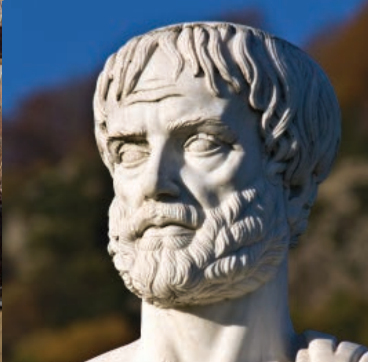

# The Merits of Western Civilisation

## An Introduction

**Wolfgang Kasper**

*Foundations of Western Civilisation Program*

**MONOGRAPHS ON WESTERN CIVILISATION NO. 2**

# WESTERN CIVILISATION:
# An Introduction

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Wolfgang Kasper

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# Foreword

The Institute of Public Affairs and Mannkal Economic Education Foundation's joint project, the Foundations of Western Civilisation, is dedicated to exploring, sharing and celebrating the origins of Western Civilisation.

In this second monograph, emeritus Professor Wolfgang Kasper explores what makes Western Civilisation great, what makes it different, where it comes from and where it is going. It is the essential introduction to Western Civilisation.

It follows the first monograph, *The National Curriculum: A Critique*, edited by Chris Berg, which exposes how the federal government's draft national curriculum in turn disparages, ignores and downplays many of the key foundations of modern Western society.

This document, which will mandate what every Australian child is taught in the future, contains few references to Christianity, and the ones it does contain are not favourable. It is full of highly political and ideological terms like 'sustainability' and places a heavy emphasis on the study of Asia and Indigenous Australia, but fails to mention vital historcial events like the English Civil War. It even suggests that modern human rights stem from international organisations like the United Nations rather than the Enlightenment and the development of 'natural rights' through Christian theology.

# FOREWORD

If the next generation of Australians are not going to be taught how we got to where we are today, and the things that make our modern society great, then our very future is under threat.

That's why this text by Wolfgang Kasper is so important. It tells the story of the development of Western Civilisation in a highly accessible and enjoyable manner. It ranges across an extraordinarily broad canvas of history, economics and religion. It discusses the key features of our civilisation today and the threats that it faces in the near future. It traces the development of private property rights, the law, religious values and culture. After reading it, your view of the history of Western society will undoutedbly be better informed and hopefully, meaningfully enriched.

John Roskam
Executive Director
Institute of Public Affairs

September 2011

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I gratefully acknowledge the critical and valuable inputs of my wife, Regine Kasper, and of Ted Rule, who saved me from possible embarrassment.

# 1 Introduction

How important is civilisation to the fulfilment of our destiny and the pursuit of happiness? Will modernisation mean more or less automatic Westernisation of the entire world—the 'end of history', as Francis Fukuyama memorably phrased it after the demise of totalitarian socialism? Or will non-Western societies ultimately fail to master the blessings of new knowledge and advanced technology, because they do not fully subscribe to fundamental liberal values?* Are we already experiencing the evolution of competing 'multiple modernities'? If this is so, will this motivate confrontations between various civilisations vying for supremacy—'clashes of civilisations', as Samuel Huntington asserted in 1996?

The attacks on September 11, 2001 shone a harsh spotlight on culturally and religiously motivated conflicts. Interest in civilisation—what it is, what role it plays—has since risen steeply. Its detractors have dismissed Western Civilisation as a burden imposed by tradition and an obstacle to creating a new dawn for humanity. Those who see merit in Western Civilisation have, by contrast, highlighted it as the decisive underpinning of freedom, security, justice, peace, prosperity, and the conservation of a liveable environment.

* I propose to use the word 'liberal' in its original, classical meaning, namely as promoting liberty, not in the modern American meaning of being generous with other people's money.

Whether one wishes to defend or attack our civilisation, one will need to answer these basic questions: what is civilisation? And what is the essence of Western Civilisation?

Civilisation and culture are abstract concepts. It is not always easy to grasp them fully. Think of them as a garden that has been carefully cultivated for generations: owner after owner modified and added to the underlying design, which has been passed on from one to the other. Its paths and old trees, its lawns and flowerbeds can be likened to the tangible evidence of civilisation. A lot of thought and care, inspired by evolving notions of beauty and ambitions for display, has gone into the garden. A great deal of knowledge and experience has been required to maintain and develop it, not to mention unstinting regular effort to control wild growth and maintain some order. And yet, the garden has a momentum of its own; it cannot be completely controlled by any one cultivator. It is shaped by the soil; it changes and grows, subject to unforeseen climatic conditions and the plants' lifecycle. Whoever tends the garden, and even all who just visit, will appreciate it all the more if they understand its inherent qualities. They will appreciate not only the tangible and the visible in the garden, but also the inherent ideas and design concepts—the invisible that gives it its character.

Western Civilisation, too, forms a varied ensemble of elements that ceaselessly grow and evolve, some tangible, some reflecting the underlying layer of values, which are less frequently thought about. This layer is arguably closer to what many writers have called 'culture': the substantial values, which are subconsciously adhered to, such as honesty, rejection of violence, a readiness to cooperate and compromise, and an ambition for improvement. These values and the rules that translate them into behaviour are invisible to the untrained eye, but it is the invisible underpinnings that count most. They reflect past trials and errors, the lessons learnt by earlier generations. They are the sediment of their wisdom.

Once we shine the torchlight of analytical thinking on Western Civilisation, we discern ancient origins: Greek logic and civil sense, Roman law and individualism, Christian compassion, Humanist erudition, liberal open-mindedness, tolerance and respect for the rights of the individual. A distinguishing hallmark of modern Western Civilisation is openness: no one possesses the ultimate truth, no one is allowed to impose their truth on others, and everyone is free to think, be curious and compete with their insights and resources.

With this in mind, I shall elaborate on the two questions posed above:

While acknowledging the tangible, visible fruits of civilisation—its art and architecture, its music, its technical and economic achievements—I shall underline its unifying, underlying cultural backbone, the cement that holds society together: the values and the institutions which are easily overlooked.

Asking how Western Civilisation came about, what it stands for and why it has become so singularly successful in attaining fundamental aspirations and so influential throughout the world, we will draw on the cultural inputs of ancient Greece, Rome, Christianity, Medieval-Renaissance Europe, and the Enlightenment in Europe and America, which paved the way for civil, economic and political liberty, as well as individual responsibility.

We will then ask which nations belong to the West, and which do not, and will touch on how the West in various epochs of history defined itself vis-à-vis 'the East', a concept that has kept changing over time. Will non-Western Civilisations, which are now acquiring modern technology and aspire to Western living standards, have to subscribe to the complete Western cultural canon, or will we see equally or more successful 'alternative modernities' based on diverse cultural foundations? Finally, we will reflect on the implications of our insights for Australia, which is an immigrant nation like no other and in many respects an outpost of the West.

Exploring, explaining and upholding what the West stands for is both an obligation and a challenge. Without an understanding of what Western Civilisation represents, we are in danger of losing it and discovering—when it is too late—what assets we have lost.

# 2 What is Civilisation?

Reading the vast literature on civilisations, it is easy to become confused because the precise definition of the term varies greatly over time, across different European languages and between authors. At some stage, one may be tempted to side with British art historian Kenneth Clark, who dedicated a lifetime to the study of civilisation and admitted that he still did not know what it was, but thought that he could recognise it when he saw it.[1]

In the contemporary literature, 'civilisation' is frequently equated with 'culture'. Yet, it seems useful to differentiate between culture and civilisation. The former goes back to human efforts to cultivate a raw, natural state, so that it better serves human purposes, such as for example in *horti-cultura*, whereas the latter derives from the Latin *civis*, a member of a civilised urban community.

British historian Arnold Toynbee and French historian Fernand Braudel, among others, distinguished between an older term 'civilisation in the singular' and 'civilisations in the plural'.[2] In 18th century French, the then novel term 'civilisation' (in the singular) meant 'the process of becoming civilised, acquiring the finer habits and polished manners of a gentleman'. Mark Twain used the word in 1885 in the same meaning when he let Huckleberry Finn say: '...Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and civilise me, and I can't stand it'.

'Civilisations' (in the plural) only came into use in the early 19th century to describe systems of institutions, remarkable human creations and material artefacts in various regions of the world, often with the connotation that these represented high levels of accomplishment. In this sense, the term 'civilisation' soon became confused with the term 'culture', which German anthropologists preferred and which also became the preferred term in the American literature.* In addition, some sociologists and historians, such as Arnold Toynbee, began to use 'society' as synonymous with 'civilisation', despite the fact that civilisation comprises more than society in the sense of a collection of people and their social interactions.[3] This school of thought tried to define a limited number of human macro-groups that had certain features in common, so that they could be classed as one civilisation, an attempt most recently made by Huntington. While some aggregates make sense—the West, Islam, the Chinese East—the enumeration of a definite number of civilisations soon gets stuck in the mud of contradictions, overlaps and uncertainties. A look at long-term history will immediately tell us how fuzzy the boundaries are: cross-fertilisation, mutual assimilation by trade and war, empire-building, migration, trade and technology transfer have been the norm; 'pure breeding' is the rare exception.

* In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the distinction between culture and civilisation became a potent political argument for German nationalists. They accused the pragmatic, commercial Anglo-Saxons of possessing only superficial 'civilisation', whereas the Germans had developed inner-most, superior notions of 'culture'. If one reads the literature today, one is hard-pressed to understand why German intellectual elites could stylise the First World War as a battle to make (German) culture the leading influence in Western civilisation. In the run-up to the Second World War, Nazi propaganda appealed to the same romantic logic, that the *Volk* were to fight to free humanity from the curse of civilisation. These episodes are nevertheless a stark reminder of how deep-seated civilisational concepts are and how they can be exploited by political powerbrokers. Something similar might happen again in possible future 'clashes of civilisations'.

Nevertheless, civilisations form imagined communities with which people identify and in which they feel comfortable, because they understand the basic rules of behaviour—what is expected of them, and what they can expect of others.

Others have focused on the interaction of man with nature, according the term civilisation only to macro-groups of people who have re-crafted nature to an extent that the human condition is dominated less by it than by the manmade creations of civilisations.[4] This school goes back to ethnological studies and tends to focus exclusively on the material, tangible creations of civilised societies: the arts, the sciences, the buildings, industry and commerce —in short: the hardware.

## The Visible, and the Invisible, which Matters Most

These definitional entanglements notwithstanding, a good case can be made for cutting through the Gordian knot of the civilisation/culture confusion by distinguishing, as most German and many American writers have done, between culture (*Kultur*) referring to the values, religious beliefs, ideals and internal institutions that are deeply embedded in the minds of a community (and that often come with a certain disdain for the hardware of civilisation), and civilisation (*Zivilisation*) as embracing culture as well as all the valuable intellectual, technological and material creations, including the practical technical and organisational skills in mastering nature.[5] According to these definitions, the Greek *hippie Diogenes* may well have been a cultured man, but he disdained civilisation. Using these definitions (which I propose to adopt here), civilisation is the overarching, wider concept, and culture the sub-surface regime of values and rules, that underpins all of civilisation. Seen in this light, the two concepts are entirely compatible. As the English and Scottish writers of the Enlightenment in particular have shown, values, rule systems and material creations should be considered a cohesive whole. Distinguishing the intangible, value-centred concept of culture from

the more comprehensive concept of civilisation nevertheless allows us to say that the fruits of Western Civilisation are now eagerly sought and readily adopted by non-Western societies, yet the deeper, less visible cultural aspects may still elude them.

'In any society the nonmaterial culture is the most significant feature of the whole society, because it is the least capable of being exported and because it is pervasive in all other levels as well'.[6] Indeed, one may ask whether Western Civilisation is inseparable from Western culture and whether the tried and tested Western brand of civilisation is the only design that can durably ensure the benefits of modernity, as Eurocentric observers tell us. Will the frustrations of non-Westerners with having to acquire Western culture (and thereby losing some of their traditional identity) lead to resentment and attacks on the West, as some third world potentates keep telling us? Or will we observe sustainable modern civilisations that are anchored in differing cultures—what has been called 'multiple modernities'?[7]

Since we want to make the important point that the invisible —the cultural essence—matters more than the visible, we are arguably best served by a definition of civilisation first framed by the great British anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1932-1917). He defined it as 'all capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.... Culture, or civilization, taken in its broad.... sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society'.[8] This classical definition refers neatly to the tension between the individual and the social group and focuses on the learned rules (institutions)—the moral values, the customs, laws and habits—which form the backbone of any civilisation.

Culture is normally rather durable. Its character influences the outward manifestations of civilisation, which tend to adapt to changing opportunities and circumstances faster than culture. One might compare

the evolution of material civilisation to a ship on a drag anchor: the ship responds flexibly to outside circumstances, but the 'culture anchor' moves only slowly if the pressure of winds and currents pull persistently in one direction. Culture can be viewed as the sediment of tradition; it gives continuity and a degree of cohesion to civilisations. Civilisations tend to retain sufficient inherent qualities to be a recognisable continuum over many centuries. For example, Shang Dynasty artefacts are recognisably Chinese; they could not have originated anywhere else. And European Christian civilisation, despite its long and sometimes turbulent development, has retained core characteristics over the past 1,000 or 1,500 years, if not longer. Roman and Greek concepts of thought and seeing the world still live on; the language, the writing and the architectural symbols of antiquity can still be recognised in modern manifestations, at least by the knowledgeable elites, and Christian ethics has left a lasting imprint—even on the worldview of present-day Western agnostics and atheists.

Both civilisation and culture evolve: in this respect, a dividing line runs through the discussion of Western philosophy. There is a conservative tradition, which is based on the understanding that old rules are good rules because people have internalised them by long practice, whereas new rules can easily produce unexpected, deleterious consequences. Considerable empirical and theoretical argument may indeed be adduced for this conservative stance. However, we must never lose sight of the key lesson of history: rigid civilisations eventually are overwhelmed by changed circumstances and then decline. The liberal Western tradition takes this into account. It favours the freedom to explore, discuss and test concepts as essential for the long-term viability of civilisation. Continuity and flexibility are reconciled, as we shall see, by a hierarchical order of institutions that allows for adjustment of low-level rules and establishes firm, hard-to-change higher-ranking rules. In the dynamic modern world, where so many complex changes are occurring all the time, much recommends the liberal ahead of the conservative stance.[9]

Although revolutionaries rail against tradition and confining institutions, we must recognise that humans need continuity and cohesion. They have limited cognitive capacities and therefore feel uncomfortable and stop coordinating their actions properly when recognisable patterns are overturned by dramatic (revolutionary) changes. This is not only a matter of comfort and confidence, but also of economic efficiency: as we interact with others, we can do so only within a framework of rules that make the reactions of the others predictable. We shall see below that certain civilisations are better than others at reconciling the need for flexible adjustment with the need for continuity.

