

The Liberal West and Its Critics

From Plato to NATO: The Idea of the West and Its Opponents
by David Gress. The Free Press, New York, NY, 1998.

Gress offers an outstanding analysis of the intellectual and cultural wars raging over the value of the liberal Western civilization. The debate is not just waged in the halls of academia but throughout society in North America and Western Europe by virtue of the textbooks in use from the elementary to high school, and mass print media, including the Internet.

Gress's book will surely raise vociferous objections in many quarters on both sides of the Atlantic, but he offers one of the most cogently argued defenses of the liberal West in print. The book must be read by all with serious interest in the debate.

The author adeptly steers a middle course between ideology and polemic, writing in defense of the liberal Western tradition, for his arguments are judicious and a testimony to his sense of historical objectivity in dealing with so controversial a subject. As a European who has studied, taught, and published in the United States, Gress brings a wider perspective to the debate, for he traces developments in North America and Europe that are, at times, quite divergent. Chapters 7-12 are the heart of Gress's argument and his assessments tend to be cool and objective in tracing the evolution of liberal Western values and inquiry from the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Furthermore, he is remarkably optimistic

about the future, for all his criticism of the traditional vision of Western civilization taught in universities during the past three generations (hence the book's title, *From Plato to NATO*).

In pursuing the daunting task of comprehending the roots of the liberal West, Gress has put the spotlight on the shoddy, often emotional, arguments against the Western tradition. Many modern critics have deliberately obfuscated the historical record, piling up a litany of complaints about Western injustices against other cultures and promoting veritable hysteria over the West's alleged technological vandalism of the planet. The ostensibly skeptical outlook adopted by many critics today is rooted in a sentimental vague Marxism that, from the 1960s, has invested a moral superiority in the totalitarian regime of Moscow as champion of all causes of the humble. Ironically, the criticisms are moralistic, and often ultimately nihilistic and self-defeating.

This reviewer finds himself in agreement with the author on the weaknesses of the traditional approach of teaching the Western tradition, which was based almost ex-

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clusively on great texts often interpreted as universal statements of morality and politics divorced from context. The texts were presented as if they were great moments in the inevitable march of human progress that culminated in the United States of the late twentieth century. There is much that is naive, even wrong-headed, in this traditional approach. Gress, himself trained as a classicist, has raised serious objections to the claim that classical Greece was the liberal West in embryo, but Gress goes too far in downplaying the classical legacy in his second chapter, "The Battle over Hellas." There he argues from one line of current scholarship that classical Greek civilization from Homer to Aristotle was not the progenitor of the liberal West's values because the Greeks, as they themselves acknowledged, owed a debt to the older Near Eastern civilizations. To be sure, the Greeks had their dark and irrational side, and as polytheists, they possessed a religious and ethical outlook quite different from the modern Westerners. Yet even with these qualifications, the Greeks still stand as the parents of the West rather than remote ancestors—an issue that is still to be argued cogently by today's classicists. The Greek texts did, and still do, matter, for the West received from these Greek authors its poetic meters, sense of drama, notion of history, and philosophical and scientific inquiry. Above all, the Western ability to judge oneself in relation to others is first seen in the pages of the historian Herodotus. If there is a fault with his fine book, it is that Gress has devoted so much attention to how classical texts were taught that he has missed the wider aesthetic impact of Greece.

As Gress argues in his first three chapters, traditional proponents of the liberal West have been at a loss to explain the legacy of Rome or the synthesis of Roman, Christian, and Germanic strands that generated the medieval West. In my view, clas-

sical denotes more than the literary masterpieces of the archaic and classical ages. Rome was a full member of a wider Hellenistic Mediterranean world, and she drank deeply from the cup of Hellas. The urban imperial civilization of Rome was based on civic values that had emerged in the seventh century B.C. Foremost, the early fathers of Christianity—the decisive force in shaping so much of the West—created a brilliant synthesis of Apostolic teachings and later Platonic thought. Thereupon, Christian emperors and elites from the fourth through sixth centuries reinterpreted their Hellenic cultural legacy in terms of this New Faith. They carried out, as Peter Brown has argued, what was in effect the first "revival of Hellenism." Repeated classical revivals have enriched the West down to this century, and, in this reviewer's opinion, the loss of this classical sense among so many of the educated in the West has contributed immeasurably to their cultural nihilism. As a Hellenist, albeit of the Roman age, I am not so willing to concede in the face of Martin Bernal and his less than honest *epigonoï* the demotion of classical Greece to a marginal role.

