

## Introduction

**A**s dusk begins to settle on the abruptly curtailed “American century,” the time seems long overdue for an assessment of that hitherto distinct civilization, the West, which is in the process of merging now with other civilizations and cultures. It may seem inappropriate for a study aspiring to relevance and to revision, and thus apparently requiring a specialist in modern history, to be attempted instead by a scholar of early modern European history. Yet an awareness of the earlier period affords a readier access to first principles, their development, and an appreciation of their uniqueness, as well as their capacity for transference to a global context. For however remote, tangential, and irrelevant sixteenth-century Europe may appear to some, it is one of the main tenets of this analysis that the Renaissance decisively and effectively prepared the global context for the European engagement of the world’s peoples. As the early seventeenth-century French geographer Pierre d’Avity put it, “[The geographers] have wanted to make the world as a single community known to all men who are its citizens.”<sup>1</sup> If globalization has become the major focus of social studies and the new frontier for historians, the European Renaissance then provides the proper moment to begin examining a process that increasingly enfolds us all.

As Western civilization becomes the primary agent in the present process of globalization, wherein the multitude of cultures, societies, and peoples of our planet are being reduced

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to a common, modern civilization, we seek to distinguish and assess some of the West's unique characteristics that are operating in this vast planetary transformation. Three are exceptional developments of our civilization: modern science and technology, the idea of a common humanity, and the capacity for self-criticism and dissent. Regarding the first, the distinguished social philosopher Ernest Gellner has claimed for Western science a "culture-transcending knowledge" that works to effect a sort of cognitive replumbing of the people of the globe.<sup>2</sup> This distinctive development is certainly the least debatable and, because of the obvious case that has been made for it, will not be treated here.

The second distinctive characteristic, with its program of natural, human rights, warrants attention as a formative and enduring characteristic of the West. To some extent a culture-transcending quality can also be claimed for it. The transcendence of this contribution is indeed explicitly announced in the idea of a common humanity as a single moral, biological totality, despite the apparent difficulty which many of the more collective societies might at first have with Western notions of rationality and individuality. The initial, if imperfect, manifestation of this idea first expresses itself in a religious form derived from Christian roots. In the course of the Renaissance, the more fragile and inevitably more particularistic notion of civilization will largely displace and frequently disfigure but never entirely lose the ongoing momentum of commitment to a universal jurisdiction of a common, all-inclusive humanity. This idea persists throughout the period studied here, 1500 to 1800, which provides the principal context for analyzing its continuity during the shift from the specifically religious to the more secular register.

The third of these distinctive characteristics, and the second of the two political principles to be examined, is the faculty for self-criticism. This feature really amounts to a state of

mind, one ultimately attributable to Socrates' "examined life" and broadly described as a capacity for criticism, review, and dissent, which through a long historical process ultimately culminated in constitutional democracy. Certainly constitutional democracy, representative and elective, involves a number of practices, attitudes, and institutions not limited to two-party government but also including the presence of a free press, independent judicial review, and respect for the rule of law and the rights of minorities. The discussion in this book limits itself to the heart of this vast subject, namely, the immediacy of political dissent with its inherent idea of freedom; it seeks to disclose the beginnings of political parties in the European world, specifically in Britain and its first empire, culminating in the Federalist period, which followed immediately upon the acceptance of the U.S. Constitution. To a significantly lesser extent because of its complexity and unique history, as well as the need for moderation, this second political principle, the permitting, even expectation, of dissent, has culture-transcending aspirations and is thus potentially exportable to the peoples of other civilizations.

Two clarifications are in order. First, it is indeed true that other developments in current Western civilization may seem to be more influential and immediately exportable, such as capitalism and the world market—or, even more prominent and pervasive, American popular culture and consumerism. But these apply specifically to recent modern developments, especially in the twentieth century, and occur outside our period of consideration. Second, the use of the term "European" rather than "Western" in the title may appear problematic. But Europe and Europeans have come to identify and define a distinct civilization that matured in the extreme westernmost end of the Eurasian landmass in the period under analysis. Despite their long, august pedigree, "West" and "Western" are terms avoided in the body of this work or as much as possible cur-

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tailed; it was not until the late nineteenth century that the term “West” came to displace “European”—undoubtedly a process reinforced by America’s increasing prominence—and to represent the entire collectivity of our civilization.<sup>3</sup> It will thus be used here either to indicate the period of our civilization following that designated as Europe and European, after approximately 1900, or as a convenient term referring to the total course of this civilization from the Stoic-Christian origins to the present. Consequently, according to such a periodization—Christian, European, Western—the title of this book refers to a still initial, brittle engagement of European civilization with the globe and its peoples; it deliberately stops short of the great period of colonialism and imperialism in the nineteenth century.

The strange anomaly of this European civilization that grades later into the West is nicely captured in a recent observation provoked by Denis Diderot’s criticism of European imperial practices, which poses “the paradox that the most arrogant of civilizations is at the same time the most radically given to criticism of itself.”<sup>4</sup> But this paradox is trumped by another, even more astonishing—that the civilization that in its colonialism and imperialism gave us the most savage, inhuman treatments of indigenous populations, not to mention the ultimate inhumanity of Auschwitz, was the same that promoted the idea of a common humanity and programs of human rights accompanied subsequently by a myriad of private organizations that continue to address poverty, hunger, disease, and multifarious needs throughout the globe. Yet perhaps this is not a paradox at all but can best be understood as integral to the complexity and varieties of the human animal.

