

# Metamorphosis, or Why We Should Study the West

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History was once timeless—or nearly so. A Renaissance reader of Livy or Thucydides would have found himself transported to a quite recognizable world. Monarchs and city states, fleets powered by wind and muscle, armies meeting at sword's point, weather moving faster than word, visitations of plague—all would have seemed quite familiar, down to the handwritten texts in which the events had first been described. Likewise (minus the city states) would it have seemed to a Ming literatus perusing the court histories of the Sung, Tang, or Han. In both cases things had, of course, changed in many specific ways. But the warp and woof of human existence, the conditions of daily life, remained largely the same, even at its pinnacle. So Machiavelli could advise his Prince drawing now from antiquity, now from the careers of contemporaries like the Borgias. So too an emperor of the Ming could be advised on how to treat with the barbarous Jurchens—as a Han emperor, fifteen hundred years before, had handled the barbarous Xiongnu.

Today, we stare at all but recent history—to the extent we have any interest in it—as across a vast divide. To be sure, the deepest roots of the human condition remain the same. We're still born, pay taxes, and die. Yet for most of us life on that farther shore, were we compelled to live it, would seem a purgatory. And most of its denizens would regard us as inhabiting an earthly paradise. Be it with respect to life expectancy, medicine, hygiene, common comforts, personal mobility, communications, or entertainment, the royalty of yesteryear, Machiavelli's Prince or China's Son of Heaven, could only gape in amazement at what Everyman now enjoys. And this says nothing of the unexampled political, intellectual, religious, and personal liberties widely exercised by the un-princely and non-imperial of today. History still has an immense amount to teach us, but our questions of it, when well-framed, must be at least as attentive to disjuncture as continuity. The once seemingly static now flows torrentially, readily expunging even the most venerable of landmarks.

One thing history's torrent appears to be sweeping away is, ironically, the study of its most productive wellspring, Western civilization. *The Vanishing West*, a report the National Association of Scholars released in May 2011, documents the extent of this vanishing.<sup>[1]</sup> The traditional Western civilization survey requirement, commonplace only decades ago, has become a rarity for students in general and for history majors in particular, and most so at those institutions where America's opinion leadership is shaped. It is also steadily losing ground in our high schools.

This state of affairs is a natural prompt for several questions about that much-discussed topic, “civic literacy”—or perhaps, to formulate it more adequately with respect to the mission of liberal education, “civilizational sophistication.” For one, are most students really aware of how much modern civilization has quickened the pace of social change? For another, do they have more than an inkling of how wondrous is the wealth and freedom that surround them? And last, do they have much sense of the nature of the forces to which these wonders owe their birth? Levels of historical knowledge being what they are—especially among the young—there is little

ground for complacency on any of these counts. But if these understandings are insufficient, or absent, what hope is there for the stewardship our bounties deserve?

Unfortunately, cultivating such awareness isn't much of a priority in higher education today. For a variety of reasons ranging from the crassly professional—the wish of scholarly specialists not to waste their time on general courses of any sort—through the fashionably enlightened—a belief that concentrating on one's own culture is parochial—to the outright ideological—the view that our history is largely an occasion for shame—the Western history survey course, not only as a requirement, but even as an elective, appears to be on its way to extinction.

Much is at stake. A condition as exceptionally benign as our own is only likely to be sustained when fully appreciated. So let's do a little intellectual pushback and see what can be argued on behalf of this beleaguered educational remnant. We'll rest our case on two premises. The first, unimpeachable if rather obvious, is that in teaching history the stress should be on what is most important. The second, probably less substantial, but certainly compelling to contemporary educators, is that in teaching history we should be preparing students for life in a new globalized age.

The first leads to a conclusion that should be no less evident than its premise: If historical importance is being sought, doesn't it most reside in the origins of our exceptionality, in the miracle of Western modernity? The second oddly boomerangs: If we're really preparing students for “globalism,” on what does our new worldwide dispensation rest, if not, almost in its entirety, on Western derived institutions? Educationally, it's not “the West or the world.” Without the West nothing like the modern world would exist.

## **THE METAMORPHIC NATURE OF THE WESTERN ACHIEVEMENT**

To argue, in this day and age, that other civilizations deserve equal treatment with the West is to ignore the elephant in comparative civilization's living room. What happened in, and through, the Western world during the last three hundred years is unique in the history of civilization. Western civilization is not just another civilization. It represents a metamorphosis in humanity's estate. The other civilizations of the world have been reborn in, and through, that of the West.