## Fundamental Aspects of Institutions

To understand what civilisation means, one has to understand institutions, the rules that coordinate people's actions in ways that create confidence and economise on the costs of interacting with each other.* Institutions are the essential software needed to ensure the usefulness of natural resources, as well as the artefacts and the implements made from them—the hardware of civilisation. Ordinary people are rarely fully aware of the institutions, essential though they are to civilisation. We have become so completely used to them that we normally take them for granted. Canadian author Jane Jacobs neatly highlighted this when she told of an experience that opened her eyes to the centrality of institutions: she had just deposited a substantial sum of money in a Dutch bank.[10] As she walked out, she writes, it 'hit me that I'd handed over my fee to a total stranger in a bank I knew nothing about in a city where I knew almost nobody…in exchange for nothing but a flimsy paper with a scribble in a language I didn't understand'. She began to wonder whether and why she would see her money ever again.

* By the term 'instiutions' we do not mean organisations such as banks, universities or insane asylums. Institutions here mean rules, whose violations carry sanctions.

Therefore, she explored just how many total strangers were bound by mutual promises, enforced by institutions that carry penalties, to overcome our opportunistic instincts to appropriate other people's funds. We engage only rarely in similar reflections on the institutions that facilitate our daily lives and that make many actions, which we take for granted, possible in the first place.

A society's institutions are anchored in deeply held values, which tend to evolve even more slowly than the customs and work practices. Such values may, for example, relate to how people see material equality versus reward for individual achievement, or how the community respects individuality versus conformity. American economist Deirdre McCloskey was right in highlighting the essential role of such shared values, and how they are communicated, to the emergence of modern capitalist growth. Only when successful entrepreneurs were widely respected for their success and their well-deserved wealth was not attacked as illegitimate, could modern development take off. If material civilisation is based ultimately on an almost invisible spider web of such fundamental values, it is important to guard against attacks on the value system. If envy of high achievers, valuation of material achievement versus the conservation of nature, or hatred of all tradition become community norms, modern civilisation, high living standards and material comforts will, over the longer term, be unsustainable.

Important though institutions and values are to civilisation, many researchers concentrate on its visible manifestations, indeed often overlooking the institutions altogether. To cite personal experience: when I visited early neolithic sites in eastern Thailand and northern Chile to investigate why people moved from paleolithic hunting and gathering into the early forms of wealth creation by agriculture, I searched for clues about the institution of property rights. People will obviously not dig the soil and plant crops or bother with domesticating animals, if all comers can simply take the results of their efforts.

In other words, reasonably secure, exclusive property rights are a precondition for the development of agriculture and animal husbandry. In both places, the local museums dwelled on implements and excavated remains of structures. In each case, the curators were astounded that, when I questioned them, we soon found clues to the existence of private property: evidence of fences and individual storehouses, locks and border markers. To cite another example, every account of the Hanseatic League dwells on how important the sailing technologies and the salt mines at Lüneburg were, but they hardly ever describe the trust-creating institutions so crucial to underpinning this network of trading cities.* It is easier to focus on tangible hardware and overlook the more important software.

## Universal Institutions are Superior

Not all institution sets are of equal value in helping people to attain fundamental aspirations, such as freedom, justice, prosperity or security. To this end, the institutions ought to be universal, as the Italian legal philosopher Bruno Leoni and Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek have taught us.[11] In other words, the rules must be general (non-discriminatory and not case-specific), certain (simple, knowable, neither ad-hoc nor conditional or arbitrary), open (apply to similar future circumstances) and consistent with each other.

To the extent that they have these universal qualities, institutions confer threefold benefits: they protect spheres of individual autonomy and are therefore crucial to fostering self-responsibility and individual freedom. This in turn motivates people to make the best of their lives. Indeed, as German philosopher Immanuel Kant once remarked, ‘freedom is special because it brings out the best in us’.

* The Hanseatic League was an alliance of a northern European coastal trading cities formed in 1358 to protect their shared commercial interests.

Given our cognitive limitations, universal rules help us to cooperate effectively with each other, both in our regular routines and in exploring new ideas. As economists would say, institutions reduce transaction costs. Owing to the complex division of labour in modern civilisations, these costs tend to be very high, in particular when innovative ideas are explored and tested. Since knowledge is nowadays the key production factor and relevant knowledge is normally dispersed in many different brains, expedient institutions are necessary to foment productive cooperation between people with different specialities. 'Certainty we cannot achieve in human affairs, and it is for this reason that, to make the best use of what knowledge we have, we must adhere to rules'.[12] Universal institutions therefore make a huge contribution to economic welfare. We speak with justification of 'institutional capital'.

Different people will always pursue their own differing purposes, so conflicts are sometimes unavoidable. In civilised societies, good institutions help us avoid many possible conflicts and establish non-violent, just methods of solving conflicts where they do arise. In these ways, institutions promote the fundamental values of social peace and security. Shared rules constrain individual opportunism and thereby inspire confidence. As a result, civilised life is not lonely, brutish and short, but sociable, comfortable and increasingly long.

Agreed rules are especially important when enterprising people begin to explore new ideas: will a discovery work in practice (technical efficiency)? Will it be more advantageous to sufficient numbers of people to make the implementation of the new idea worthwhile (commercial viability)? Shared institutions are therefore decisive not only to making a society civilised, but also to making it innovative. Indeed, universal rules are key to explaining why innovators prospered in the West, and why the West grew rich. Roman law created rules, which already had certain universal qualities (at least for free, male citizens), but genuinely universal institutions became only widespread in the early modern era. Sustained economic growth could therefore only take off in modern times.

## Internal versus External Institutions

The institutions that matter most are what we call the internal rules of society: ethical norms, customs, good manners, work and trading practices and the like, which have evolved by trial and error within society and are enforced spontaneously by those directly affected. They differ from the so-called external rules, which are designed and enforced from above by political authorities—legislation and regulations imposed and enforced by governments.

The internal institutions are not of human design. Baron Charles de Montesquieu (1689-1755) already made the point that many rules were the result of evolution, not of intelligent design when he wrote: 'Intelligent beings may have laws of their own making; but they have also some which they have never made.' Friedrich Hayek, an astute observer of how institutions are formed, wrote:

> We flatter ourselves undeservedly if we represent human civilization as entirely the product of conscious reason or as the product of human design… Though our civilization is the result of a cumulation of individual knowledge, it is not by the explicit or conscious combination of all this knowledge in any individual brain, but it is…[thanks to the] habits and institutions, tools and concepts that man in society is constantly able to profit from a body of knowledge neither he nor any other man completely possesses.[13]

Compliance with internal rules is enforced by those directly involved and therefore best informed. Violations may be met with direct reprimand ('tut tut'), reprisal ('tit for tat') or ostracism ('out!'). A bad conscience may also serve to make us adhere to certain internal institutions. Relying on such direct, spontaneous enforcement may sometimes be embarrassing and uncomfortable for affected parties, but these methods are low-cost, expedient and effective.

Manmade, external rules, by contrast, require some authority to design the rules and enforce compliance. Examples are legislation, administrative regulation and decrees. The authority to impose and enforce external institutions may have been usurped by force or guile, or it may be exercised by tradition or with the consent of the people. Legislators often simply codify customary rules and attach formal enforcement mechanisms. Rulers since the times of Hammurabi (who ruled Babylon ca. 1790-1750 BC) and Indian Emperor Ashoka the Great (304-232 BC) became great legislators who clarified existing internal institutions and improved transparency. Likewise, the praetors of the Roman Republic created a body of formal, external laws, which they enforced. Not all legislation and public regulation is law in the sense that it is in harmony with the body of evolved, traditional institutions. Indeed, contemporary legislation often lays down external rules solely to reshape society (social engineering), to extract taxes or bribes, or to expand the influence of government.

Let us note some systematic differences between internal and external institutions. Internal institutions, which often incorporate the traditional wisdom of generations, tend to be spontaneously obeyed by most. Violations are spontaneously enforced whenever and wherever they become known. By contrast, politically decreed external institutions tend to be less effective and more expensive as their enforcement depends on the discovery of violations by agents of government, who operate with high agency costs. The police, the courts and the jailers (the violence professionals) certainly do not come cheap. Moreover, dependence on external rules often invites agent opportunism (corruption) and may lead to divisive politicisation. All too often powerful, well-organised groups are able to influence the body of external institutions by lobbying—to the detriment of the wider community. It is not surprising therefore that civilised societies rely heavily on internal rules.* In the Western liberal tradition, there

* All modern democracies suffer from excessive, intrusive legislation, only a small portion of which governments have the knowledge and the resources

has for a long time been a preference for treating man-made rules merely as supplementary backup.

## Reconciling Continuity and Adaptability

Another important feature in today's dynamic world is the evolutionary potential of rule systems: can they cope well with changing circumstances? Here too, internal rules normally have merits over government-made rules.[14] Internal institutions operate in a decentralised way, they encourage diversity and experiment. Internal institutions can normally be adjusted pragmatically to new exigencies. Specific rules evolve but usually stay within overarching, more abstract meta-rules (such as tolerance, humour and free speech) and in harmony with accepted cultural values, which tend to remain reasonably stable over time. One example for meta-rules is a nation's constitution, which creates a framework of continuity and coherence, even if specific legislation and administrative regulations are changed.[15] Revolutions of entire rule systems are costly because they create confusion, disruptions, loss of confidence and loss of effective social coordination. This is why institutions should remain anchored in meta-rules and shared fundamental values, stopping points whose usefulness is not questioned.

Only after traumatic shocks do major, revolutionary shifts in internal rules occur. One such example has been the dramatic shift in the Chinese cultural world from the 1940s to the 1960s. Max Weber was proven wrong: he (and many Chinese scholars) had theorised that Confucianism was so deeply anchored in internal traditions and the 'dignified acceptance of the world as it is' that it would never adjust to modernity.[16] However, the traumatic experiences of the 20th century

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to enforce. Present-day parliaments pour out volumes of legislation and regulation that no one can know, obey or enforce, unless there is voluntary compliance based on traditional habits of law-abiding behaviour.

and exposure to modern trade and industry caused large segments of the Chinese population to comprehensively shift their traditional internal institutions in the direction of greater future-orientation, with greater emphasis on material improvement and of less hierarchy.[17] The wish to overcome acute penury propelled cultural adjustments in the 'Asian Tiger' economies and more recently in China, so that we soon heard talk of 'neo-Confucianism' being the secret source of industrial success.

The evolutionary potential of external institutions tends to be problematic and haphazard: first, collectively made institutions frequently create interest groups that are motivated to perpetuate them.[18] This applies both to the political agents who design and administer government-made rules and the interest groups that benefit from regulations. Second, centralised political agents often suffer from genuine cognitive difficulties in interpreting changing circumstances that make timely reforms desirable. 20th century Australian history is replete with examples of political elites preventing overdue rule adjustments, instead political inertia harmed general welfare (for example, delaying trade liberalisation, refusing to reform labour markets, or sustaining untenable industries with costly subsidies). Political learning is particularly slow in closed economies, because direct feedback from international competition is not felt. Even in open jurisdictions, it may take considerable time until political agents recognise emerging problems, interpret them correctly, design new rules and become 'political entrepreneurs' who convince majorities that institutional change is necessary.

The adaptive potential of a civilisation's institution set is crucial to its longevity. Most civilisations have declined culturally and materially because they were based on a rigid rule system. This notion of the cyclical rise and fall of civilisations has long been a tradition in historic studies of the subject (from antiquity to Arnold Toynbee and, in our day, Michel Foucault). One of the most famous proponents of this theory

was Oswald Spengler, who predicted in the first decades of the 20th century that the 'Decline of the West' was inevitable.[19] Yet, despite repeated predictions, the West has—so far—achieved a historic record of generating new phases of expansion after phases of conflict, which are normally the harbingers of civilisational collapse.[20] Indeed, it is the most outstanding feature of Western Civilisation that it has remained adaptive and open to new challenges and opportunities, as well as sufficiently open to allow other civilisations to borrow from it.

In his analysis, historian Niall Ferguson speculates about an impending collapse of Western dominance, but he seems overly impressed by climate fears, which I consider as yet speculative and unfounded, and the short-term monetary and fiscal imbalances of recent years, which I would consider flutters of the 'monetary veil' above the real economy. Economic growth potential is not so much decided by monetary balances as it is by natural resource endowments, labour skills, capital structures, the competitive flexibility of the economic system, and the internal institutions and values of the population. It therefore seems more apposite to side with Quigley, whom Ferguson only cites in passing, and to emphasise the capacity of, and need for, capitalist democracies to adapt their institutions to new, emerging conditions. That institutional adaptation is key, has in recent years again been illustrated by the rise of China, which has excelled at adopting the 'hardware of Western Civilisation', but struggles to embrace the complementary 'software' of the institutions of a free society.

Periodic predictions of the decline of the West, even if unfounded and wrong, are nevertheless a pertinent reminder that our civilisation is a precious asset that has to be cultivated, that must not be allowed to ossify and must remain open to useful ideas and influences from competing civilisations. This tends to be acknowledged by empirically oriented philosophers and historians, whereas non-empirical (ideological) philosophers tend to exalt the static, ever-enduring aspects of a civilisation.[21]

## Civilisation and Religion

Because institutions are hard to grasp, myths, taboos, educational parables, Bible stories and symbols often serve to make institutions more comprehensible. The rule systems of many civilisations are anchored and made coherent over time by being underpinned by reference to the transcendental, namely, religion. Religious belief often serves as a crucial backup for a society's institutional regime. In earlier generations, many saw religion as a guarantor of the survival of a civilisation.[22]

A dominant continuum in Western Civilisation over the past 1,500 years has of course been Christianity, irrespective of what specific form the organised side of the religion assumed. For many, Christianity has been more—the 'transcendental kinship' which the common faith creates and a shared sense of security when faced with dangerous nature and aggression from other human groups.[23] Moreover, it is frequently claimed that morality—a fundamental quality for civilisation—requires a belief in the transcendental.[24] Many disagree. In the early modern era—let's say from Isaac Newton to Charles Darwin—doubts about the origins of the world as told in the Bible multiplied, the notion of original sin was rejected and the belief spread that one can be good without being a believer. Writers such as John Locke and the greats of the Scottish Enlightenment removed God from morality. 'Without God to fear, say religious moralists, human beings cannot be relied upon to observe morality. This reasoning is obviously false. For religious people have no monopoly of virtue and, over history as a whole, almost as much evil has been done in the name of religion as in pursuit of the irreligious alternatives'.[25]

Religions have frequently also become a rigidifying, reactionary influence and hence a hindrance to cultural evolution. The temptation is great for religious leaders to arrogate to themselves superior knowledge of all relevant truth; they are then easily tempted to suppress dissent, even if this proves harmful to the well-being of most.

