Enlightenment ideas helped to fuel the French Revolution and its terrors. The terrible totalitarian movements of the twentieth century in the West—National Socialism and Soviet Communism—were, likewise, inspired by atheistic ideologies which sought to engineer totally new societies on the basis of theories and the theorists who believed they had discovered truths worth instantiating.

To move from the presumption that there is single unalterable truth according to which all of society should be organized, whether derived from revelation or discovered by human reason, to the acceptance of the possibility that a variety of ways of living may be worthwhile, and that the political arrangement should protect individuals' freedom to pursue happiness as they themselves conceive of it within very generous boundaries protected by law, a further revolution in social consciousness was necessary. Isaiah Berlin calls European Romanticism “the greatest single shift in the consciousness of the West that has occurred” (Berlin 2001, 1). Its new emphasis on sentimentality and emotion, the charms of aesthetic life, love, all the things men and women feel—in a word, the inner (and not always fully rational) life of the individual—represents a dramatic step away from the thitherto accepted assumption that public life should, so far as possible, be organized according to a single coherent system of morality. This privileging of the sentimental side of man, so long suppressed by authoritative conceptions of good and evil, noble and base, decent and obscene, would progressively replace what had for a long time been the North Star of European civilization: the search for truth, rational or religious, and the belief that the community should be organized according to it.

European Romanticism—ironically made possible by the Enlightenment's assault on authority—amplified it from a new, and arguably more powerful, direction. If there is not a single truth to know, other excellences can be elevated: creativity, genius, beauty, passion, the sublime, depth of feeling, etc. These were depicted beautifully, movingly, in the poetry, art and literature of the Romantic era. Thus, from the middle of the Eighteenth Century, worthy action—the meaning of “noble”—comes increasingly to be interpreted in light of a loose constellation of often incompatible standards, and less and less, measured against a man's fidelity to truth or his righteousness (Berlin 2001, 10). Suddenly grand action—(insert your own definition)—meant more than the pursuit of wisdom or virtue, both of these things, irreparably rooted in thought. It became possible, perhaps for the first time, to admire another's dedication to ideals one did not share, and in some cases, ideals one emphatically rejected. Action and feeling were glorified; contemplation and the pursuit of truth, meanwhile, were depreciated.

The resultant toleration of significant disagreements on the most fundamental questions of justice and morality is a truly impressive achievement from the perspective of limited and liberal government. To accept with indifference that fellow citizens, family members, clansmen, etc.—people to whom one is united by powerful bonds of affection—will disagree profoundly on the most fundamental questions, and should nonetheless be tolerated and even embraced, is not in any way an automatic disposition. Where individuals care deeply for one another, one would rather expect great efforts to be made to save those who stray from the right path. It is not unusual to take an active interest in the morality or propriety of the decisions the people we care about make; it is far more unusual to expect that those who care most for us will muster a well-meaning indifference in the face of our choices when they believe them to be profoundly misguided.

This new ethic helped make liberal democracy possible by making citizenries in the West *gentle*—restrained and relatively easygoing in their use of their considerable freedoms in the private sphere. The birth of tolerance has an unhappy twin, however. The prior disintegration of authoritative moral guidance (even the belief in the possibility thereof) made possible, as the logic of Romantic ideas unfolded into value relativism, a dramatic radicalization of individualism and redefinition of liberty. Romanticism, by progressively divorcing the definition of worthy action from any single conception of virtue or excellence apprehended by the intellect, appears in practice to legitimate the freer and freer and freer pursuit of happiness. When the American Founders spoke of the pursuit of happiness, happiness bore an essential connection to virtue understood along classical or Christian lines. By disconnecting the idea of happiness from notions of excellence (whether intellectual or moral), which depend for their continuation

across generations on confident espousal by the regime's respected voices, liberty too came to take on a new, entire self-indulgent, meaning.

Originally, liberty meant freedom from interference by the state, and implied a right to help guide the polity by patriotic participation in government; most important, perhaps, for the American founders it meant the freedom to pursue one's own salvation free of government interference. As Romantic ideas took hold, it came to mean the freedom to freely will and live a law apprehended by reason (or some other way) for oneself. For progressive political reformers, this justified active state support for individuals in the name of helping them to realize their potentials. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, liberty took on an altogether new meaning again: the unlimited and unbridled license to indulge whatever passions, whatever inclinations, whatever whims, one prefers, with the expectation that no one will judge the resultant behavior according to anything resembling an exacting standard—moral, aesthetic or otherwise.