There have been only two prior episodes in the human story, both pre-civilizational, which parallel the importance of what recently happened in the West. The first was nothing less than the appearance of modern humanity itself, “*homo sapiens sapiens*,” roughly fifty thousand years ago. This was a biological event, a kind of sub-speciation, probably associated with brain and laryngeal changes that allowed for the development of complex language. Out of it came the cultural effervescence that separated us from the rest of animate creation. While humans continued to evolve biologically, adaptation, often of a radical nature, no longer had to wait upon our genes. Religion, art, and an increasingly complicated technology followed in train, as mankind, hitherto confined to Africa, spread across the face of the earth.

The second metamorphic episode, beginning about ten thousand years ago, involved the invention of agriculture, the transition from the Paleo- to the Neolithic. What made this

metamorphic, what gave it a close resemblance to the appearance of language and culture, was its immense multiplication of possibility. With agriculture came redistributable surpluses and, eventually, states to redistribute them. States concentrate power and their redistributive policies typically concentrate wealth among the powerful. This may not have been fair, but it did provide the basis for high civilization, the arts of luxury, and the advanced technologies of war and rulership, including, ultimately, written language. Populations increased, cities arose, the entire human web became a densely intricate knit—and history began.

Metamorphic events have signature qualities. They generate a rapid increase in innovation, population, cultural content, information exchange, energy sources, specialization, the division of labor, and institutional variety. The alterations are not just add-ons, human life is qualitatively altered. By each of these measures recent Western history is surely the third of the great metamorphic breakthroughs. Never before in history has so much, so long taken for granted, been in such flux, including basics like gender relations and family structure. The advent of biotechnology, genetic manipulation, and artificial intelligence even opens the door to the Faustian possibilities of species modification.

There are those, to be sure, who believe that what took place in the West was not so much a breakthrough as a breaking-and-entering, a kind of global grand larceny. In their view the West travelled (or at least started down) its road to riches by expropriating the wealth of others. This trivializes something majestic. The West has no doubt done its share of looting—perhaps more than its share—but there was never enough wealth in the world to account for the undreamt powers and possibilities the West (and those regions that have successfully borrowed from it) now possesses.

What happened in the West wasn't a matter of aggregating "quantities," it was a qualitative transformation that carried humanity to a new plane. Old-fashioned empires of which the world has seen many, amass wealth through booty, tribute, taxes, and enslavement, but this is hardly the same as emancipating imagination, energy, and potential. Rome enriched itself on the backs of its subjects and slaves, yet experienced no breakthrough. A metamorphosis involves profound internal changes that intensify creative powers rather than simply concentrating lucre. It is this Promethean aspect that sets apart the last three Western centuries as something truly extraordinary.

## **WESTERN HISTORY IS WORLD HISTORY**

All history, when of serious content, is good history. Standing along with literature as the greatest trove of wisdom about human affairs, much more of it should be taught in our colleges and universities. There are huge wastelands in today's desiccated curricula that additional history courses could fruitfully fill. The history of non-Western civilizations, together with the history of the relationships among civilizations, are highly interesting subjects in their own right, and offer significant and clarifying perspectives on that of the West.

What is troubling is not the rise of a new historical subject called "world history"—though teaching it with any degree of competence, and learning it with any degree of mastery, is a tall

order—but the fact that world history may be on its way to superseding Western history as the preferred non-American history survey course, and even as a history specialization.

This is clearly true in our high schools, where world history courses have steadily been replacing Western history. The trend is exemplified in student patronage of Advanced Placement exams. According to the College Board, 95,981 students took the World History AP exam in 2009, while 78,276, opted for the European history test—the closest thing to a Western history exam covering 1450 to the present, though not the Greco-Roman and Medieval periods.<sup>[2]</sup>

There is also evidence for the increasing popularity of world history at the undergraduate level. As Western history courses have declined in number, world history surveys have become more numerous. World history doctoral programs are on the rise as well, the website of the World History Association currently lists twenty-six of them. The American Historical Association's (AHA) 2001–2002 survey of history departments found more departments in master's and doctoral degree awarding institutions with world history specialists than Western civilization specialists. Indeed, in a subsequent 2010 AHA survey, Western civilization was no longer listed as a distinct field—although world history was.<sup>[3]</sup>

Yet educators who downplay the importance of students receiving a solid education about the Western world as a prelude, or accompaniment, to “global studies,” or who believe that such a traditional emphasis has somehow become obsolete or “ethnocentric,” or that education about other cultures and civilizations should take preference over or receive equal treatment with our own, or that requirements in Western history should be eliminated, reduced, or replaced by those in world history, are profoundly mistaken. They fail to grasp the real nature of the global civilization that is emerging and the need for students to know what's producing it. While it is surely absorbing influences from a variety of cultural sources, and will likely continue to do so on an expanding scale, its foundations lie in the Western metamorphosis. Without the West, and the remarkable advances in communications and transportation that Western technology has provided, any form of global civilization would be impossible.