The leading minds that shaped modern liberalism (for example Voltaire, Locke, Hume, Smith, and Hayek) showed convincingly that people adhere to moral rules that confine individual opportunism, out of enlightened, longer-term self-interest. However, when all parties adhere to shared standards of tolerance, the role of religion need not be a divisive issue. Hayek put it well when he wrote: 'True liberalism has no quarrel with religion, and I can only deplore the militant and essentially illiberal antireligionism which animated so much of nineteenth-century Continental liberalism'.[26] In addition, most non-believers nowadays agree that religious support for compliance with ethical norms, however motivated, does not do harm.

## The Origins of Civilisation

Civilisation is the result of drawn-out evolutionary processes. When *homo sapiens* emerged from Africa some 200,000 years ago, humans were organised in small bands of hunter-gatherers. The search for resources to survive and curiosity drove our distant forebears to eventually spread across the entire Old World, even as far as Australia. In that time, cultural change was slow, for about 8,000 generations humans remained hunter-gatherers. Together with millions of years of pre-*homo sapiens* ancestry, this shaped fundamental human behaviour, which remains a legacy of the present generation. Then, some 300—350 generations ago, momentous changes took place, the neolithic revolution. Humans began to move from mere exploitation of nature by hunting and gathering to wealth creation by agriculture and animal husbandry. As already mentioned, this required the adoption of new institutions, most notably a respect for the property of others. The neolithic revolution took place in different locations, first during the global warming period of the Holocene, which favoured good crops and an increase in human numbers: about 10,000 years ago, people in the Fertile Crescent began to plant emmer, einkorn, barley, lentils, grapes and olives.

They domesticated sheep, camels, donkeys and cows. In Melanesia, tubers, bananas and sugar cane began to be cultivated, and in Southeast and East Asia we saw the cultivation of rice, soybeans, cucumbers and tea. Later, early Africans in various regions discovered agriculture too, cultivating coffee, millet, sorghum, African yams and palm oil. Later still, paleolithic immigrants in the Americas also began to depend for their survival on agriculture—maize, beans, tomatoes, squash and cotton in Mesoamerica, and potatoes, manioc, amaranth, quinoa and llamas in Andean South America.[27]

The cultivation of crops and animals was the first step in the direction of civilisation. Soon, tribes and kingdoms with hierarchical structures were organised; formal religion, commerce and writing developed in emerging cities.* These changes demanded new attitudes and adherence to new sets of rules, indeed it required a different type of human being, who could operate with a much wider division of labour. Gradually, the original 'First Man' was replaced by a new type of human being. In the process, some primitive qualities—idealised by Romantics—were lost, but many new qualities essential for civilisation were acquired. The experience of the most recent five per cent of the time of existence of *homo sapiens* has had an impact, but the heritage of 95 per cent of our time on earth before that means that civilised habits are still only a thin, fragile veneer. Scratch it, and more primitive instincts come to the fore.

Since the neolithic revolution, civilisations have risen and declined. This is not the place to go over the various attempts by historians to establish periods and sequences of what have been complex and disparate processes.[28] The salient feature of the history of civilisations has been phases of expansion and flourishing, followed by eventual decline.

* Many consider writing as a hallmark of civilisation, as it promotes the conservation and growth of knowledge and understanding. Indeed, the Chinese word for civilisation (wen hua, literally 'the transformative influence of writing') relates directly to the possession of a writing system, whereas the Western definition relates to the physical attributes of urbanisation.

This could have two causes. Before the scientific and industrial revolution in the West, societies were predominantly agricultural and therefore vulnerable to the vagaries of nature. The limits to the production of food and other resources to sustain growing numbers of people expanded only slowly. Mankind was caught in the 'Malthusian trap' (named after the pessimistic British economist, Robert Malthus). The other possible reason for the decline of civilisations and the exceptionalism of Western Civilisation, so far, is inherent in its very nature: like no other, it made openness to new ideas, from the outside and from new inventions, a core quality. This has been underpinned by a fundamental belief in individual freedom, competition and the possibility and desirability of progress. No truth has been deemed beyond doubt and protected from challenge, no elite has been allowed to fend off competitors.[29] Western Civilisation has consequently survived internal crises: the toppling of the monopoly of the Catholic Church in the Reformation; the Wars of Religion; the overthrow of the *ancien régime* in the French Revolution; the European uprisings in 1848 and the assault and eventual defeat of totalitarian regimes in the 20th century. Yet Western culture survived all these crises to embark on renewed phases of expansion.[30]

So far, liberal Western Civilisation has managed time and again to progress, triumph and expand. With the possible exception of Chinese civilisation, which has had its historic ups and downs and ups again, the past five centuries of Western ascendancy can be considered unique in human history. And, distinct from Chinese civilisation, the West has expanded and influenced the world at large.

## Civilisation, Cities, Ethnicities

'Civilizations', writes French historian Fernand Braudel, 'can always be located on the map'.[31] This means that they are the possession of societies that live in defined spaces, indeed they are normally centred on cities. Since time immemorial, the city has been considered the motor of civilisation.

Cities contain the critical mass of ideas and talent to serve as the crucible and bearer of civilisation. They also tend to generate the wealth that enables them to stand up to repressive political powers. In this context, it is worth quoting Aristotle who wrote about the city (in *Politics*): '…while it comes into existence for the sake of life, it exists for the good life... it is clear that the city-state is a natural growth and that man by nature is a political animal; and a man that is by nature and not merely by fortune citiless is either low in the scale of humanity or above it…' Karl Marx expressed the same sentiment in a befittingly proletarian manner when he spoke of the 'idiocy of village life'.

The role of cities in civilisation is well documented. The cultural crucibles of their age were Athens, Florence, Amsterdam, London, Vienna, Paris, Berlin and New York. Industrial and artistic excellence also flourished in cities, and in turn excellence made them grow and prosper: Manchester, Detroit, the Bay area of California and the Hollywood-Los Angeles area were, for example, created by excellence in industry and services.[32] Institutional and technical capital is built most easily by the close, personal interaction of creative people, who are stimulated by the competitive hothouse atmosphere of grand cities. Whether the nexus between city and civilisation will survive in the era of the internet and ever cheaper and more convenient transport is another matter. In the past, ideas—grand and trivial—were not easily transportable. Nowadays, some of the comparative advantages of urban concentrations as hubs of cultural, industrial and commercial networks are fading. Time will tell whether net-chat can replace personal discourse, and whether e-trade can serve as a substitute to the direct neighbourhood rivalry of merchants.

Cities cannot survive on their own. They require links of communication and commerce, which integrate them with the periphery. In times past, cities and civilisations arose where transport costs were low because of river arteries—such as the Euphrates and Tigris, the Nile, the Indus,

the rivers of northern China and the Rhine—or in seashore locations, such as the Mediterranean rim. For a long time, only water transport was cheap enough to supply a city. Over time, technical changes have lowered transport costs and thus facilitated the rise of new and bigger cities in all sorts of locations.

For a long time, urban economies were not closely integrated with the countryside that fed them. The countryside remained a 'basement of civilisation', where little of the city culture permeated. Only in the 17th and 18th centuries did European civilisation become territorial, when lower costs of transport and mobility, as well as the spread of the market economy, higher living standards and the rise of modern states, brought closer vertical spatial integration. At least in the developed world, the lifestyle and amenity of civilised life have now been 'democratised' throughout space. The cheaper conduits for transport and communication have of course also facilitated the horizontal flow of ideas and knowledge, ultimately leading to globalisation.

In the historic process of spatial integration, countries went through the phase of nationalism: in the early 19th century, writers like the German Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) made language the determining feature of a national civilisation and a nation state. Over the following 150 years, this gave rise to a concept of one national territory being inhabited by one people of homogeneous racial background, sharing a common history and a national language. If one adds to this the (understandable) notion that everyone had the best institutions, it is easy to see why this inspired chauvinistic, even aggressive cultural and political nationalism, mostly in Europe, but later and even now in other continents. In Europe, this cocktail of cultural assumptions advanced the Great War of 1914-1945 and underpinned the East-West conflict from 1919 to 1989 (side-tracked temporarily during the confrontation with National Socialism from 1939 to 1945). The costly experience of the 'awful 20th century' should serve as a warning that civilisation and culture lend themselves to abuse by demagogues.

Fortunately, the new science of gene analysis has meanwhile undermined the identification of ethnicity with a civilisation and a language, let alone the arrogant notion of chosen peoples. All of humanity is cross-bred, and many have ancestors who changed their languages. The 19th century notion that a 'national language' defines 'a people' is not tenable in the light of genetic research and the new linguistics. Languages, like other cultural attributes, have frequently 'migrated' from one population to another. For example, it is now widely accepted that the current inhabitants of Europe, Iran and Northern India are descended mostly from people who lived there in pre-Indo-European times, and that the original inhabitants accepted a proto-Indo-European language from small groups of immigrants, jettisoning their earlier languages almost completely.[33] Or to give another example: most of the northern French are of Germanic stock (the Franks), but acquired a Romance language; over ten per cent of English-speaking US Americans are of African ethnic origin; and only 30 per cent of Hungarian and Turkish speakers in Hungary and Turkey are genetically Magyar or Turkic.

In the face of this evidence, only a liberal and tolerant posture towards other races, societies and civilisations is logically tenable. The working hypothesis must be that civilisational attributes evolve and 'migrate', even if some do so slowly.

## Normative Issues

The discussion of civilisations always implies controversial value judgments: societies that are given this sobriquet are often deemed to have reached a higher, more admirable state of institutional development and material and intellectual accomplishment than the others, the barbarians. A related normative aspect refers to widespread claims that one's own civilisation is superior to all others. Paradoxically, there is even a kernel of justifiable truth in this: for everyone, his own culture may indeed be superior to all others. This is so because everybody has to become habituated to his community's given

rule set, and many institutions have to be internalised to the extent that they are obeyed unthinkingly. Once people are used to interacting within given rules, cooperation costs them little effort and produces few misunderstandings, surprises and accidents. Compared to one's own familiar rules, those of others appear cumbersome and less efficient. Just think of how we react to driving on foreign roads. Driving habits (the internal institutions) are unfamiliar and the road rules (the external institutions) are hard to comply with. It is therefore only natural that most ordinary people claim to possess the superior rules. They do not realise that they only think of their personal adjustment costs when they contemplate different civilisations. Having said this, it is of course also true that not all rule sets—all cultures—are objectively of equal value in terms of attaining such fundamental goals as freedom, justice, security and peace.[34]

This point relates to personal encounters with other cultures, which often come with the danger of racial tension. People who are challenged by institutional differences look to the visible, namely inherited racial traits. Ill-understood differences in rule systems can lead to conflicts, which are then aggravated and emotionalised by racial identification. The right approach is not to consider the differences immutable (racial) but changeable (cultural). The best school for changing cultural traits—other possibly than intermarriage—has been the marketplace. Here, both parties pursue their own material self-interest and quickly learn to concentrate on trade deals, leaving other matters aside. Trucking and bartering requires common rules and an open, tolerant mind. In turn, it creates a peaceful, tolerant, businesslike attitude. It was, for example, revealing that—even during the worst of the Balkan conflict—Serbs and Croats kept trading with each other, leaving the conflicts outside the marketplace. This is typical: markets, where people interact for narrow mutual material benefit, have often been the best schools to learn conflict resolution, racial harmony and cultural integration.[35] By contrast, attempts to impose harmony by political decree and force often lead to politicisation, division and conflict.

## Civilisation Needs to Be Taught

A wit defined culture as 'all that is worth passing on to the next generation'. Although vacuous, this definition highlights an important aspect: the next generation will only be civilised if the relevant, time-tested institutions and appreciation for what is noble and worthwhile are inculcated by one generation into the next, and by incumbents into immigrant communities. Education in matters cultural probably begins at a very early age. Parents, who react uncritically and without discrimination to every whim of their crying babies by giving them whatever they demand, fail to cultivate good habits, which form the backbone of civilisation. Parents need to distinguish between a baby's crying that merits redress and comforting and instances where crying is unreasonable. Likewise, educators who consider themselves as mere 'resource persons', instead of teaching a syllabus of necessary knowledge and habits of the mind, fail in the task of passing the baton of civilisation onwards. When the uneducated and ignorant decide what values, attitudes, practices and knowledge are to be learnt, and when all is relative, civilisation declines.

Fundamental modes of thought and action are typically patterned at an early age. They are hard to change later in life. Consequently, there are persistent variations among different cultures. Just to cite one telling example, misbehaving children tend to be 'grounded' in Australia, that is, prohibited from leaving the home till they promise betterment. By contrast, misbehaving children in East Asian families tend to be excluded from the family community. Who in Asia has not seen children in front of apartment doors pleading with their parents to be readmitted into the community of the home? Another telling example that shows how deep patterns of behaviour and resultant social attitudes are shaped by education is Japan, where small children are completely indulged from birth. As they grow up, ever-tighter demands are imposed on their behaviour, so that they abandon their will for autonomy and submit unquestioningly to all social obligations.

Eminent French liberal philosopher-essayist Phillippe Némo writes that 'the Japanese despise most [the individual] who lacks the force of character to respect the *giri* in all its claims for self-abnegation'.* By contrast, Western children are educated strictly from birth. As they grow up, they are given greater autonomy, which encourages them to develop and assert their own individuality and their own ideas—a very fundamental trait in the make-up of the Western psyche. Or, to take yet another example: the desert herders of the arid belt between Morocco and northern India learnt for millennia that you have to beat other tribes away from your scarce water sources. Your herds survive best if you adopt an aggressive, xenophobic posture towards other groups. Contrast this with the long-term experience of East Asian irrigation cultures, where cooperation and compromise have been the way to obtain the best from nature. The resulting divide between the desert and 'the sown' is, for example, plainly evident between Hindi and Dravida India.

Such long-term cultural attitudes are very deeply engrained. How can the basic behavioural patterns derived from such educational influences ever be changed? How important are they in inter-civilisational cooperation with a potential for tensions or conflicts?

As the young grow up, they have to learn the essential meta-rules of their culture, within which specific, subordinate rules may be adjusted if need be. The institutions are living, evolving systems, which incorporate traditional values, attitudes and institutions that cannot always be rigidly conserved, but they should evolve on the basis of what is time-tested and familiar to the members of the community.

* The Japanese virtue of *giri* means the unquestioning fulfilment of duty to one's superiors to the extent of self-sacrifice. It is often reflected in onerous gift-giving that Westerners may find offputting. It far exceeds what the Chinese typically expect under the maxim of filial piety.

This is where the adaptive capacity of the rule system comes into play. Good rules should allow communities to make progress in realising shared aspirations. What matters beyond such flexibility is that the rules should help creative minds and enterprising innovators to enrich their civilisation.