In sum, then, European Romanticism struck a great blow for liberty and tolerance in its infancy but grew corrosive with age. The movement—built on sentiment, sensuality and willfulness—exerts two separate pernicious effects, each of which strike important pillars of Western civilization. In the first place, the romantic ethic strengthened value relativism and its denial that knowledge is possible in the realm of values. Secondly, it transformed Westerners' conception of one of the very things—liberty—our civilization exists to protect. Third, in glorifying man's sensual nature and depreciating the West's Christian inheritance, Romanticism levied a powerful challenge to the notion that it is worthwhile to be good, that goodness and virtue have a direct connection to human happiness. It is much harder to defend the righteousness of a civilization where its very *raison d'être* are understood in such a way as to condone and legitimate the antics of a Paris Hilton, a Lady Gaga or a Miley Cyrus.

## DEMOCRATIC EGALITARIANISM AND WITHDRAWAL

The immortal words of the Declaration of Independence, “all men are created equal and endowed with certain unalienable rights” announced America's dedication to principles discovered by the Enlightenment's leading political thinkers. The idea spread throughout the West like wildfire, perhaps because Christianity, which taught that all men are equal in the eyes of God whatever one's earthly station, make it spiritually plausible to believe in the equal dignity of all human beings. Once again, however, a constituent element of Western civilization—the very keystone of the exceptional polities built in the modern era—ultimately contributes to its unraveling.

No thinker better understands the double-edged nature of egalitarianism and democracy than Alexis de Tocqueville. To be sure, Tocqueville appreciated the attendant benefits: class mobility is a feature of a just regime; family life is sweeter where inheritance and hierarchy do not interfere with parental and filial love; religious worship can bring deep and lasting satisfaction when it is divorced from political ambition; in unleashing the productive energy of the entire citizenry, democratic states have the potential to become more powerful than their aristocratic ancestors. These are all happy consequences of the emergence of an egalitarian social state, which Tocqueville believed to be inevitable—at least in the Christian world. Nonetheless, it is the threat equality represents—to the potential happiness and greatness of democratic individuals and nations—which occupies the vast majority of Tocqueville's attention. He believed the democratic social state to be inevitable; but he did not believe healthy republican governments would necessarily or inevitably issue from it. Egalitarianism can just as easily prepare the way for insidious new forms of tyranny and despotism. Tocqueville wrote to teach democrats how to avoid the perils of egalitarianism in the hope of rendering democracy “profitable to mankind.” Nor are Tocqueville's concerns confined to the political dangers of egalitarianism. He also feared that a *mania* for equality might transform human longing altogether, robbing democrats of “several attributes of their humanity.”

Tocqueville's key insight is that equality of conditions transforms ordinary selfishness into what he calls “individualism.” Democratic citizens are free and equal, but they are politically impotent: “As conditions are equalized, one finds a greater number of individuals who, not being wealthy enough or powerful enough to exert great influence over the fates of those like them, have nevertheless acquired or preserved enough enlightenment and goods to be able to be self-sufficient” (Tocqueville 2002, 483-4). Private life thus comes to occupy the whole of an individual's attention. Sensing that he will never distinguish himself among the entire body of the citizenry, the



democrat seeks to isolate himself, retreating into coterie (small groups) of like-minded individuals the better to pursue his narrow interests and inclinations. As Tocqueville explains, “Only with difficulty does one draw a man out of himself to interest him in the destiny of the whole state, because he understands poorly the influence that the destiny of the state can exert on his lot” (Tocqueville, 487). If it the country is at war, or in fiscal crisis, he hardly notices so distant do the affairs of state seem to him to be from his own. On the one hand, America is exceptional in part for Americans’ active participation in their government; Tocqueville calls the township the “seed” of free institutions. On the other hand, however, by way of a pervasive individualism, egalitarianism destroys citizenship: “there is no need to tear from such citizens the rights they possess; they willingly allow them to escape. The exercise of their political duties appears to them a distressing contretemps that distracts them from their industry” (Tocqueville, 515).