In what ways has human society become globalized? It has been globalized through the development and expansion of an integrated worldwide marketplace, whose primary institutions of production, distribution, and finance are embodied in multinational capitalism. It has been globalized through the creation and spread of impersonal, rule-based bureaucracy, now more or less a universal feature of modern states, and of a variety of international administrative bodies. It has been globalized through the general acceptance of the scientific outlook, at least with respect to solving the material problems of mankind, engendering for the first time a planetary community of researchers and technologists. It has been globalized through the dissemination of common notions of government, founded in the norms of constitutionalism and democracy, to which, at a minimum, most states give lip service, and often a good deal more. Finally, it has been globalized through the evolution of a community of taste, high and low, knitting together the experience of everyday life in many parts of the world. In New York, Paris, Buenos Aires, Dakar, Cairo, Mumbai, Moscow, and Shanghai young people are listening to recognizably similar pop music, eating similar fast food, wearing similar clothing, and gushing over the same celebrities. Simultaneously, those aspiring to sophistication read Western classics, listen to works by Bach and Mozart, and attend productions of Shakespeare's plays. Even the sports the world

plays, from soccer to the events of the Olympics, are largely Western. Much of this remains superficial overlay, but it provides a greater basis for worldwide transnational empathy than ever existed before.

These commonalities largely derive from ideas, institutions, art forms, and folkways that were first conceived of, or grew into the prominence they have today, in the West. To be sure, some have their ultimate sources elsewhere, but most received their inspiration and definition in Greco-Roman antiquity or during the Middle Ages, and their characteristically modern form within the course of relatively recent European and American history. Other civilizations have been admirably creative, but none has had such a profoundly comprehensive impact on the times in which we live as has the West.

Global selfhood is thus largely a Western selfhood. If we're to understand ourselves as members of an interconnected human family, we must understand the developments *within* Western civilization that made such a universal community conceivable. Inescapably, that requires the serious study of Western history.

Champions of world history courses further argue that they are histories of the globe instead of just one part of it. And, indeed, world history courses might have justly claimed this special merit had they been offered, say, three hundred years ago or more. Then the world's civilizations, though obviously interacting, had existences far more separate and high cultures far more distinct than they do today. It would also have been harder to say which civilization was the most important or had the best prospects to advance man's estate. A course in history that—as world history courses now generally do—examined major civilizations in parallel, looking for similarities and differences and tracing their exchanges, would have made much sense, at least for those seeking a “global perspective.”

But that kind of world history is not the best history of the world *as it now is*. It is, instead, the history of a world *that was* and which, in many respects, has passed away. Even where the older world still raises an unreconstructed head, as with the recrudescence of Islamic militancy, it's been as much in reaction against influences from the West as something indigenous.

## **WHY THE WEST?**

Even if one decries Western civilization and wants to change it, there's no denying the enormous effect it has had on the human prospect. Nothing would be more foolish than to take it for granted. Other civilizations, Confucian, Islamic, and Hindu, have no trouble understanding themselves as historic entities, objects of pride, even of reverence. As such they serve as moral rallying points of great consequence. Unless American students also realize that Western civilization constitutes a distinct legacy within the overall human heritage, with immense attainments, they are unlikely to feel a similar sense of attachment or be ready to rise to its defense. A civilization unrecognized, or insufficiently recognized by its putative heirs, is a civilization at existential risk. Given its profound impact and overall beneficence, it would be a colossal tragedy if America's educators left Western civilization so exposed.

Humanity has profound decisions to make, some to be taken collectively, others individually. They'll be better made to the extent we give the coming generation an understanding of what brought them to their metamorphic moment.

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[1] Glenn Ricketts, Peter W. Wood, Stephen H. Balch, and Ashley Thorne, *The Vanishing West: 1964–2010: The Disappearance of Western Civilization from the American Undergraduate Curriculum* (Princeton, NJ: National Association of Scholars, 2011).

[2] College Board, *The 6th Annual AP Report to the Nation: Class of 2009: Subject Specific Results* (New York: The College Board, 2010), 33, <http://professionals.collegeboard.com/profdownload/6th-annual-ap-report-to-the-nation-2010-subject-reports.pdf>.

[3] Robert B. Townsend, "A Profile of the History Profession, 2010," *Perspectives on History* (October 2010), <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2010/1010/1010pro1.cfm>.

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