# 3 What is the West?

*Qu'est-ce que l'Occident?* is the title of Philippe Némo's recent and much celebrated short book. The first part of the book is a most informative, easy-to-read primer about the roots of Western Civilisation. In what follows, I shall draw from it to highlight what is special about the successful civilisation, which emerged in Europe from the Renaissance onwards and which was carried across the oceans to be further developed in North America, Australia and New Zealand.

In the second part of his book, Némo defined 'the West' narrowly and proposed a political union of Western nations so that they might better stand up to other civilisations and the prevalent value relativism of modern times. The book immediately created a stir. It was promptly translated into most European languages, including eventually into English under the title *What is the West*?*

* Presses Universitaires de France-Quadrige, Paris, 2004; 158 pages. –– The author (born 1949) is a professor of social and political philosophy, and a historian of ideas at the top-ranked École Superieure de Commerce de Paris (Europe Business School of Paris) and the leader of the 'Centre for Research into Economic Philosophy' at that School. He is well-known in France as one of the key exponents of classical liberalism and as the foremost expert on the work of Friedrich Hayek.

Némo's is the plea of a liberal European thinker to concentrate on the common traits of Western Civilisation, which is shared by Western Europeans and North Americans, as well as outliers such as Australians. In other words, it is a plea not to dwell on a trans-Atlantic rift, as some American neo-conservatives have been doing.[1] Nor does he want us to focus on obvious differences between the Anglo-Saxon and Continental European variants of Western Civilisation. Némo rightly stresses the common heritage that distinguishes Western Civilisation from all others.

The main merit of Philippe Némo's book is its historic account of what produced Western Civilisation. He tackles this task by focusing on five 'cultural leaps' that have created the 'intimate convictions', the values and the rules on which modern Western Civilisation is built and that have enabled the West to produce admirable artistic and technical creations. These 'leaps' occurred when the ancient Greeks invented the city (*polis*) and rational science; when the Romans invented the law, in particular private law with its definition of individual autonomy and private property; and when the Judaeo-Christian thinkers added compassion beyond the law and outlined an eschatological vision, the possibility and necessity of humans bettering their condition on earth. This was a dramatic and far-reaching change from the fatalistic outlook on life in traditional societies. It also injected an element into the Western tradition, which set it apart from most other civilisations. Somewhat more surprising to many readers will be his argument that the three strands of Athens, Rome and Jerusalem were synthesised into a new 'whole' during what he calls the 'Papal Revolution', tied foremost to the name of Pope Gregory VII (1073-1085) and implemented in Western Europe between the 11th and 13th centuries. Finally, the present-day model of Western Civilisation was completed by the intellectual, religious, scientific, political and economic liberalism of the Enlightenment from the 17th to the early 19th centuries in Western Europe, as well as in the United States and the remainder of the Anglosphere.

Némo emphasises that only the West has been shaped by all of these 'evolutionary leaps', and by no other major influence beyond them. He asserts that these five elements have very deep roots and cannot easily be internalised by people who come from different cultural and historic backgrounds, even when they master the technical and material achievements of Western Civilisation.

The first three ingredients—Greek, Roman, and Judaeo-Christian—can be found in any standard textbook and seem uncontroversial, but the role of medieval popes and abbots as a stepping stone to modernity might be surprising to many, in particular students from the Anglo-Saxon world. Némo proffers good arguments and cites solid historic research to underpin his case, but nevertheless fails to completely convince. On the other hand, he almost forgets the creative intellectual ferment of the reformers that followed in the footsteps of the 'Papal Revolution'—Luther, Calvin and fellow Protestant reformers, who recast the religious vision of the role of the individual on earth. They emphasised more than was the case before that man should improve the Creation. More than ever before in European thinking, they made good deeds and honest effort in this life a way for people to seek salvation. This gave religious endorsement to innovation and progress and distinguished European civilisation from the many others that made a virtue of a fatalistic outlook on life.

## The Greek Miracle: City and Science

The Greek *polis* evolved when, after the 8th century BC, the sacred monarchies of ancient Greece gave way to small-scale republics. Politics now became the business of all citizens. They were equals, though women, children, slaves and immigrants were typically excluded from shaping the rules, however not from obeying them. No longer could citizens be subjected to arbitrary case-by-case decisions of some ruler; all had to obey the same general rules that the citizenry had created for itself. In this context, common descent—the normal foundation of tribalism—no longer mattered.

The citizens met in a public space (*agora*) to argue rationally about their shared institutions (laws). Religion was no longer the dominant force in governing society; it was now governed by politics and, by and large, became a private concern. As city civilisation evolved, the Greeks distinguished between *nomos*, the order that humans created for their own communities and that could be improved by rational debate, and *physis*, the unalterable order governing the natural world. Like the European Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, Greek civilisation thus rested on two pillars: the rational explication of nature and the rational shaping of social norms.

To be sure, ancient Greece covered an area much larger than the territory of present-day Greece, a state which often lays exclusive claim to the Greek heritage. As a matter of fact, much of the cultural capital of the ancient Greeks was first formulated on the eastern shore of the Aegean, for example in Milet near the mouth of the Meander River in present-day Turkey. When one wanders today through the ruins of Milet (mostly of later Graeco-Roman origin), one can reflect on the originality and lasting impact on our civilisation of the great sophist philosophers and natural scientists who lived there in the 6th century BC, most notably Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes. Nor should the contribution of thinkers in Magna Grecia (the Greek colonies in Italy and Sicily) be overshadowed by an excessive focus on Athens. It should also be noted that today's Greeks vary ethnically and culturally from the ancients, since mass emigration to the Hellenistic east after Alexander the Great almost depopulated stretches of ancient Greece, into which Slavonic tribes migrated from ca. 600 AD onwards. Subsequently, Osmanlı Turk influence shaped the folklore, popular music and cuisine of modern Greece. This illustrates an important point made earlier: civilisations and languages are not tied to a specific ethnicity or space. They are evolving, living complexes that are adopted and adapted by others. Much of the cultural capital of the ancient Greeks was later adopted by the Romans.

One important cultural trait of ancient Greece, which Némo fails to mention, is the development by Greek sailors and merchants of a commercial culture. Traditional, tribal societies were typically familiar with barter and exchange only between people who knew each other. Aliens were perceived as potential enemies. It mattered whom you knew, not what you knew. But seafaring Greeks, who roamed the ports of the eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea often ventured among aliens. They made *katallatein* (exchanging knowledge and goods with strangers) a virtue: one can picture a newly arrived merchant from Athens in a Phoenecian or Egyptian port, as he starts a conversation with strangers to discover trading opportunities, interacting and eventually becoming a trusted friend. In short, aliens were perceived as potential trading partners.

The Greek merchants' approach to strangers has given rise in modern times to the concept of *catallaxis*, the spontaneous market order to discover diverse human purposes and how best to satisfy them.[2] This commercial approach has bred attitudes and preferences that are deeply embedded in present-day Western civilisation: openness, curiosity, tolerance, reliability and a focus on practical advantages rather than pride, honour, and disrespect for the other, which is typical of tribal (barbarian) societies.[3] The omission of this aspect of our Greek heritage by Némo is understandable as he focuses on philosophy. However, the spirit of commercial enterprise is an essential aspect of Western civilisation. After all, civilisation is intimately tied to economic life: private property, including self-ownership, the openness of mind to trade freely with anyone, and the curiosity that produces innovation.

## The Contribution of Rome: Private Law and Humanism

When Rome became a multi-ethnic polity covering Italia and beyond, and attracted numerous immigrants, the praetors (the annually elected law-makers and law enforcers) had to invent legal rules that replaced Rome's old, rigid legal formulae. The laws became more

abstract and general, but also more certain for everyone under Roman law. The law of the Roman Republic evolved from precedent and new case decisions, much like English common law. By Cicero's time, it had become a universal natural law which dealt with an abstract human nature that all humans shared. Late in Imperial times, when Rome was a sea-board civilisation around the entire Mediterranean, under Emperor Justinian, the law was codified in the *corpus iuris civilis* (AD 529-534), which became the foundation of Western European laws governing persons, property and contracts not only throughout the Middle Ages, but also in modern times, both in Anglo-Saxon common law and in the codices of present-day Europe, such as the French *Code Napoléon* and the German *Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch.*

It may be useful to add that, for the Romans, property was not the mere possession of an asset. Rather, it conferred a bundle of rights. Some could be separated and used in cooperation with the property rights of others, for example a tract of land could be rented out to a share-cropper, or a slave could be leased to a factory. Of course, property rights had existed since the neolithic revolution, but the Romans clarified the concept of property and refined it in ways that made it more effectively operational. Since people without their own resources can hardly stand up for other rights, the clear definition of property and widespread ownership greatly advanced other individual rights in ancient Rome. The Roman definition of private property was decisive in defining the individual persona and his freedom. What you are is to a considerable degree determined by what you have. When Enlightenment liberals later spoke of 'citizens of property', they drew on the Roman invention of the persona and his well-defined property. Humanism is impossible without private law and the legal protection of private property. In passing, Némo tells us that the Roman invention of individuality is reflected in sculpture, for all to see even today in the great museums of Italy or the Louvre: Greek sculptures depict idealised types of humans, Roman sculptures are by

contrast personal portraits that allow us to immediately recognise Caesar or Emperor Hadrian when we step in front of their busts.

## Biblical Ethics and Eschatology

The ancient Greeks and Romans had no clear concept of progress. This constitutional element of Western Civilisation was contributed by the Judeo-Christian sensibility to suffering and the idea that man should rebel against the normality of evil. American historian Carroll Quigley once called this new social trait 'Christian optimism'.[4] The eschatological concept of cumulative, never-ending improvement of the human condition differs greatly from the vision of most other traditional civilisations, where either cyclical worldviews dominate (for example in Hinduism and Buddhism) or apathy and fatalism in the face of human suffering reign (for example, in Islam and the Amerindian civilisations).

In the Bible, and in particular the New Testament, people are admonished to feel compassion. Humans are burdened by original sin, which obliges us all to empathise even with our enemies. German philosopher Nietzsche, and numerous other modern thinkers of course rejected any such general responsibility for their fellows. The consequences of massive redistribution in contemporary welfare states have certainly highlighted a need to draw limits on empathy with complete strangers.[5]

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, salvation should be sought by practical charity. People are expected to improve the human condition also by economic development. Némo makes the distinction between two strains of this tradition: a violent one, which has inspired the utopian revolutions of the political right and left; and a voluntary tradition, which uses rational law and science to promote gradual progress, reflected in the Western ideal of practical rationality and free democracy.

Christianity was firmly established by the time that the Western Roman Empire expired, but the Church of Rome had to fight numerous

battles to survive the Dark Ages and retain at least a degree of central authority. In doing so, it became a central element of Europe's culture, which could, up to the Age of Reason in the 17th and 18th century, rightly be called a 'Christian civilisation' and even thereafter because even Western opponents maintained their dialogue with the Christian worldview.

## The Papal Revolution

Némo describes a less widely accepted root of Western Civilisation, the fusion of the three civilisational traditions from antiquity into a specifically Western whole by medieval Christian leaders. Relying primarily on American historian Harold Berman, he speaks of the 'Papal Revolution', as Pope Gregory VII (1073-1085) and his successors reshaped European civilisation after the Dark Ages by reviving and re-interpreting the heritage of antiquity.[6] Alternatively, one may call the medieval discovery of the almost lost knowledge of antiquity the 'First Renaissance'.[7]

An assertive papacy, supported by monastic scholars such as Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), helped turn Roman law into philosophically based jurisprudence and a unified body of Christianised law in order to 'civilise' European society. Augustinian theology, which said that human salvation derived exclusively from the grace of God, was now replaced by the concept that individual initiative and good deeds can redeem humanity. In the process, the Purgatory had to be invented, so that people who had lived an evil life for a long time could still be promised rewards in the afterlife. If they committed good deeds late in life, their sojourn in the Purgatory would be shorter and easier. The High Middle Ages—a period of global warming, good harvests, population growth and Western expansion—saw man in the foreground of all things and stressed rationality as a means to progress.

Thanks to thinkers such as Pierre Abélard (1079-1142), Albertus Magnus (1200-1280) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), Greek science

and Roman law became tools for the salvation of mankind. The first European universities were founded, not only to shape and teach the new theology, but also to advance the arts.*

Némo seems too emphatic about the knowledge of antiquity never having been quite lost in the West. Of course, some books from antiquity were copied and re-copied in some monasteries. But he depicts the Arab assistance in 'rescuing the books of antiquity' as less important than most other historians have. Némo does not give proper weight to the cultural cross-fertilisation, which occurred between Arab Sicily, Arab-Jewish Toledo, Lisbon and Córdoba on the one hand and European Christendom on the other. Nor does he dwell on the important cultural East-West contacts during the Crusades. European medieval/Renaissance philosophy, jurisprudence, political thought, medicine, psychology and physics could never have thrived in the way they did without drawing on Arab translations of Greek and Latin manuscripts and the works of Avicenna (Abu Ali Sina, 980-1037) and the Cordovan Averoës (Ibn Rushd, 1126-1198), both of whom were widely read throughout Western Europe. Nor would the first European universities have been organised along the lines they were without the model of the Arab academies which integrated teaching and research.[8]

Némo makes one final and important point here: Eastern Christianity missed out on the 'Papal Revolution'. In its worldview, salvation remained a mystical reflection of Divine grace. Human ethical engagement and practical deeds did not become part of the Orthodox tradition. The Orthodox saw—and still see—those aspects as un-Christian. A wide gulf therefore opened between the Western European civilisation and the Greek and Muscovite East.

* The first European-Christian universities were at Bologna (founded 1088), Paris (1150), Oxford (1167), Palencia (1208), Cambridge (1218) and Salamanca (1218).

Némo skirts too lightly over those who carried the Papal Revolution forward, namely the Humanists and the early liberal minds both in Renaissance Italy and Spain. Here I refer to what some have called the 'Second [or High] Renaissance', a more complete discovery of the ideas and ideals of antiquity and the widespread emulation of these ideas and artistic concepts. The Salamanca School—mentioned by Némo only in passing—anticipated many concepts of the subsequent and more secular liberal Enlightenment.[9] Humanists, such as Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536) and Philipp Melanchton (1497-1560), drew on the rediscovered wisdom of Roman and Greek antiquity to add reformatory ferment to Christian theology and contemporary philosophy, to suggesting the glories of mankind can be understood without continual reference to God.