This retreat from public life is pernicious for a number of reasons, not least because it abets the rise of Soft Despotism. For present purposes, its effect on the citizen’s self-understanding, the democratic psychology, is more important still. Individualism and withdrawal erodes citizenship by weakening citizens’ sense of belonging, their sense of duty to the broader political community. Such a man is hardly even a citizen anymore—highly unlikely to sacrifice narrow private interest from love of country, not even when the public good urgently requires it. This effectively transforms democratic self-government into a kind of sum of narrow preferences will of the majority. What is more, for *feeling* less attachment to his polity, less bound to for his identity, this new kind of citizen-subject feels less and less impetus to learn about his country, its principles and purposes, less and less reason to celebrate its legacy. Withdrawal from country—in America’s case especially—means disengagement from the civilizational legacy as well. Is it any surprise that young men, lost in their video games and Twitter feeds, take next to no interest in the historical and philosophical roots of Western civilization? Where democrats are drawn out of themselves, they join with those like them—who share and interest or a passion—and derive their identity from the associations nearest to them rather than the political community as a whole.

## DEMOCRATIC MATERIALISM AND THE DESICCATION OF HUMAN LONGING

One’s sense of his own impotence, joined to habitual indulgence in narrowly private pursuits, has a further damaging effect: it distracts individuals from worthwhile endeavors and wraps them up entirely in making money. For Tocqueville, greatness generally *requires* leisure and education, which is to say greatness requires inherited wealth. Where moneymaking is an object of scorn (by those born into it), the ardor to be admired—pride—spurs the gentleman to develop a reputation for excellences that extend well beyond the marketplace. Aristocratic brilliance flows from the way unequal social conditions mold and shape human longing. By channeling the energy of men and women toward noble, worthwhile pursuits—achievement in politics, literature, art, science and philosophy, some other great contribution to country—*aristocratic* inequality inspires high culture and political greatness. This is the reason Tocqueville laments its passing. Democratic egalitarianism, by contrast, is obsessively pecuniary in focus and orientation, and almost necessarily so; the many will always have to work—to survive, to live. That work inevitably dominates life where there is unlimited hope of improving one’s station is only a part of the problem. Some of that work (the tedious task of placing pinheads on pins is Tocqueville’s example) is so narrow as to exert a dehumanizing effect: it shrinks man’s conception of himself (Tocqueville, 530-2). Others devote every last bit of energy to ameliorating their fortune without improving themselves or achieving anything truly worthwhile. Democracy channels energy bit of human energy in the same direction and, in so doing, raises a herd of hardworking but otherwise mediocre businessmen: “What above all turns men of democracies from great ambition is not the smallness of their fortune, but the violent effort they make every day to better it. They compel the soul to employ all its strength in doing mediocre things” (Tocqueville, 601).

When excellence at moneymaking becomes honorable, the spur that drives capacious individuals ceases to raise their aspirations and begins, instead, to desiccate them. Human passion can itself be “appeased and debased” (Tocqueville, 604). Tocqueville’s prose betrays a particularly poignant dejection when he laments the soul-deadening effect of this reorientation of life toward money and utility: “What I reproach equality for is not that it carries men away in the pursuit of forbidden enjoyments; it is for absorbing them entirely in the search for permitted

Cross-Cultural Decision Making (2019)

enjoyments...” Materialism, Tocqueville goes on to explain turns democrats to the pursuit of “material enjoyments... with an insane ardor” and in the process “softens [souls] and in the end quietly loosens all their tensions” (Tocqueville, 509, 519). The tensions—between duty and inclination, present situation and imagined glories, love of country and religious devotion, family and high romantic attachment—can drive human beings to exert energy, sometimes tremendous energy, in an effort find peace in resolution. Democratic centuries loosen those tensions in two separate ways. Where the marketplace rules, money-loving men paint easier horizons, which give safe—read: mundane—shape and tenor to the longings and aspirations that motivate members of the community. At the same time, distractions are multiplied and brought within reach of everyone: either by the furious busyness of the marketplace or the distractions that come from the successes it lays open, democrats grow ambivalent to the longings of soul that, in differentiating man from beast, once provoked him to strive to perfect the higher features of his nature. We live in an environment that all but *compels* “the soul to employ all its strength in doing mediocre things” (Tocqueville, 601). One of the unforgettable images of Allan Bloom’s *Closing of the American Mind* is his arresting portrait of pubescent male youth: utterly absorbed in a private mood cocoon, withdrawn from the world, completely content to strive for nothing so long as he has his Walkman (Bloom, 77-81). It is not for nothing that Bloom wanted to call his siren work *Souls Without Longing*.