The Christian "Old West" emerged in the aftermath of Rome, and Gress has argued eloquently that the fragmented Germanic kingdoms that emerged in the early medieval period were the synthesis of the Old West, a peculiar mix of Roman institutions, Christian teachings, and Germanic freedom. Quite in contrast to Orthodox Byzantium or the *umma* of the Caliphate (each premised on a single religious authority and culture), the Old West had competing authorities and estates that allowed for niches of freedom that transformed society from the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries. The Germanic contribution to this brew is still a matter of debate, but Gress's point is well taken, and Christianity, as faith and culture, in the

medieval West led to the birth of the liberal West—a point all too often missed in the traditional surveys. Chapter seven is recommended reading for the origins of democracy, capitalism, and reason upheld by the Enlightenment. Gress offers a perceptive analysis of the debate raised by Max Weber that capitalism and freedom were not simply the products of a revolution wrought by Protestant reformers, but a culmination of notions about medieval liberties linked to property rights. The liberal sense of freedom emerged from the medieval notions of liberty to enjoy property that was originally conceived as a privilege and was transformed into a right by the English Civil War.

Gress's last five chapters will excite the most controversy, for even in its heyday Gress argues that classical liberalism suffered from two weaknesses—an ahistorical sense of itself as a radical departure from the medieval past, and a tendency to reduce the freedom argued by Adam Smith to solely economic, even materialistic, terms. Hence, after the failure of the revolutions of 1848, many in continental Europe redefined their liberalism as free trade and the protection of property. Liberalism, in effect, bifurcated, for political freedom retained its importance in Great Britain and North America. This division has resulted in different responses to the current cultural crisis in North America and Europe. The weaknesses of classical liberalism, Gress optimistically argues, were not necessarily fatal, even though liberalism often was advanced as little more than a bourgeois ideology. Marxists called for the overthrow of a liberal capitalist order that exploited the mass of workers. Moral conservatives, such as Ultramontanists, pleaded for the values of the Counter-Reformation, and intellectual revivalists of this century have called for a return to a medieval past. None of these critics would have gained much head-

way were it not for the impact of the First World War and the Depression that led despairing elites of the West to doubt the moral authority and achievement of their own legacy. All too many stumbled into what Gress dubs the trap of totalitarianism.

Gress offers a penetrating analysis of the critics of the West, who are ironically all within the West (chapters 9-11). As the Cold War ideology eroded over the 1950s and 1960s, many Western elites forgave the USSR the sins of totalitarianism out of a sentimental mix of justice based on Rousseau, nostalgic socialism, and virulent anti-Fascism. Hence, the USSR never received adequate scrutiny, notably in conducting a European colonization of Inner Asia on a scale impossible for the tsars. Since the 1960s, Gress argues, the proponents of Western civilization were ill served by the "Grand Narrative," for they were dissatisfied with their own understanding of their legacy at the very time when many doubted the legitimacy and record of the West. As a result, the ranks of the sundry critics have swelled over the past two decades, numbering optimistic relativists who more often evade rather than confront issues, various post-modernist moralists in the garb of skeptics, those stressing a return to community or revival of an idealized medieval order, and pessimistic critics, even alarmist in the case of environmentalists, arguing in the tradition of Spengler for an end to the West. Many of Gress's opinions are bound to provoke sharp criticism, even protest. But he has argued skillfully and with a marvelous sense of irony, as in the case of the career of Carl Schmitt, a Catholic conservative wedded to Dante's vision of a sacred empire, who rationalized the Nazi regime and, by an odd quirk of his post-war publications, has been appropriated by the New Left. Even more on target are Gress's passing observations on the environmen-

tal opinions of the current vice president.

Yet, at the same time, Gress's remarks are a bit unnerving, for the reader is impressed by how so many of today's intellectual elite have taken to what Gress calls genteel slumming by denying the validity of the Western achievement and by mocking traditional survey courses that were pioneered by Columbia University. To this reviewer, it is as if many of the elite have been carousing with nihilistic doctrines to their intellectual and moral detriment much in the fashion that the emperor Nero first indulged his personal vices as an aesthete on nocturnal prowls in Rome, and then as an amoral tyrant. Too many of the West's own intellectual elite have come to despair of their heritage and merely repeat alleged wrongs of the not-so-liberal West rather than offer solutions.

Gress offers a serious response to current critics of the West, but even more important, he has issued a challenge to proponents of the liberal West to enter the debate. Foremost, they must articulate far more critically and objectively the role of the West, for only then can come the apprecia-

tion of the West's unique achievements, and so a means of meeting the future. The traditional approach, as Gress warns, was to study the great moments of the West based on canonical texts so that the resulting "Grand Narrative" proved disjointed and an easy target to critics such as Marxists, feminists, and multiculturalists (themselves the heirs of the radical Enlightenment and its totalitarian offshoots). At the same time, many of the West's intellectual elite lost their identity and sense of legitimacy by the 1980s and are ill equipped to answer critics, most notably post-modernists who have condemned with virulent moralism Western progress at the expense of the Third World and exploited groups within the West itself. In contrast, Gress has placed the roots of the liberal West, based on democracy, science, and capitalism, in the medieval Christian Old West, which was itself a product of Israel, classical Greece, and imperial Rome. Only with such a comprehension of the Western tradition can its proponents recover a sense of our cultural identity and retake the classroom and, in so doing, reclaim our culture.