Némo also downplays the great evolutionary leap in the story of Western Civilisation that came with Martin Luther (1483-1546), Jean Calvin (1509-1564) and the other Protestant Reformers. They injected intellectual ferment at a time when Gutenberg's printing press facilitated the diffusion of knowledge. The Reformation highlighted the individual's search for salvation and earthly progress and de-emphasised the collective role of the Papacy and the Catholic Church. Assisted by the technical revolution of book printing and the spread of literacy, the Reformers taught the Europeans greater responsibility for interpreting the values and rules of their civilisation by individual intellectual effort. In a way, the rationale for Descartes' later dictum: '*cogito, ergo sum*' began with the Reformation. We might loosely translate this as: 'I am thinking for myself, therefore I am an autonomous person'. I consider this a major omission, as the spirit of Protestant ethic soon 'infected' many Catholics, changing their life and work attitudes too.

However, Némo's motivation in skipping over the role of the Reformation in the evolution of Western Civilisation seems, clear: he wants to stress the unity and homogeneity of Western Civilisation

and—like many contemporary observers from Latin Europe—wishes to downplay the differences between the subsequent French-Latin and English-Scottish Enlightenments.

An important element of Western Civilisation that emerged in the Middle Ages is the *Lex Mercatoria*, the Law of the Merchants. If medieval merchants had disagreements, that they were unable to resolve by compromise, they had the option of appealing to the court of the local overlord. This was risky, because the judicial power was often unpredictable, often demanded bribes and heard cases after long delays. Besides, contracting parties often lived under different jurisdictions.[10] It therefore made sense for business people to develop and enforce their own rules. Feudal European law, which gave noblemen privileges, could not serve traders, as they needed equality before the law. They therefore enshrined this principle, which was a path-breaking innovation that was later adopted in formal, official law codes. Merchant Law also incorporated and formalised certain practices that accelerated arbitration—'time was money' in the Middle Ages too. Different sets of spontaneously created Law Merchant competed with each other. One successful variant of Law Merchant was that of the Free and Imperial City of Nuremberg, a major trading centre in Franconia. It became an export item to many trading centres throughout central Europe, when these expedient rules were emulated by traders as far east as Cracow in present-day Poland, for example. Without the basic legal principles that such bodies of law incorporated—amongst them that of equality before the law—modern democracy and present-day law might well look rather different.

Némo also seems a little too dismissive of the contribution of traditional Celtic and Germanic tribal law to the evolution of Western Civilisation. He rightly decries the interruption of the antique cultural tradition during the 'Dark Ages', but overlooks one important contribution made by the northern Europeans. They had always refused to subject themselves to autocratic rulers. A form of primitive democracy

therefore existed within the Germanic tribes. That memory arguably fed into limitations that the people imposed on the power of their kings. Thus, the 11th century constitution of Catalonia, descended directly from the Visigoths, admonishes the ruler, the Count of Barcelona, that he is powerful only because his subjects want him to be. Likewise, the body of laws that were codified in Catalonia from the 11th century onwards (the *Usatges*, or customs), owes much to Germanic traditions. It features much that one finds later in the better-known Magna Carta of England. The earliest parliaments—the Danish, the Icelandic and the Swiss popular assemblies of the Middle Ages—anticipate much of what later became the European parliaments. One can of course only speculate about direct influences, but old Germanic folk memories and deeply engrained cultural norms must have been an element in what shaped both constitutional monarchy and modern parliamentarism.

## The Rise of Liberal Democracies and Capitalism

The crowning achievement of Western Civilisation so far and the starting point of its rise of world influence has been the intellectual, political and economic liberalism of the Enlightenment. Issues of liberty and special political privileges have been as much a hallmark of European (later Western) civilisation as Christian teaching. By now, liberal thought has shaped the success story of modern democracy and the capitalist market economies in many parts of the world. The Western system is now being emulated by nations that come from different cultural backgrounds. In my opinion, this is the most exciting story of our time.

Némo sees the historic origins of the European Enlightenment in the Wars of Religion—the Huguenot uprisings in France, the Dutch revolt against Spanish Catholic rule, the two English Revolutions, the American Revolution, the 'French Revolution of 1789-1792 (but certainly not that of 1793-1794)', the Italian Risorgimento, the German liberal tradition and more.[11] These drew on the earlier elements of Western Civilisation

and have resulted in representative democracy, universal suffrage (the personal, free and secret ballot), the separation of powers, an independent judiciary, a neutral administration, mechanisms to protect human rights, religious tolerance, the freedom of scientific research, academic freedoms, a free press, free trade, the protection of private material and intellectual property, the principle of self-ownership, free enterprise, the free choice of one's profession and the obligation to fulfil contractual agreements once entered into voluntarily. These institutions form the foundation of our modern material and technical civilisation, which has led to Western dominance in the world for the past few centuries.

Modern liberalism began with tolerance of differing opinions, including about religion. Truth can only be found in critical pluralism, as pioneers such as John Milton (1608-1674), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), Benjamin Constant (1767-1830) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) taught us, and as Karl Popper (1902-1994) and Thomas Kuhn (1922-1996) re-affirmed in the 20th century. These writers recognised that any individual's reason and knowledge are limited and open to error. Progress towards the truth can only be made if we renounce certainty and subscribe to intellectual pluralism. Némo emphasises that 'all this happened only in the West and when elsewhere, then only recently and under the influence of the West'.[12]

No civilisation outside the West has turned intellectual pluralism into a value of its own. Liberality, openness and receptiveness to ideas from the outside are crucial to the long-term health of a civilisation, whereas hidebound conservatism heralds decline. Cultural rigidity, for example, proved fatal over the longer term for Indian, Chinese, Japanese and Arab science. The great flourishing of Western Civilisation owes much to absorbing and further developing the knowledge and technology from the Islamic world and to cross-fertilisation from the Chinese world.[13] I would not go as far as Hobson did when he attributed virtually all ideas and technologies that made the West as being of Eastern origin. Admittedly, gunpowder, the

compass, paper and printing were inventions purloined from the distant East and were turned into core technologies for the rise of the West. However, what matters is not invention (the production of a model that functions), but innovation: the broad application, wide distribution and further development of ideas, so that they raise general welfare. The European liberal market economy, with decentralised, profit-driven enterprise, has been uniquely capable of generating innovation—a feature that the East Asians have only been able to replicate in recent decades, often by attracting Western multinationals or adapting Western business models. This reminds us, yet again, that civilisation is a garden that can flourish and bear fruit in different cultural soils!

Democracy—incarnating freedom and pluralism in governance—has ancient roots, but was long lost, until the 'Levellers' in England and liberal writers in Holland and England reminded us of its merits. The United Kingdom became the first constitutional monarchy and the United States created a republican democracy. The move to democracy meant the rejection of the idea that certain people were infallible, whether by the grace of God, inheritance or use of force. No one had an inalienable, God-given right to rule over others. 'The role of the State is to guarantee order, to ensure that human society does not descend into hell. But the State does not hold the keys to paradise'.[14] Such ideas could flourish only in the soil prepared by Athens, Rome and Jerusalem. Némo therefore doubts that democracy—as we practise it in the West—will take root in non-Western civilisations.[15] This is a contentious point, and one on which I am for the time being inclined to be less categorical.

Némo also acknowledges the long and noble Swiss record as a republican democracy, as well as the political reforms in Denmark, Germany, Austria, Hungary and Italy in the 19th century, as well as constitutional innovations in British dominions, including Australia. He is categorical on one point however: democracy was pioneered only in Western countries.

Moves towards economic liberalism had begun already in the Middle Ages, for example when Thomas Aquinas and the Spanish scholastics at Salamanca replaced Aristotle's notion of a 'natural price' and the concept of a 'just price' with a rudimentary understanding of the laws of supply and demand. They also rejected earlier criticism of the pursuit of profits. French writers, such as Anne Robert Jacques Turgot (1727-1781) and Jean-Baptiste Say (1767-1832), writes Némo, 'are just as important for the birth of modern scientific economics as the classical English School (Smith, Ricardo, and Malthus)'…really?[16]

Capitalist production and free trade became a constituent part of Western Civilisation. These elements can only exist when property is in private hands and reasonably secure both from government and private thieves. Individual autonomy and responsibility can only flourish if private property rights are defined and enforced, be it by internal rules or external legislation. Classical liberal economists like Adam Smith (1723-1790) considered private property rights, including self-ownership, voluntary cooperation and competition, as the central tenets of the emerging capitalist civilisation.

Given the subsequent and justified criticism of 'monopoly capitalism' (Karl Marx) and 'rent-seeking' (a contemporary variant of political-industrial collusion against open competition), it seems necessary to remind us more explicitly than Némo does, what secure property ownership and genuine competition really means.[17]

Property establishes an open-ended bundle of rights to use the assets that one owns as one sees fit—as long as this does not harm others. Established rules determine on what grounds someone who claims harm can seek remedy or compensation. In a free society, the burden of proof rests always with those who claim to have been harmed.

Market competition occurs on both sides of the market: suppliers rival with each other to present their offerings to the clientele in the

most attractive way possible. They do this by keeping the price low, improving the product and offering after-sales services, advertising and being agreeable to the customers. Likewise, intending buyers compete against each other by incurring search costs, offering an attractive price and displaying amenable behaviour (think of an example of people who compete with each other to rent an apartment or employers who wish to hire hard-to-get skilled people).

It is no coincidence that 'bourgeois virtues'—honesty, punctuality, reliability, non-discrimination of strangers, civility, thrift and the like—became popular with the rise of capitalism. Whereas the Biblical virtues adorned the façades of Gothic cathedrals, allegorical representations of the bourgeois virtues appeared in guildhalls and on market façades, when the capitalist civilisation dawned. The insight that production for profit and trade require people to be polite, honest and conciliatory (as we saw, qualities that had already been cultivated by ancient Greek seafarer-merchants) has led many observers to assert that secure property and competition—the hallmarks of liberal capitalism—are civilising influences; in other words, they promote civility or 'civilisation in the singular'. 'Increased means and increased leisure are the two civilisers of men', Benjamin Disraeli said in a 1872 speech in Manchester, and US President Calvin Coolidge told a crowd in 1920 that 'civilization and profits go hand in hand'.

The classical liberal economists often highlighted the material benefits of economic liberalism, namely that the combination of laws that define private property rights (stipulating what must not be done) and the guarantee of private property rights and their free use through markets (with prices indicating what should be done) generate unprecedented prosperity. They discovered that the 'invisible hand' creates a spontaneous order, which differs in character both from the 'natural order' (*physis*) and the 'artificial order' (*nomos*), which the ancients had known and which are familiar to conservatives and socialists. But neither school of

thought properly understands, according to Némo, the merits of the spontaneous order, which emerges in the free interaction of rational people. It encourages diversity and 'pluralism of creation'. The totalitarian regimes of the 20th century advocated the creation of an artificial order (the Marxist socialists) or, alternatively, the return to an earlier natural order (the National Socialists). Both political movements, Némo writes, tribalised the masses and returned to atavistic, pre-Enlightenment concepts.

The totalitarian experiments of the 20th century certainly demonstrated—as Hayek showed in his *Road to Serfdom*—that Western Civilisation rests on a thin, fragile layer of institutions and values, which is superimposed, as we noted before, on deeper cultural layers which were developed by the human race in the course of its long existence.[18] It is only thanks to 20th century philosophers, such as Ludwig von Mises (1881-1973), Michael Polanyi (1891-1976), Walter Eucken (1891-1950), Friedrich Hayek (1899-1992), Karl Popper (1902-1994), Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), and Bruno Leoni (1913-1967), that we understand the highly vulnerable liberal character of Western Civilisation.

Némo considers the triumphalism of Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History* 'overly optimistic'.[19] I concur, because capitalism and Western Civilisation in general depend to a considerable extent on those internal institutions and ingrained values which are not easily acquired and which can be easily overruled by primitive sentiment and opportunism.[20] Other civilisations, such as the wider Chinese culture, of course have developed coherent, universal institution sets that can be adapted to handle modern technology effectively (maybe in future even more effectively than Western civilisation). It therefore seems to me rather likely that several sustainable 'modernities' will emerge. This would lead to fruitful competition among civilisations —and not necessarily to a 'clash of civilisations'.

The Western institutional system favoured the emergence of technical innovation, because it favoured independent scientific inquiry, competitive markets and autonomous entrepreneurship—a pluralistic, liberal framework. It established the creative tension inherent in competitive market capitalism. Industrialisation and sustained technical development could therefore occur only in the West—scientific discoveries in the Middle East, India and China, and even rudimentary, abortive beginnings of manufacturing in Sung-era China notwithstanding.[21] Industrial development has been powered by the wide spread of innovative energy uses (wind and water power was surpassed by steam, electricity, internal combustion engines, and nuclear power). It required large lumps of capital, which could only be gathered on the basis of trust in banks and stable money, secured by appropriate institutions. In the process, modern industry brought unimaginable wealth and amenity, and progress in transport and communications brought unheard-of mobility, acceleration of trade, and an unprecedented growth of knowledge. It cannot be emphasised enough that industrial innovation depended on clear-cut and flexibly evolving institutions—a fact often overlooked by historians and popular attention, which concentrates on the material, visible achievements —the machines, the bridges, the transport facilities. The institutionally aware student of civilisation will, however, remember that it is the invisible that counts.

In Niall Ferguson's detailed and entertaining historic study about the rise and predominance of the West (and a possibly impending end to it), he attributes the rise of the West to six 'killer apps', social and technical inventions or innovations that made the decisive difference. Some are economic institutions, as defined here: a competitive, decentralised economic and political system property rights protected by the rule of law; a productive work ethic and the stimulus of access to consumer satisfactions for all. Others are the result of that second pillar of modernity, that we owe to the Greeks and the Enlightenment: the sceptical-critical

approach to analysing nature, which has produced unprecedented scientific, technical and medical innovations of great benefit.*

One might summarise the essence of Western Civilisation as the German-British sociologist, philosopher and politician Lord Ralph Dahrendorf (1929-2009) has done. In his 1965 book, *Society and Democracy in Germany*, he identified three core pre-conditions required for people to enjoy a free, civilised life: an experimental, fact-based, open-minded attitude to knowledge; the competition of economic agents, citizens, social groups and political ideas; and liberal political institutions—the laws and democratic controls of political agents that we have discussed in this chapter. These core elements reinforce each other, but are never guaranteed.[22] American writer Henry Grady Weaver (1889-1949), the 'Man of the Year' on the 1938 cover of *Time* magazine, summarised the essence of the West's progress in an even more condensed—and more radical—form: 'Liberty is the mainspring of progress...Human energy does not work the way the despots…would like to have it work…Any attempt to make it work through the use of police force has always failed and has held back civilization'.[23] These essential qualities of freedom and responsibility therefore require ceaseless cultivation.