An emphasis upon exceptionality, uniqueness, and the universalizing aspirations of the West more than implicitly challenges those currents that have come to prevail in American academe since the 1960s. The present study, however, refuses

to become entangled in this ongoing debate or mired in confronting counterclaims of other civilizations to a comprehensive understanding of humankind or to the value and role of political dissent by means of diversity. In order to free this work from such distractions and maintain the unity of its argument, let it be clearly stated at the outset that there can be found in such claims only disparate, scattered cases, random lights—the Confucian Mencius, for example, or the Arab social philosopher Ibn Khaldūn—over the past twenty centuries that lack a sustained, continuous tradition, coherent in its formulation, comprehensive in its potential application and ever capable of achieving institutional expression. The stock recourse of those making counterclaims is most frequently evinced by appeals to truly attractive, unusual figures such as the emperors Akbar or Asoka in Indian civilization. But where the continuity? the sustained influence? the religiously neutral legal framework? the institutionalization of such high-minded practices?<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, these scattered moments point to a larger universality upon which the Western impetus can attempt to graft itself.<sup>6</sup>

Developments within American academe since the 1960s have worked to marginalize or reject, while vilifying, what formerly seemed to be most solid and meritorious in the Western tradition. Admittedly, much in that tradition did need criticism and reformulation. Yet such an effort does not warrant a total denial of its enduring value. Extreme relativism and subjectivism have recently been rampant, their proponents urging that the center cannot, should not, never did, and will not hold. The West may be responsible for much of the present state of the world, including some horrendous features. Nevertheless, there is much in the Western tradition that we need to recognize, nurture, and enhance, rather than vehemently denigrating the entirety and indiscriminately pursuing the celebration of variety and difference for their own sakes. Absent

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the two distinctively Western political principles studied here, enthusiasm for diversity alone can descend into a nasty tribalism; absent the frameworks these principles provide, the opportunities for justice can only suffer. More important perhaps than anything else is the intellectual need to establish a common ground that also respects difference. And insofar as the West's intellectual inheritance addresses this issue, it creates at its best a framework for discussion, for reasoned argument, and the quest for a more inclusive justice, thereby extending a common basis of negotiation to all others. In brief, this book concerns itself with the unique creation, the historical beginnings, of that arena, that framework.

It would appear imprudent to extend such a study outside one's own competence as a historian of the Renaissance and Reformation into the present and even beyond. Here, without the same presumed authority, I must consider these enduring issues—more as an ordinary citizen. Furthermore, against the judgment and advice of several of my readers, I nevertheless remain determined to intrude this inquiry into the present day and not suppress the considerations that appear in the Epilogue—considerations dictated by the nature of the subject. The attempt to define the ultimate long-range political characteristics of our civilization and to recognize their universal purpose and seemingly inexorable development commits the investigator to entering at least to some extent the tricky currents of present controversy. To blandly refuse the challenge would be irresponsible. Nevertheless, one can only accept this responsibility by recognizing that one is acting in a different register and that whatever apparent “polemic” ensues, it must not intrude upon the principal historical exposition of this study; it must be insulated from the body of the work, the historical analysis and exposition of two unique political principles, and confined to an Epilogue that whoever wishes to do so can ignore.

The present study seeks to pursue a historical analysis and deliberately eschews any polemical, much less triumphalist, exposition of its two themes. Whatever its implications for the present, the object here is to deepen our historical appreciation of two distinctive features of our civilization—the idea of a common humanity that reveals itself in programs of human rights, and the tenability of political dissent that expresses itself in constitutional democracy; they bear within themselves the ideas of equality and of political freedom, respectively. Nor can this study linger in weighing the claims of other civilizations to a notion of universal humanity, where fleeting, fitful expressions contrast with the sustained, continuous concern of the West. Nor again, other than by brief allusion or in endnotes, can the issue of the potential grounds for an effective future coalescence or concord between a Western program of human rights and a Chinese-Confucian style program of human rites gain consideration. Likewise, any reference to the current political climate has been limited to an Epilogue, which justifies its inclusion here only by addressing the intrinsic question regarding the exportability of the two potentially universal features defined by this study: human rights and constitutional democracy.

An opening geographic chapter sets the stage in the Renaissance engagement of the peoples of the globe. In its cartographic contribution, linked with improved navigational skills, the Renaissance establishes the global context. Chapter 2 addresses the first of our two political principles—the idea of a common humanity. In chapter 3, that aspect of constitutional democracy mentioned earlier will be treated in two stages: the unlikely but necessary opening of formal, constructed dissent in Reformation Germany, followed by the more obvious development of party government in Britain and Anglo-America. An Aftermath seeks to bring the subject more into the present. Finally, an assessment of the future exportability

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of the two political principles will be the subject of a concluding Epilogue.

In the exposition of such a theme, with its potential universality over space and time, one embarks upon a representation of European civilization that is frankly more positive and attractive than has prevailed in the academic discourse of the past several decades. While admitting some validity to the criticism that has been leveled against the West, this book seeks to educe an achievement that has been allowed recently to suffer obscurity: namely, that uniquely positive voice in the long development of our civilization as it crosses the threshold into a more amorphous modern civilization for the planet.

Before the knowledge of Western civilization's distinctiveness disappears—and it *is* disappearing in the immense wash of globalization—this analysis aspires to define the two paramount political aspects of that civilization, the greatest of all in its resourcefulness and aspirations, the most awful and unnatural in its exploitation of power.