Democratic man, as Tocqueville found in embryonic form when he visited America, is a pitiable and pathetic creature—blind to the higher longings that might bring deep and lasting fulfillment, it is as though he “despises himself to the point that he believes himself made only to taste vulgar pleasures” (Tocqueville, 604). At the extreme, he becomes viciously self-indulgent insofar as his ubiquitous focus on material concerns tends to morph into a dangerous theoretical materialism. Thus distracted from his mortality, from all of higher longing, bourgeois man is apt to seize upon the mechanistic understanding of the cosmos put forth by modern science to soul-desiccating effect. It is a short step from denying the possibility of God and an immortal soul to thoroughgoing nihilism. Every consistent nihilist, meanwhile, lives life as a hedonist, unable to find meaning in the world outside of himself. The democrat’s self-indulgent retreat saps life of its deepest potential satisfactions; it is hard to feel fulfilled or happy lacking something larger than oneself to which to contribute. Hedonists are politically pernicious, too—unlikely to sacrifice for the greater good, unmoved by its claims to noble purpose, unconcerned with the endurance of their political community past their own time in it. The community feels the damage keenly; this new kind of man is ignorant, even contemptuous, of the legacy he has inherited and his role in helping to continue it.

## THE EROSION OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

The liberal arts—poetry, philosophy and history—stand proud, as prospective remedies for the ills thrust upon us by egalitarianism and capitalism. They have always reminded the best among those who engage in them of the brilliant heights mankind *can* reach, inspiring some to *want* to equal and exceed the pinnacles of human achievement, thought and experience. Western civilization’s openness to the great works from every period—and, indeed, from every civilization—is one of its distinguishing features. Tocqueville expresses a hope that teaching the great works of antiquity, in particular, can “counterbalance our particular defects” and “prop us up on the side where we lean” (Tocqueville, 452).

Tocqueville also foresaw that the liberal arts themselves, and the way they are engaged, were likely to be affected by democratic *mores*, however. On the one hand, democrats are apt to emphasize the useful and the practical, depreciating the purely theoretical and the beautiful (Tocqueville, 439). Artists themselves are forced to please an ever larger and ill-educated market, bustling obsessed with practical and material concerns. This inevitably debases the “art” they produce: “in aristocratic centuries, enjoyments of the mind are particularly demanded of the sciences; in democratic, those of the body” (Tocqueville, 437, 448). What is more, the impotent, equal and lonely democrat, alone among a crowd of similarly unimpressive individuals, naturally doubts the possibility of great human achievement simply. Tocqueville keenly observes that there is “nothing so small, so dull, so filled with miserable interests, in a word, so antipoetic, as the life of a man in the United States” (Tocqueville, 461). Thus, there is no subject matter for the poet; “equality... dries up most of the old sources of poetry” (Tocqueville, 460.)

Egalitarianism and materialism also transforms democrats’ manner of engagement with the works of antiquity. Who

imagines that the ambition of an Alexander or a Caesar is possible today? This naturally gives a fatalistic character to democratic history (Tocqueville, 471). Individuals do not bend the arc of history; democrats perceive powerful historical forces and trends, beyond the control of any individuals or society, sweeping entire populations along in spite of themselves. The democrat in effect loses sight of his place in history, his country's place in history, even the distinguishing features of his civilization. A population that detaches itself from the great achievements of the Western tradition is unlikely to trumpet and celebrate that tradition. It is as though he believes himself to be beneath the dignity of such lofty concerns. As Irving Kristol has observed, the entire political community is lowered where the citizenry does not believe itself worthy of its rich inheritance or meaningful collective pursuits:

a society needs more than sensible men and women if it is to prosper: It needs the energies of the creative imagination as expressed in religion and the arts. It is crucial to the lives of all our citizens, as it is to all human being at all times, that they encounter a world that possesses a transcendent meaning, a world in which the human experience makes sense. Nothing is more dehumanizing, more certain to generate a crisis, than to experience one's life as a meaningless event in a meaningless world (Kristol, 134).

## CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, the West's elite universities are unlikely to combat the crisis of meaning so apparent today. They have not only abandoned their responsibility to teach future generations about the West, its merit, and the importance of its endurance. Far from buttressing and improving Western civilization, they contribute mightily to its further erosion today. In fact, the most impactful geniuses of the late nineteenth century, their influence still felt and amplified by the very universities their thought quickly and thoroughly corrupted, sought deliberately to undermine the foundations of Western civilization today.