The wealth created by industrial civilisation, modern commerce and social change has not only extended lifespans, health standards and leisure, but also facilitated the creation of art. Admittedly, much was not the brilliant elite art of earlier epochs in Europe but popular culture, once wealth, access to education and disposable free time were 'democratised'. Elitists frequently decry the fact that painting, sculpture,

* Ferguson—in a modification of Max Weber's theories—places considerable emphasis on the role of (Protestant) Christianity in promoting the work ethic and literacy, hence the growth of human capital. He looks less convincing when he attributes so much of the ascendancy of present-day China to the undoubted spread of Christian churches and sects.

literature, music, theatre and architecture are not in line with the artistic achievements—as they see it—of earlier times, but they overlook the fact that bigger and bigger shares of the population have gained access to the enjoyment of these fruits of civilisation. It is probably also worth recording that Western Civilisation always benefited from the high mobility of gifted artists. The integration of the artistic fraternities led to excellence and gave Europe, later the entire West, in each era an certain uniformity. The civilisation-wide spread of the Gothic, Baroque or Neoclassical art illustrates this point.

## Some Darker Consequences of Western Civilisation

Western Civilisation has been singularly successful. What we call modernity and the overcoming of dire scarcity for more and more people on earth has sprung from it, as has the progressive civil and political liberation of many millions around the world. Specialisation and exchange have promoted human knowledge: how to derive wealth from nature, how to foster human bonds, voluntary, peaceful cooperation and the non-violent settling of inevitable conflicts. Like Hayek and others before him, Némo assures us that the edifice of the competitive market economy and modern civilisation rests on internal and external institutions to an extent that most do not even realise. Those parts of mankind, who do not have the legal and moral rules that underpin the Western 'cooperation from a distance', are still caught in a vicious circle of non-development.

The rise of economic liberalism in the West and its consequence, the so-called industrial revolution, initially produced more poor people—just as is the case now in newly emerging third world countries. As soon as economic growth takes off, more people survive and live longer, so that population growth accelerates, before subsequent generations adjust by having fewer children (which is known to demographers as the 'demographic transition'). In pre-modern times, many of the poor simply died.

Némo also rejects aspersions that colonisation of poor countries in the 18th and 19th centuries was characterised by malice and inflicted nothing but enslavement and pain. To the contrary, it brought much cultural and material progress, and allowed more and more people in the third world to live in comfort. However—whether they like it or not—it has also condemned them to live with Western technology and the discipline of global competition. The alternative—namely to return to pre-colonial ways—would nowadays also mean a reduction of the population by 90 per cent or so.[24] As Némo says 'It is not unreasonable to claim that the five billion extra people on the planet are the sons and daughters of capitalism'.[25]

# 4 The West and the Rest

Némo's book attracted immediate attention partly because he defined the West narrowly: Western Europe and the Anglo-Saxon nations in North America and Oceania.[1] Their civilisation had inherited all of the various cultural elements discussed in the preceding chapter, their shared heritage was more important than any regional differences between them, and they had not been significantly affected by any other cultural tradition. Citizens from any one part of the West can therefore live and work in any other part for a long time without major difficulty. Western governments can rely on each other politically even in critical situations without deep misunderstandings or distrust.

## Near-Western Civilisations

Némo identified a number of nations that are close to the West, because they share some of its constituent traits, although they missed out on others, or even rejected them.

Central European countries from the Baltic to the Adriatic have been heirs to the Papal Revolution and at some stage experienced democracy to a greater or lesser degree. However, 'none genuinely experienced or evolved liberal and democratic institutions because developments to this end pulled up short owing to the successive rise of fascism and communism'.[2]

Némo expects these countries to become fully qualified members of the West now that the transformation process to liberal democracy is progressing.

Orthodox Eastern Europe—Russia, Greece, Cyprus, Romania, Bulgaria, and soon possibly also Serbia—are not part of the West. Némo is quite explicit in excluding the Orthodox European societies from what he defines as the West. He concedes that these nations have a 'quasi-Western civilisation', but—as we saw above—they missed out on the important Papal Revolution and consequently a pervasive commitment to rational, purposeful action to improve the human condition by responsible personal engagement.[3] Nor did they make the fundamental traits of democratic and economic liberalism their own.

Israel presents another problematic case, because the modern Western world is as much a Jewish creation as it is a Christian one. Since the modern state of Israel was created in 1948 as a quasi-Western democracy, many Western Jews have, however, emigrated again, and there was mass immigration from non-Western civilisations in the Middle East and the former Soviet Union. Némo notes a progressive retreat from secular values and a growing rejection of tolerant pluralism in present-day Israel.

Whether Latin America should be considered a part of the West is even less certain. There can be no doubt that the traditional elites are nourished by European civilisation and have contributed to it. But in many parts of Latin America, the affluent, educated Western elites no longer rule. Broad sections of the population live in the 'cultural basement'—the rural areas and the poor urban quarters, in what an observer called the 'economies of the cart'. They display only a thin veneer of Western civilisation over layers of deep-rooted pre-Columbian belief, habit and life attitude. The Western sectors —the 'economies of the car'—are islands, and the Westernised elites are numerically in decline. It is not only the Náhuatl- and Maya-speakers in Mexico and the Aymará- and Qechua-speakers in the Andean countries, but also

the numerous immigrants from Africa in parts of Brazil, who live in a parallel, non-Western cultural universe. As long as Western (Iberian) and other European elites dominated public life in Latin America, it was easy to overlook this demographic and cultural dichotomy. But the non-Western population has been increasing rapidly and is now on the rise politically, be it in the Venezuela of Hugo Chávez or the Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia of Evo Morales (which even enshrines cultural division in the state's official title). Given the demographic trends and the vast cultural chasm between the old Iberian elites and the Amerindian and *mestizo* masses, the Latin American claim to being part of Western civilisation, as defined here, seems no longer tenable.

## Defining Easts

Throughout history, the West has defined itself in contradistinction to an East (which contemporary observers often dismissed as of lesser civilisational worth). The ancient Greeks perceived themselves as civilised when dealing with the 'barbarians', those who lived to the east and north, did not speak Greek and could not be entirely trusted. To the Romans, the 'Orient' meant, first and foremost, the irrational, decadent monarchies of Egypt and Persia, with their absolute, luxury-loving rulers and a totalitarian oppression of the individual. For generations, the Persian realm was considered a natural enemy of, and threat to, Rome.

After the Latin part of the Roman Empire became officially (Roman) Catholic early in the 4th century AD, Greek Orthodox Christianity was perceived as the alien East, even the enemy. The various religious schisms of the 'Dark Ages' helped define a Western Latin and an increasingly Germanic-Saxon identity, as against the mystic East.

With the rapid rise of Islam from the late 7th century onward, Damascus, Baghdad and Córdoba became a new East and certainly an enemy. It was an aggressive, expansive power that threatened Christendom's heartland. But it was also a civilisation that had much to offer culturally to medieval Europe.

Even before the Crusades and certainly with the Mongol assault on the Islamic world in the first half of the 13th century, intellectual and political stagnation gained the upper hand in the East. At the same time, Western Europe flourished partly thanks to the cultural imports from the Middle East, which they soon perfected and applied widely, for example in new glass and textile industries and in applying Arab mathematics to solving scientific and technical problems and business accounting. The cultural borrowing from the East by the Europeans was stimulated by the political rivalry among competing small states in Christendom and the drive to innovate, which stemmed from this rivalry.[4]

By the 19th century, the then stagnant Ottoman Empire had become the defining East. The Turkish empire had originally risen by borrowing ideas from the West, but had eventually fallen prey to institutional sclerosis and the anti-developmental forces in the 'cultural DNA' of conservative Islam.

The Leninist revolution created a new East, which challenged and redefined the West. For most of the 20th century (only suppressed temporarily by an opportunistic alliance during World War II), the East-West conflict dominated politics and cultural awareness. Only when the Soviet empire imploded in the 1990s did many sceptics accept that the West had always had greater dynamic efficiency than the totalitarian East. Yet, even today, many observers refuse to acknowledge that Western civilisation passed the Soviet challenge brilliantly thanks to its innate cultural traits of flexibility, adaptability and creativity.

As of the beginning of the 21st century, two new Eastern challenges have emerged: a newly militant Islam and newly dynamic Chinese and East Asian culture.

Only time will tell whether the Muslim civilisation will fully embrace modernity and achieve sustained material progress, but there can by now be no doubt that the modern Chinese and East Asian civilisation with its emphasis on learning, self-improvement, discipline, societal harmony

and pragmatism is becoming an unprecedented economic success. East Asians have been developing an innate dynamism of their own, borrowing from the West but flexibly re-adjusting their own long-established, coherent internal institutions.[5]

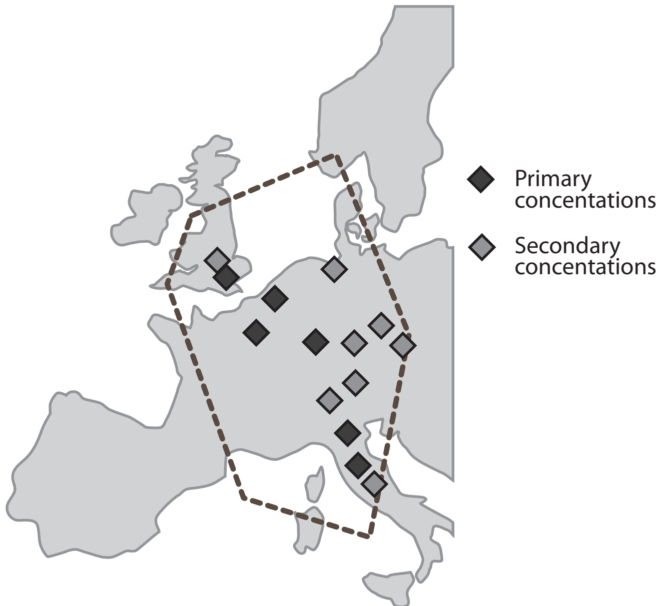
## Where was Western Civilisation Created?

Némo's definition of Western Civilisation gains additional substance when we ask where most of the cultural creations occurred. It was in the West European core (Graph 1). The centres of gravity in Western Civilisation shifted with the focal points of commerce—from Venice and the great trading cities of Upper Germany, to Seville and Lisbon, later Antwerp, then Amsterdam, then London. Now, the high-voltage gateways in the global networks of trade, art and communication have moved beyond Europe—for example New York, Tokyo, Shanghai.

American social analyst Charles Murray made a most imaginative attempt to find out where the 'hotspots' of Western development have been. To this end, he concentrated on the tangible intellectual accomplishments that are the hallmarks of civilisation in the fields of philosophy, astronomy, biology, chemistry, earth sciences, physics, mathematics, medicine, technology, art, literature and music.[6] He screened a total of 183 written sources, such as old and new encyclopaedias and historic surveys, to check how frequently persons of genius and high accomplishment are mentioned. He identified some 20,000 historic figures that lived between 800 BC and 1950 AD and selected significant persons to create an index of cultural creativity.[7] He then encoded regions and cities and calculated the share of the 'high achievers' in the average populations for each region or city.

Murray found a very high concentration of cultural achievers in a broad band running across Western Europe, from Lombardy and Toscana, down the Rhine Valley to the mouth of the River Thames and Scotland, with important outliers in Hamburg, central Germany,

Bohemia and Vienna, Paris and Rome (Graph 1). The geographic distribution did not change much over time—only from 1800 onwards, a growing concentration of civilisational achievement also occurred in the United States: first in the northeast, later also in the Midwest, and finally also in California.




Graph 1: Concentrations of Cultural Creativity in Europe

Source: Murray (2003), pp. 297-98

Incidentally, the distribution of high attainment across Europe and North America is matched by the regional distribution of per-capita incomes.

The causation between income and cultural attainment is arguably circular: affluent people can afford good education, exploration,

experimentation and innovation, and the spouting of 'innovational lava' helps to build up local income pyramids.*

## Civilisations Compared

When one speaks of the attributes of Western Civilisation, one must of course also speak about non-Western Civilisations.

As someone, who has lived and worked in several non-Western settings and who has found much to admire in diverse cultures, I felt occasionally uncomfortable with Némo's sketchy and somewhat dismissive treatment of non-Western civilisations. Of course, some civilisations are superior to others in terms of achieving high, universally valued objectives, such as freedom, justice, security and prosperity for the majority. It seems indisputable that Western Civilisation has in this respect been the most successful civilisation, both when we look at the number of people embracing it, their material and cultural achievements and the eagerness of many outsiders to buy into it.

As we have seen, two of the most decisive characteristics in a cultural system are the autonomy of the individual and the basic understanding of the fate of humanity on earth. It is therefore tempting to classify various civilisations as to whether:

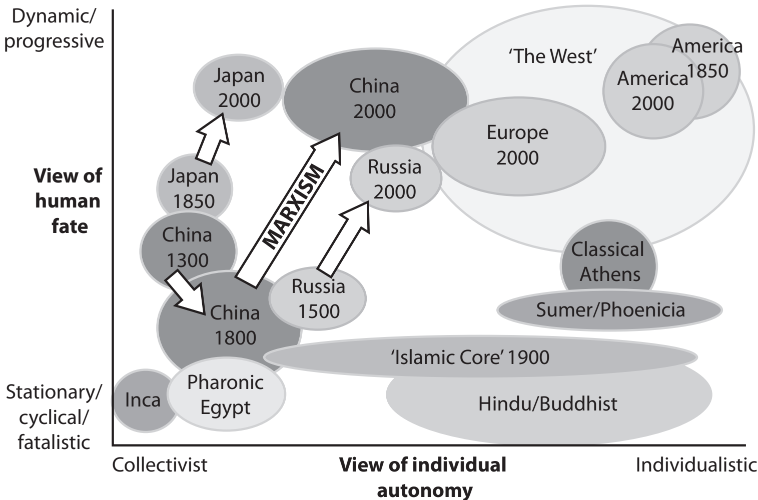
i. they are individualistic or collectivist in their conception of personal autonomy (a preference or otherwise for individual freedom and, coupled with it, a tolerance of sceptical challenges to accepted knowledge), and

* Conclusions similar to Murray's can be gleaned from a long-standing bestseller; Michael Hart's ranking of the one hundred most influential people in history. It highlights the preponderance of Western European greats: about two thirds of the 'Top 100' are from Europe. However, of the top five, two of the five are Mideasterners (Muhammad and Jesus Christ), one is Indian (the Buddha), one is Chinese (Confucius) and only one is European (Isaac Newton).

ii. people perceive the world as stationary or at best tied up in recurring cycles that man cannot or must not alter, or whether they believe that cumulative progress is both possible and desirable.

Once economic growth takes off, fatalistic attitudes tend to decline. Likewise, experience with massive collectivist experiments may strengthen preferences for self-reliance and individualism. However, mild collectivism, such as the 'welfare state', has the potential to stifle individual self-reliance since collectivist solutions tend to create interest groups that have a stake in collectivist ways.

