



## From Plato to Palo Alto

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Stanford University is embroiled in a debate over Western Civ courses — again. In the 1980’s, Stanford was at the epicenter of the collision between older great books curricula and new-fangled identity politics, a clash which featured the Reverend Jesse Jackson joining protesters in chanting, “Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western Culture’s got to go!” (referring to a course, not a civilization). After a generation in which the life of the mind on campus has been divided between leftist identity politics and technocratic social science in economics departments and business schools, old-fashioned liberal humanism is being championed again by the *Stanford Review*. The student magazine has launched a petition to restore mandatory courses in “Western Civilization” for all Stanford undergrads.

The champions of a Western Civ requirement certainly have the right adversaries. According to the most extreme versions of multiculturalism, there is no common national or global civilization, merely a number of exclusive cultures defined by race, gender, or sexual orientation which outsiders cannot understand and should not appropriate. While the excesses of identity politics upset conservatives and centrist liberals alike, an even greater threat to higher education is the elective system, which, as Irving Babbitt warned a century ago, denies undergraduates the benefits of education in a shared tradition by allowing them to pick and choose among topics, buffet-style, on the basis of personal tastes or ephemeral fads.

But the revival of a Western Civ requirement is not the answer to the problems posed by identity politics and elective-system smattering. The concept of Western Civ is confused.

From their manifesto, “The Case for a Western Civilization Requirement at Stanford,” we learn what the editors of the *Stanford Review* think that civilization is. As one might guess from the fact that the magazine was founded by the libertarian entrepreneur Peter Thiel, the *Stanford Review* equates Western Civilization with political and social individualism plus modern technology. Here are a few sample quotes (emphasis original):

Western societies forged literature from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* to Du Bois’ *Black Reconstruction in America*; technologies from the steam engine to the Internet; and

values like free speech, due process, skepticism of authority, rationalism, and equality under the law.

Western civilization, *more so than any other*, unleashes disruptive technology on the world; and Western history brims with examples of technological revolutions and their effects on warfare, politics, culture, economics, and poverty.

Values of rationality and empiricism inspired the Scientific Revolution, which in turn fueled Industrial Revolutions that lifted more people from poverty than ever before. Individual initiative, free markets with powerful central institutions constrained by the rule of law, and scientific advances changed the average human condition from perpetual poverty to economic growth.

Most of the individuals or episodes cited in the manifesto as part of the history of Western civilization contributed to the expansion of individual liberty, disruptive new technologies, or both. The editors cite Socrates and Galileo as martyrs to free speech: “They paid a price. But political events made room for divergent opinions in public discourse.” They invoke Britain’s Glorious Revolution and Bill of Rights and John Stuart Mill’s 1859 essay *On Liberty*.

Then there is the technological dimension, which in their telling is largely a matter of information technology, as opposed to, say, indoor plumbing or antibiotics or contraception or motors and engines:

Gutenberg’s printing press, developed around 1440, increased viral potential... In 1843, the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions merged insight and practical knowledge to create the steam printing press... Centuries later, modern computing and the Internet enabled social media platforms, which lowered the costs of content creation and distribution.

All that is missing is the right-wing historian Niall Ferguson’s trendy and fatuous claim that Western Civilization consists of a set of six “killer apps.” This is Western Civ as a TED Talk by a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute or *Reason* magazine.

The manifesto includes an obligatory disclaimer: “Taught properly, a Western Civilization course will not gloss over racial oppression and colonization.” But it appears that racism, imperialism, and other illiberal practices by Europeans and Euro-Americans were deviations from the main highway that led to the triumph of liberty and technology.

What we have here is an update of what Sir Herbert Butterfield called “the Whig Interpretation of History”: the idea that Western history or perhaps world history is a story of gradual but certain progress from the philosophy of ancient Greece to 19th-century British Whig values of parliamentary supremacy, civil liberty, and free expression. In 1998, the historian David Gress called this the “Plato to NATO” tradition. This particular Stanford version might be

called the “Plato to Palo Alto” theory. The road of progress leads from Homer and Plato through Dante, Shakespeare, and the American founders to the culmination of history in the Bay Area with its elite technolibertarian subculture.

The problem with this, and with all attempts to define an ancient, enduring Western tradition — or ancient, enduring, non-Western traditions, for that matter — is that the horizontal divide between industrial modernity and premodern agrarian civilization is much deeper and more important than the vertical continuities in particular regions, including Europe and its lands of settlement. The global transition from agrarian society to industrial-urban society is the second great transformation in the history of the human species, following the long-ago shift from hunter-gatherer society to sedentary agrarian society.