The barbarians within are often more dangerous than the barbarians at the gates. For us, the seductive ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche are the biggest danger, turning democratic self-doubt into a pervasive kind of self-loathing. Nietzsche's proud depreciation of the possibility of knowledge—his affirmation of a kind of blind, animalistic, will to power—provided a powerful theoretical reason to dismiss the principles which redeem and justify the West. His claim that the West's foundational assumptions are in fact a source of weakness—likely to usher in the reign of the last man—served only to reinforce the dangerous relativistic assumptions promulgated by modern science. Equally pernicious, an important tenet of Marxist ideology, which sprung from Romanticism to criticize the failings of capitalism, is alive and well today. While the failed Soviet experiment has cured Westerners of their desire for communal ownership of the means of production, the underlying assumption of Marxism, that capitalism (not human nature) is the cause of human greed, continues to fuel a pervasive self-hatred among many Western elites. This erroneous assumption is Pavlovian truth for Western elites today, and it leads them to blame their own regimes for the injustice of the world—as though *we are* the cause of human greed, oppression and war, both at home and abroad.

If the liberal arts exacerbate the problem today, they may also be the solution. In spite of all of the societal forces that sap lofty ambition and eradicate refinement of taste, Tocqueville is unusually optimistic through his discussion of the liberal arts. He is confident that great minds will nonetheless emerge, from time to time, even in spite of the thoroughly enervating effect of egalitarian *mores* (Tocqueville, 429, 437). He seems to hope these rare lofty geniuses—lovers of truth and greatness—will work to refine and ennoble their societies, helping to pull against the desiccating tendencies of egalitarianism. He hopes, in a word, that a kind of natural aristocracy—proud of its heritage and public spirited—will be cultivated somehow, even if the spirit of the times altogether rejects the notion. Culture can change quickly in democratic centuries thanks to its destruction of hierarchy and tradition. It will be left to such men and women, “perfect master[s] of ancient literature and wholly steeped in its spirit,” to save the West from the barbarians within (Tocqueville, 452).

## REFERENCES

- Berlin, Isaiah (2001). *The Roots of Romanticism*, Henry Hardy, ed. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Berman, Harold (1983). *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bloom, Allan (1987). *The Closing of the American Mind*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Brague, Remi (2010). "Liberty and the Judaeo-Christian Inheritance," in Roger Scruton, ed., *Liberty and Civilization*. New York: Encounter Books.
- Ceaser, James W. (2012). "The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism, *American Political Thought* 1:1 (Spring).
- Codevilla, Angelo (2009). *The Character of Nations*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hail, Michael (2013), "The Philosophic Foundations of the Crisis of Western Civilization," in *Advances in Cross-Cultural Activities, Part II*, Denise M. Nicholson and Dylan D. Schmorow, editors. New York: Taylor & Francis, CRC Press.
- Hallaq, Wael (2005). *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic law*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Huntington, Samuel (1991). *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Huntington, Samuel (1993). "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* (Summer, 1993).
- Jefferson, Thomas (1984). *Writings*, Merrill Peterson, ed. New York, The Library of America.
- Lange, Stephen (2011), "Relativism and its Consequences for Western Civilization" in *Advances in Cross-Cultural Decision Making*, Denise M. Nicholson and Dylan D. Schmorow, editors. New York: Taylor & Francis, CRC Press.
- Kristol, Irving (1995), *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*, New York: The Free Press.
- Ricketts, Glenn, Peter Wood, Stephen Balch and Ashley Thorne (2011). "The Vanishing West, 1964-2010," A Report by The National Association of Scholars. [http://www.nas.org/articles/The\\_Vanishing\\_West\\_1964-2010](http://www.nas.org/articles/The_Vanishing_West_1964-2010). Last accessed March 1, 2014.
- Pidluzny, Jonathan W. (2011). "Democracy's Sacred Opinions and the Radicalization of Islam in the Twentieth Century" in *Advances in Cross-Cultural Decision Making*, Denise M. Nicholson and Dylan D. Schmorow, editors. New York: Taylor & Francis, CRC Press.
- Scruton, Roger (2010). *Liberty and Civilization : the western heritage*. New York: Encounter Books.
- Strauss, Leo (1964). "The Crisis of Our Time" in *The Predicament of Modern Politics*, Harold J. Spaeth, ed. Detroit: University of Detroit Press.
- Strauss, Leo (1967). "Jerusalem and Athens," *Commentary* (June).
- Tocqueville, Alexis de (2000). *Democracy in America*, Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop trans. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.