Graph 2: A Classification of Civilisations




Much can be learnt about cultural differences from the encounters between the West and the Islamic East: Islamic societies have been governed by the thought that people have to subject themselves to their fate, though there has been a wide range of attitudes to individualism and collective bonds. These deeply engrained cultural attitudes have been reinforced by religious teaching. As far back as the Crusades, the Muslims of the Middle East showed considerably less interest in material progress

and innovative thought than their Western European contemporaries. By contrast, the European Crusaders, when they came into close contact with the Islamic world, quickly began to emulate the civilisational achievements they encountered. Wide-eyed, open-minded 'tourist-warriors' picked up numerous useful concepts and novelties, ranging from new fruits and vegetables (apricots, aubergines, eschalots, oranges, pistachio nuts—all incidentally Arab words), to the art of distilling alcohol, paper-making, new leather-processing and textile technologies, dyes, spices, as well as architectural and military techniques. Moreover, the 'Occidentals' eagerly studied Arab medicine, chemistry, astronomy, geography, mathematics and architecture, not only in the Holy Land, but also in Syria, al-Andalus and Sicily. Many of the cultural 'souvenirs' taken back from the East to Europe are still embedded in the vocabulary (zenith, nadir, azimut, algebra, algorithm and cipher, which is the Arab word for 'zero'). And soon, the Europeans improved on these imported ideas and applied them in practical ways.

By contrast, the Muslims considered the 'Franj' (Franks) as barbarians from whom they could learn nothing, although in reality they could have picked up a useful trick or two. 'Numerous were the Franj who learnt Arabic, whereas the inhabitants [of the Middle East] showed no interest in learning the languages of the Westerners'.[8] By the time of the Crusades, the Islamic world had already passed its cultural zenith, unable to build stable, but adaptable institutions. Individual freedom could not develop.[9] Whereas the Crusades triggered a veritable scientific and technical revolution in Europe, which enriched the ferment of the Papal Revolution, the jihad against the West led to centuries of Eastern obscurantism and decadence. All relevant rules and all relevant knowledge were deemed to be already given. To think about enhancing the existing, God-given order was deemed to border on sacrilege. After all, the Q'uran and the *hadith* embodied all that men ever needed to know.[10] The Muslim world became 'defensive, intolerant, sterile', fearful that change would mean a loss of identity.[11]

## Does Modern Civilisation Require Western Culture?

A frequently asked question is whether third world countries have to Westernise holus bolus, if they want to exploit Western technology and organisation, as well as compete in the global marketplace. In parts of his book, Némo seems rather insistent that 'the others' may master Western *Zivilisation* (the material trappings), but without completely mastering Western *Kultur* (the deep-rooted values and attitudes) completely. He points to the fact that many important cultural traits are deeply imprinted in childhood education and cannot be easily dislodged by experiences later in life. This leads to a further issue, namely whether it is necessary for a complete mastery of Western Civilisation to embrace the entire gamut of Western values, or whether viable 'alternative modernities' will emerge and survive. To my mind, the big question now is whether the 'Chinese model'—free-market capitalism combined with political authoritarianism—can survive in the long term, both in China and elsewhere. I think not.

As non-Westerners now embrace and further develop modern (Western) technological and organisational knowledge and overcome the 'Malthusian trap', we can already observe the emergence of modern, technically advanced non-Western civilisations in China, Japan and India, whose culture will remain essentially Chinese, Japanese and Indian. Despite globalisation, mankind is unlikely to end up with a homogenous, uniform global culture. It seems more likely that existing alternative cultural systems will adapt sufficiently to come to grips with modern civilisation. Their Western material civilisation will be underpinned with their diverse traditional, though evolving cultures.

Westerners should therefore no longer try to stake an exclusive claim to modernity. Euro-centrism and the notion of a dichotomy between a progressive West and a stagnant, dependent 'Rest' is simply not tenable any more. My own experience inclines me to side with liberal Indian-American economist Deepak Lal and Chinese-American scholar Tu Weiming, who assert that there are many viable paths to modernity.[12]

We would be well advised to abandon the possibly comforting notion that the Western brand of liberal capitalism will remain the only model of organising modern economic life. The West may not remain the unchallenged dominant 'top dog' much longer.

Niggling doubts nevertheless remain because in any civilisation there is always the issue of a consistency of orders: a decentralised, pluralistic, competitive economic order will, sooner or later, require a pluralistic political order, where contending political entrepreneurs can compete.[13] The exciting question therefore will remain: which type of order will ultimately make the other order compliant—markets or politics? Judging by the history of liberalisation, free markets have normally won.[14]

## Enemies of Civilisation

Civilisation is not uniformly popular, even in the West—as we already learnt from Huckleberry Finn. Institutions impose strictures, limits and disciplines, which often conflict with our deeper instinctual desires—post-neolithic Man is at loggerheads with 'First Man'. To many, modern civilisation imposes undue, cold rationality, when heart-warming feeling should govern human interaction. Civilisation is indeed often demanding and uncomfortable. The strictures of civilisation are resented because people easily lose sight of the fact that abiding by the rules serves a higher, longer-term purpose. Enemies of civilisation have frequently argued that it deprives us of freedom. Thus, French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau opined: 'Civilised man is born, lives, and dies in slavery; at his birth he is confined in swaddling clothes; at death he is nailed in a coffin. So long as he retains the human form he is fettered by our institutions'.[15] This attitude prevailed among the Romantics of the 19th century.

The classical liberal notion that genuine freedom can only exist under the discipline of the law and that appropriate institutions have to be cultivated to ensure progress and civility was rejected out of hand. Since then, the West has lived through repeated waves of Utopian-Romantic

counterculture promoted by people who yearned for salvation in a community unfettered by rules. One prominent opponent of civilisation was Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), who argued that, with the progress of civilisation, neuroses, alienation and repression of the individual increased inevitably, which leads to growing aggressiveness and dehumanisation.[16] The Freudians (and latter-day Freudo-Marxians, such as those in the 'Frankfurt school'), who have followed this line of argument and consider that 'reason tyrannises our lives', overlook the fact that greater wealth not only demands more discipline and self-restraint, but also provides individuals with the material means and security to pursue greater self-realisation. Of course, these critics have often been able to point to instances where the rules have been distorted by political action to convey privileges to the particular groups and themselves (rent-seeking). It is therefore always important to cultivate institutions so that they are perceived as just and helpful to all.

Artists, too, have often been opposed to certain aspects of Western Civilisation, although their creations become part of it. Artists ever so often appeal to the subconscious and the emotions, rather than 'cold reason'. When they wish to be more influential in public life than the institutions of civilisation permit, they chafe at the limitations, which the rules of Western liberal civilisation impose.

From the middle of the 19th century onward, the socialists offered political means to bring salvation: abolish private property and the coordination of diverse human aspirations in free markets. The totalitarian socialists may since have suffered a devastating reality check, when the Soviet empire collapsed and the evidence of woeful underachievement was uncovered for all to see, but idealist socialists and the Green movement have meanwhile picked up the utopian banner of the 19th century Romantics, attacking Western Civilisation. The motivation of many postmodern critics may be a rejection of the consequences of material progress, which always comes with costs, a

fantasy that glorifies an imagined lost paradise, or a guilt-ridden fear that the world is going to end. 'Saving the Planet' has become the catch-cry of those who feel that mankind has over-exploited natural resources, that the developed West is claiming an undue share of the world's resources (assumed to be a fixed pool with known limits), that the population explosion (assumed to be limitless) is going to lead to the inundation of the comfortable affluent parts of the world by hordes of hungry 'uncivilised' multitudes. These postmodern movements have in common that they reject much of Western civilisation as an unaffordable luxury —ignoring its past track record on improving the human condition for more and more of our fellows.[17]

At present, one can observe a certain cultural ennui among elites, who take prosperity and freedom for granted. Protest songs, adulation of Tibetan wisdom (which, with a big class of indolent monks exploiting the workers, looks not all that attractive from close up), and the nihilistic cult of dropping-out reflect a certain disenchantment, but also utopian assumptions about what humans can achieve. Felipe Fernández-Armesto notes that modern affluent Western societies have lost 'a sense of 'destiny' or even of direction [which] makes civilization hard to sustain… The confidence in the future … disappears'.[18] Despite the enormous achievements of the liberal Western model in terms of affluence, cultural attainment, health, longevity, peace and human dignity, the utopian enemies of civilisation keep comparing their dreams with a reality that has not and cannot match the dream. US historian Alan Kors expressed this succinctly:

> In the midst of unparalleled social mobility in the West, they cry 'caste'. In a society of munificent goods and services, they cry either 'poverty' or 'consumerism'. In a society of ever richer, more varied, more productive, more self-defined, and more satisfying lives, they cry 'alienation'… In a society of boundless private charity, they cry 'avarice'. In a society in which hundreds of millions have been free

> riders on the risk, knowledge and capital of others, they decry the 'exploitation' of the free riders. In a society that broke, on behalf of merit, the seemingly eternal chains of station by birth, they cry 'injustice'. In the names of fantasy worlds and mystical perfections they have closed themselves to the Western, liberal miracle of individual rights, individual responsibility, merit, and human satisfaction.[19]

The evidence notwithstanding, the unscrupulous among political and bureaucratic elites of all shades tend to appeal to utopian visions to control the gullible and the docile, who do not understand the central institutional tenets of Western Civilisation.

Philippe Némo writes of the dangers to our civilisation. He warns his readers that the values, on which it is based, are imperilled. In this respect, his position is almost the opposite of Francis Fukuyama's, who asserted the 'End of History' in the sense that rational modernity, as manifested in democratic capitalism, had triumphed for good.[20] Like the great American historian-philosopher, Will Durant, who with his wife Ariel wrote the still best and most detailed history of civilisation, *The Story of Civilisation*, Némo is worried by the assault of cultural relativism, atavistic sentiments and the self-hate of Western intellectuals. He deplores the lack of 'civilisational awareness' in Western countries, which are now being swamped by immigrants and confronted with hostile attitudes from non-Western elites in an ever more closely integrating world. Némo is alert to the possibility of a clash of civilisations, as Samuel Huntington was, when he observes 'walls of [cultural] incomprehension' dividing today's world, despite intensified economic exchange.[21] Here, Némo's position is at variance with many observers who see economic exchange as a path-breaker for institutional change that brings greater harmony.[22]

Apart from Romantic rejections of Western Civilisation, there have of course also been totalitarian attacks. The message that no one can possess

the ultimate truth and that civilisation requires the ceaseless competition of ideas is anathema to those who promise salvation, if only given absolute powers. Fundamentalist socialists have therefore always attacked Western Civilisation—whether those of the Marxist-socialist or those of the national-socialist brand. In the 20th century, it became clear that no totalitarian regime could ever be part of the West. Absolute dominance and final solutions were against the very grain of Western Civilisation. In the 1930s, many contemporary observers could not believe that entire civilised populations could so easily jettison the veneer of civilising institutions and fall prey to atavistic instincts and the promises of primitive, all-knowing political saviours. The liberal capitalist democracies only just survived hate-filled attacks from the left and the right, and at great cost in terms of lives and treasure.

At the present time, the West is under attack by fundamentalist Islamists who believe that they possess the ultimate truth and have to convert the world to it. Although Soviet support for third world hostility is gone, the West is also facing hatred and incessant attacks from the likes of Hugo Chávez, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Robert Mugabe and Mahathir bin Mohamad; and many such as Vladimir Putin and the Chinese leadership signal their fundamental reservations about Western ideals of tolerance and openness.

Western Civilisation thus faces attacks from inside and out. This does not amount to a crisis of our civilisation, but it should remind us of what our civilisation stands for and what merits it has. Knowledge about the key institutions—such as the rule of law, secure private property and its free use, a free press, a free vote to select those who should govern us for the time being—deserves to have its profile raised in education. And the history of the great cultural transitions and achievements of the West deserves to be taught in school. If done properly, this can be a great inspiration for the next generation—and for the teachers and parents who take up the challenge.

# 5 A Western Political Union?

Had Némo confined himself to describing the essential elements that made the West, his book would deserve a triple A rating. But—*o si tacuisses*—the philosopher, in the final chapter of his book, goes on to make a case for a political Western Union—a political confederation comprising Western Europe and, Catholic Central and Southeastern Europe, as well as the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

This idea strikes me as a desperate attempt of a liberal observer from one of Old Europe's ailing welfare states to overcome Europe's self-inflicted mental and economic pain. The Western democracies are already in a loose, friendly alliance anyway, despite the occasional trans-Atlantic tiff. However, a formal political union, as envisaged by Némo, seems to my mind unduly inward-looking, defensive and ignorant of the growing web of global networks that span beyond the confines of Western Civilisation.

A formal political union of all Western nations would also go towards making the problems of every nation the responsibility of all others—and ultimately the responsibility of no one. The European Union has already demonstrated that the ever-wider sharing of responsibility for political tasks only leads to a multiplication of summits, inaction, bureaucratisation and irritating interference with the sovereignty of nation states.

The euro zone, conceived as a monetary union with strict rules for disciplined fiscal behaviour, has morphed within a mere decade into an ill-disciplined 'mutual liability union', where the profligate can expect to be bailed out by the responsible. Can one really imagine that US or Australian taxpayers might want to bail out a profligate Greek or Irish government? Or would a relatively dynamic United States allow themselves to be tied down by consensus agreements on social welfare and growth-destroying reactions to artificial climate angst? It is simply illusory to assume sufficient Western solidarity to support such a political union.

The solution of the many problems of complex and dynamic modern societies lies with more subsidiarity, governance moving again closer to the people, and in decentralisation, rather than a mega confederation that comprises more than half the world economy. The European supranational model, which owes much to Louis XIV and Cartesianism, has not been a success. Why does Némo here abandon his otherwise professed commitment to genuine competition? Let us instead build the future of Western Civilisation on a diversity of competing administrative and political solutions, so that political elites can learn from the experience of others and remain disciplined by political competition. The 'European Miracle' since 1600 was built on political rivalry and enterprise; it was built by market integration from below, not a political cartel imposing rules from above.[1] For the West to emerge triumphant, it was necessary that independent jurisdictions rivalled with each other for economic advantage through trade and attracting mobile enterprises and capital. Political rivalry drove the elites to be enterprising and innovative, creating attractive, citizen- and business-friendly institutions, albeit within the general, loose framework of a shared (European) civilisation.[2]

If the differences between the West and the Rest are not as clear-cut and enduring as Philippe Némo implies, in other words if the people who are keen on material progress, peace and freedom are able to adjust

their fundamental cultural values and habits of thought, then the case for a political Western union makes even less sense. In today's pluralistic world, the bonds of trade, investment, friendship and intermarriage are strengthening across cultural divides. Drawing political trenches would be polarising and potentially harmful in the longer run. Clinging together in a political 'cartel of Western Civilisation' would only close minds, prevent mutual learning and deprive citizens of the benefits of rivalry among those who govern them.[3] A vibrant, dynamic Western Civilisation will be able to hold its own in the global competition between cultures and nations. Certainly, a Western frontline nation like Australia would gain little from it and might lose a lot in confrontation with a dynamic East Asia.