The novel social order that emerged first in Europe and then spread elsewhere in the last two or three centuries is best described as “modernity,” not “Western civilization.” Modernity succeeded older Western traditions — but chiefly by destroying them. Modernity emerged from the bosom of the older West violently, like one of the parasitic creatures in the “Alien” movie franchise that burst out of the body of its human host.

In *From Plato to Nato*, Gress argued persuasively that premodern Western Europe was a unique local compound of three elements: the Greco-Roman legacy, Christianity, and pagan Germanic or Germano-Celtic notions of honor. Liberal modernity of the sort celebrated by the editors of the *Stanford Review* in the name of “Western Civ” has long been at war with all three elements of the Old Western compound.

The central project of modern liberal ethics — be it utilitarian, Kantian, or perfectionist — has been to replace the premodern Old Western ethics of honor, in which your duties are prescribed by custom, depending on whether you are male or female, young or old, lord or peasant. The marginalization of Christianity, through its privatization and the secularization of public life, has been another major liberal modernist project. As for the Greco-Roman legacy, most Western universities dropped Greek and Latin requirements a century ago. Words like “citizen” and “senate” and “democracy” and “republic” are still used, but in ways which the citizens of ancient and medieval city-states would not have recognized or understood.

What the editors of the *Stanford Review* are calling “Western civilization” is really not Western civilization — that is, the civilization of ancient Greece and Rome or medieval European Christendom. What they have in mind is liberal modernity, which is not much older than the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. The history of modernity goes back only three centuries or so, not three millennia. Isaac Newton, John Locke, and James Watt are its founders and culture heroes, not Homer or Aristotle or Aquinas.

What is more, liberal modernity is only one of several versions of modernity. The cataclysmic revolutions and world wars of the 20th century were, among other things, clashes of rival modernities. Marxist-Leninist communism was a future-oriented, radically modernist doctrine

that claimed to be based on a science of history. German National Socialism was denounced by its liberal enemies as barbaric and medieval, but its ideology of pseudoscientific racism, which justified genocide and eugenics using industrial technology, was a product of misconceived 19th- and 20th-century biology and anthropology. Hitler and Stalin each believed that he represented science and the future, unlike bourgeois statesmen such as Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, whom each of the totalitarian tyrants regarded as quaint relics of a doomed, superseded social order.

All of this raises an obvious question: Why not just call the proposed course requirement Liberal Modernity, not Western Civ?

The supporters of the proposed Western Civ course requirement at Stanford would answer that because liberal modernity originated in Europe and its lands of settlement like the Americas, it is necessary to understand premodern as well as modern European culture. But this is not persuasive.

We use Arabic numerals, and the name of algebra comes from the Arabic language, but studying medieval Arab civilization will not make you a better mathematician. Law schools do not precede courses on contracts, torts, and criminal procedure with a year or two of the history of law, starting with the Code of Hammurabi and working through Magna Carta and Blackstone's commentaries. Courses in medical school do not begin with two quarters of premodern alchemy and homeopathy. If liberal modernity is defined by political liberalism and science-based technology, why not required courses on liberal political philosophy and the philosophy of science?

Even if there were a case to be made for studying the premodern origins of key elements of liberal modernity, why study unrelated premodern traditions? Modern natural science can be traced back in part to the atomic theory of Democritus and Epicurus. It owes nothing to the physics and metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle, which turned out to be intellectual dead ends.

When it comes to values, the ideas of democracy and republicanism and a social contract and natural equality can be traced back to some schools of thought in Greece and Rome and medieval city-states. But what does this have to do with the tribal warrior ethics of Homer or Dante's medieval Catholic theology? It seems rather odd to justify studying masterpieces of ancient and medieval literature on the grounds that they are affiliated in some indirect and unexplained way with the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. Surely Shakespeare would be worth reading, even if he had not lived and worked in a cultural region that later gave us the PC and the Internet.

A strong case can be made for a core curriculum for college undergraduates to serve as a corrective to the excesses of cafeteria-style elective systems and politicized identity politics. But the genre of triumphalist Western history, beginning with Homer and Athens and culminating in liberal democracy and free enterprise, of the kind represented a generation or two ago by

popularizers like Will and Ariel Durant and Daniel Boorstin, was always crude presentist propaganda. We do not need a Western Civ 2.0 in which the ancient Greeks and Romans and Hebrews and medieval Christendom are part of a grand historical narrative that concludes with the triumphant technolibertarianism of Silicon Valley.