# 6 Cultural Awareness in Australia

Former Prime Minister John Howard makes the important point that 'Australia occupies a unique intersection of history and geography'.[1] Our geographic location makes us—together with New Zealand—a frontline state of the West in a part of the world that is increasingly dominated by the rejuvenating, ascendant Hindu-Indian, Muslim-Indonesian and above all the Chinese-East Asian civilisations. For this reason alone, Australians need to think more clearly about what they stand for. It will be harder for us to retain our Western identity than for, say, the Europeans or North Americans who can hide in a big cultural unit. Anyone who discusses this with Asian elites will be aware of their mix of interest and admiration, as well as scepticism and doubt about certain aspects of life in Australia. Being aware of our cultural roots and of what is important to our civilisation is part and parcel of how we should prepare ourselves for such cultural encounters. Another part of our preparation is, of course, also a receptiveness to influences from Asia that could enrich and further develop our own institutions and capabilities. Let us never forget that readiness to learn and compete is a core ingredient in the Western tradition.

The other dimension is our history. During the 19th century, a remarkably small population developed this vast, harsh continent into

one of the most affluent and civilised countries in the world.* They did so with the benefit of imported British institutions, as well as imported capital, technology and enterprise. Soon, the Colonials enhanced the imported institutions and adapted them creatively to their own conditions. That evolutionary potential was crucial. For most of the 20th century, the post-Federation 'Australian Settlement' rigidified socioeconomic structures and prevented ready adaptation to a changing outside world. Some flexibility and innovative change in internal institutions came after the Second World War with mass immigration, which changed the national identity. Growing evidence that a conservative, nay, reactionary stance of an isolated Australia was leading to economic failure and national inferiority complexes eventually returned Australians and Australian governments to a more flexible, liberal posture. Many external institutions were adjusted by comprehensive reform during the last quarter of the 20th century. For a long time, the political elites suffered from a typical recognition lag, as discussed earlier. In the process, the fundamental commitment to Western values was maintained while the more superficial legislation and regulations were reformed. As so often in history, reform led to a new can-do spirit and self-confidence in engaging productively with the outside world.

## Immigration and Cultural Integration

A second argument as to why Australians should learn about our Western Civilisation is mass immigration. Most Australians probably realise that—in order to welcome mass immigration from different cultural backgrounds—the essential traits of the human capital of the incumbent society must be preserved. The most important part of that cultural capital is shared (internal) rules of just conduct, which can never be fully replaced by black-letter law codes and a formal judiciary.

* In 1851, only about 400,000 Whites lived in Australia, by 1901 there were still only 3.7 million.

There comes a tipping point for immigration societies, where the basic institutions are no longer embraced by substantive minorities and where the common moral bonds are sundered and the transaction costs of living together rise steeply, as has for example become evident in recent times with the street riots of youngsters—many of whom were of non-European descent—in Paris and London. Let us not forget that a shared morality is the key to attaining security, peace and prosperity in the first place.

These fundamental institutional characteristics have often been the very reason immigrants are attracted to Australia, especially those from less secure, peaceful and prosperous countries. However, one can also observe instances where immigrants from non-Western cultures persist with the mores that they brought from their less successful home civilisations. Some even demand that the incumbents accept the institutions of the society they left behind.

One school of thought about immigration focuses almost exclusively on population and immigrant numbers, assuming that people's values and institutional habits are infinitely malleable. Australians of this frame of mind can indeed point to how post-war immigrants from various European backgrounds successfully integrated and became law-abiding, productive fellow citizens. Indeed, their admixture made this a more interesting and diverse country with a better adaptive potential to new developments. However, people are not just bodies; and fundamental cultural traits are not infinitely malleable. Anyone with a sense of history or a rudimentary understanding of the institutions of culture—as outlined above—will accept that some immigrants come with considerable and deeply entrenched cultural baggage. If Australians want to retain their (familiar and successful) Western Civilisation, they must insist on integration.[2] Some cultural challenges can be enriching and useful, helping our evolving culture to adjust to a changing, globalising world. Successful integration is a matter not only of immigrant numbers, but also of their origins. Some of the newcomers integrate better and

more willingly than others, since fundamental values and institutional endowments are deeply entrenched and are frequently not readily adjusted. There is an argument for selectivity in migrant intake according to demonstrated readiness to assimilate, if high immigrant numbers are considered desirable. Admittedly, selectivity runs against modern egalitarian sentiments and is easily denigrated as racism. It is not racist, but merely an acknowledgement of people's invisible values and the institutions that ensure a cohesive, effective civilisation. It is also an acknowledgement that cultural cohesion—compliance with a shared code of traffic rules—is an important asset in attaining economic prosperity, social harmony and freedom. What was said above about the effectiveness and low cost of spontaneous coordination under internal rules applies to fairly homogeneous societies, such as traditional Australia. This changes when there is a great mix of different cultural groups, some of which are full of contempt for Western liberal mores, and risks social fracture and a more costly, less secure society.

Australians naturally assume their own culture is on the whole superior to that of unfamiliar habits of new immigrants—yet, new immigrants tend to have similar reactions when first confronted with Australian mores. As discussed earlier, first conclusions can easily be that what is different must be ineffective and threatening. In an immigrant society, this is a critical juncture: if new migrants withdraw quickly into ghettos with familiar institutions, they will never discover that gradual learning and open-mindedness towards unfamiliar Australian ways, as well as a tolerant trial of those novel ways, soon enables them to interpret our mainstream culture correctly. They will then not develop confidence and will before long decide that cultural integration into the mainstream is too difficult for them. Once that attitude is acquired, they will have negative experiences in interacting with mainstream Australia, and their experiences will reinforce each other.

Fortunately, Australians are comparatively open-minded when confronted with different cultures. They have by now also experienced the integration of numerous new arrivals. However, sizable groups of immigrants with cultural backgrounds, far removed from our mainstream civilisation, from European customs and from Western morality are now coming in. They pose a greater integration challenge than that faced by the post-war generations of last century. This is often vaguely understood by the wider population, which has in recent times led to more or less chauvinistic reactions against undifferentiated mass immigration from all around the world.

The task of integrating immigrants does not stop with the first generation, in particular if they hail from non-Western origins. The first generation typically focuses on getting on within the existing system, but the second and third generations tend to challenge the existing regime. We have already observed a wave of multiculturalism and the politicisation of cultural change. Playing the multicultural card brought political advantage to the leaders who promoted the vision of multiculturalism, whether they were spokesmen for immigrant groups or politicians who sought migrant-group support in elections. Leaders with more traditional theories about governance and social harmony have opposed the new multiculturalism. However, other than asserting that assimilation has been the tradition in the United States or Australia, the protagonists of cultural assimilation have failed to explain why integration is so important and what it entails. At least Australia's elites have not fallen into the trap in which the elites of Europe were caught for so long, namely not even acknowledging that their countries were becoming the permanent home of big immigrant populations from non-European origins and where a leading observer, who understands the important role of a shared morality and outlook on life, has now come to the conclusion that "multiculturalism' is inherently absurd'.* [3]

* Only in 2010 have European leaders become explicit about the need to integrate migrants. German Chancellor Angela Merkel famously declared recently: '*Multi kulti* has been an abject failure.'

## Aboriginals and Australia's Western Identity

An additional aspect that makes clarity of thought about a shared Western Civilisation urgent for Australians is the vexed Aboriginal issue. Although this is not the place to dwell on these thorny issues, let us say that the future of Aboriginal Australians depends on how they come to grips with the fundamentals of mainstream Western Civilisation. Remaining obstinately 'outside' would condemn them to the sad fate that many have endured in the past. It is a harsh fact that confrontation with the steamroller of the dominant and dynamic Western Civilisation is a huge and very difficult challenge. Confrontation with it has been most destructive of many traditional cultures, in particular those with few members. It must be unimaginably hard for people in a cultural tradition that has seen only little change over the millennia to have to come to grips suddenly with Western modernity. However, the openness, flexibility and individualism of the Western liberal rule system make it easier to develop niches and opportunities, where Aboriginals and part-Aboriginals, who want to maintain some of their identity, are able to pursue their own chosen purposes. Besides, have Aboriginal people really ever wanted to remain moored in their traditional culture, with all the traditional features of penury, brutality, illness and early death? Alas, no one and no group in the modern world can escape the need to make adjustments to traditional cultural identity, unless they are prepared to voluntarily suffer deprivation and poverty.

## A Chinese Cultural Admixture to Our Western Identity?

Mainstream Australians have by now come to grips with adjusting certain aspects of their traditional civilisation to looming Asian challenges. Napoleon famously remarked that 'when China awakens, the world will tremble'. China has awoken from centuries of inward-looking rigidity and stagnation, even material decline. But Australians need not tremble. In the process of East-Asian modernisation, deep-seated

cultural traits have been adjusted to become more outward- and forward-looking.[4] Reality has already falsified Max Weber's notion of a culturally unmovable Confucian East.[5] In the classificatory scheme in Graph 2, we noted that—partly under the influence of Marxism—the average Chinese value system has moved mightily in the direction of progressive, more individualistic thinking. The credo of the small states on China's fringe has long become a shared belief in material progress as a guarantee of national security and better life. Since 1975, the communist leadership of the PRC and most in the country's elites have also switched their belief system to a greater future orientation and a greater preference for material progress: 'Let's get rich, before we get old'. At the same time, there are clear signs that the Chinese, still imbued by more commitment to collectives, have been moving in the direction of more individualism. My own guess—informed by first-hand observation over the past thirty years—is that at least the urban Chinese are now not all that far from the Western locus on the grid in Graph 2. The rural masses, who have always believed in the merits of the family and clan collective, have had sufficiently bitter experiences under Mao to mistrust the old national collectivism. The record-breaking material progress in East Asia also suggests that there are essential institutional elements in the make-up of the wider Chinese culture that are not all that different from where Westerners stand on their preference for individualism and progress.

The Chinese civilisation has generated as wide and diverse a range of thought about basic values as has the Christian West. Both Daoism and important strands of Confucianism have favoured distinct individualist and anti-authoritarian attitudes. For example, the concept that the 'Mandate of Heaven' is reflected in the people's prosperity and that material decline signals that the ruler has lost their mandate, is much closer to the Western notion of temporary political mandates than the Persian or Indian concept of God kings. And how should a Western liberal react to these oft-repeated quotations from Confucian scholar Mencius (Meng

Zi, c. 372-289 BC): 'The people are to be valued most, the vitality of the state next, and the ruler least', and 'Do not give in while facing power'? Copious research has analysed the interdependencies between Chinese philosophies, history and recent modernisation.[6]

Australia is unique among Western nations in that we are not only an outlier geographically, but are also relatively close to Chinese-East Asian civilisation, both in terms of time zone and geography and in terms of fast-growing economic links. Together with considerable immigration of East Asians, many of whom are cultured professionals, this has begun to make Australia the place of social interaction between the two outstanding world civilisations. If one goes to Taipei or Shanghai, it is evident how the Chinese civilisation is now being enriched by learning from the West and that an attractive mix of Chinese cultural elements with Western ideas about technology, organisation and wealth is emerging. Likewise, a mirror picture is emerging in Sydney or Brisbane, where germs of East-Asian culture are now taking root and enrich Australia's Western make-up. This 'cultural chemical reaction' is likely to increase in coming generations.

My comparatively complacent view of the Chinese challenge to Australians is based on the insight that, over the long term, it is the internal institutions that win out over the external, imposed institutions. Chinese cultural mores are much more compatible with Western ways than the external, political regime of present-day China. Those contemporary observers who only see the political institutions in the People's Republic and the still often autocratic democracies on the Chinese fringe tend to be more pessimistic and tend to foresee conflicts. There is no doubt a growing tension between Chinese (internal) culture and the various political regimes of East Asia, so that the medium-term path of institutional evolution cannot be predicted with any degree of certainty. Nonetheless, Australians with a confident enterprising and liberal mindset should not fall into the trap of seeing our nation as a future victim

of a 'clash of civilisations' with East Asia. If we uphold and cultivate our Western heritage, we will be able to confidently adopt useful ideas from that other long-lasting civilisation, that of the wider Chinese-East Asian region. The Chinese have the culturally richest and most worthwhile civilisation on earth from which Westerners may learn from for their own institutional evolution. Let's not forget that civilisation is an evolving system and that openness is a strength.*

Many in the Chinese cultural orbit have over recent decades been able to take up modern, Western-inspired civilisation and have done so with amazing speed and material success. For Némo, this 'constitutes both an enigma and a challenge'.[7] Australians are less Eurocentric and have by now had more exposure to East Asia; they will not be all that puzzled. Even if we can expect to be challenged, we will be able to benefit from greater exposure without having to fear being overwhelmed—as long as we consciously cultivate our own strengths, values and basic institutions. Our working hypothesis should be that an Australia which maintains its Western identity, but also remains open to learning and innovating, has a good chance to enjoy a non-conflictual future.

The reason for belabouring the traits of Chinese civilisation is to make the point that nothing is preordained in the evolving make-up of an aging, technically advanced Chinese civilisation or its future political system and that a firmly Western-oriented Australia may, yet again, be a lucky country, since the Chinese neighbourhood—and East Asian immigrants—prove relatively compatible with our inherited identity.

* Admittedly, one cannot be certain about such a benign outcome, as—sometimes—the political collectives that shape the external regime are able to gain the upper hand and foment conflict. The barbaric German aggression in the 1930s and 1940s, which at first left many admirers of the 'nation of thinkers and poets' incredulous, is an example of the atypical case of external institutions overriding supposedly engrained fundamental values and internal institutions.

## Let's Rekindle Cultural Fascination

The history of civilisations and the role of cultural evolution are among the most fascinating fields of study, and the analysis of institutions is arguably the most interesting aspect of history, law, sociology and economics. With Philippe Némo, I believe that we must re-investigate and re-learn what it is that has made Western Civilisation great.

It is risky to take the cultural underpinnings of our society for granted. Knowledge about the content of our civilisation is a precondition for defending it. And defended it must be in our age—externally for Australia to flourish in the global competition with rivalling cultural concepts and internally to face up to destructive postmodern multiculturalism and cultural nihilism.

Awareness of the essential content of our own civilisation, and how it continues to evolve, is important not only to future social cohesion, liberty, prosperity and security; it also constitutes a fascinating field of intellectual pursuit: what could be more exciting to discuss than the glory and fascination of civilisational achievement?

We began with a garden analogy. So, we also better end with one: *Il faut cultiver notre jardin*—we should make civilisation, in all senses of the word, our very own, personal concern.

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