# *The Question of Western Civilization*

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## 1. A little context on Western Civ courses.

It's a relatively recent idea that there is a common culture embedded in something called "Europe," uniting France, Germany, England, Italy, Spain and the others, (or the "West," if you want to include the US) and that this unity can be traced back to core cultural values and practices begun in Greece and Rome. Some philosophers had such an idea as early as the end of the 18th or the beginning of the 19th C (Kant and Hegel, perhaps), but institutional support for it really only comes in the post-WWI era (the League of Nations). In very rough terms, and always subject to nuancing, we can say that, after a century of global imperialism, rising tensions among the colonial powers exploded in the bloodbath of WWI. The carnage of this highly-industrialized war caused a deep cultural crisis in those countries and a sense that they had to band together to keep themselves from killing ALL their young, rather than simply most of them, and to keep their colonial dominions in Africa and Asia. One distant outcome of this European cultural crisis, on our shores, was the creation of Great Books course at U Chicago, the forerunner of Western Civ courses like this, which were, to speak quickly and a bit harshly, to instill in Americans that we were the inheritors of the European project begun in Greece (science and democracy, as Kagan puts it), and that we deserved to lead the world in the coming American century. Crudely put, we had to take up "the white man's burden," as Kipling put it. This is of course a caricature, if not positively offensive. We could spend lots of time nuancing this sketch. Nonetheless, without invoking conspiracy theories, something like this was the cultural context in which Western Civ courses developed.

Now don't get me wrong: I'm not against studying and teaching in the rubric of "Western Civilization." There are lots of things that do indeed resonate between parts of our culture and parts of Greek and Roman culture, although not all of them are positive (patriarchy, imperialist war, and slavery to name only three other core "Western values"). Furthermore, I think science and democracy, as ideals to strive for, are great things (whether what goes by those names in our society matches up to those ideals is a whole 'nother story!). It's just that what we could call the "continuity thesis,"--again to speak quickly and at the risk of constructing a straw man--the idea that that OUR science and democracy come down to us in a straight line from the Greeks, is difficult to uphold. Leaving alone the fact that Greek women and slaves played no role in the political life of their democracies, continuity people have to explain the fact that Alexander and later the Romans were no democrats (notwithstanding the extremely complex case of the Roman Republic, the study of whose political structure in detail has destroyed the mental balance of more than one scholar!). Then of course the relations of the Christians to pagan culture as a whole, and their scientific skeptical outlook in particular, are very complicated, shall we say. If we then factor in the Islamic, Judaic, Christian synthesis in Spain and Sicily in the 12th and 13th C and the ways it influenced the whole later course of university philosophy, theology, and science in Paris, Oxford and the other cities of Western Christendom, not to mention the practical Islamic contributions to European money management and numeracy (the zero for instance), then the continuity thesis is severely shaken.

The challenge to the continuity story I just sketched out comes to the fore after WWII as the American academy undergoes a drastic transformation due to a radically new social experiment: higher education for workers, women, and "minorities." The GI Bill brought many thousands of working class vets to college. The 60s and 70s brought female baby boomers (no longer "co-eds"), and the civil rights movement brought African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Latinos/Latinas, Native Americans, and others. Still later the gay movement allowed students and faculty to be out. As all these different types of people start to become faculty members in

the 70s and 80s, they start to write books challenging the accepted stories. (They were also much more open to French intellectual works, which brought new methods and new perspectives to bear.) The result of this new work in the 80s and 90s is the idea of "multi-culturalism," the idea that the interesting things in this world arise from cultural mixes, not from cultural purity. This has not been universally accepted, to put it mildly, so we're in an interesting, conflictual, time in the American university.

## 2. My orientation in cultural studies

I'm not only a multi-cultural guy, but I also adopt an approach called "historical-libidinal materialism." First I'll explain what this means in plain English, then I'll give an example. "Hist-lib mat" has three components in explaining social, political, and cultural phenomena (including religious and philosophical ideas):

a. historical: the historical differences between different social systems;
b. libidinal: how social systems shape desire: turning people on by certain "triggers".
c. materialism: accounting for the order and novelty of "bodies politic" without recourse to external organizing agents.

## 3. For example, the beserker rage of Achilles:

a. historical differences: only in isolated high-intensity combat (capital investment concentrated in the weapons of only a few warriors) is beserker rage effective: in phalanx warfare it is counter-productive and selected against by group discipline; in guerrilla warfare it's similarly counter-productive as the emphasis is on stealth and mobility. These war conditions change over time, given the capital investment strategies of societies, so that, like anything else, you can't really usefully talk about WAR with a capital W, but only about types of wars.

b. libidinal bodies: certain things trigger beserker rage, setting the body off into that zone: but they're different in different societies: for the Greeks, the death of the beloved, as in the case of Achilles and Patroklos; for the Vikings, the sight of the decadent southerners; for the proto-Nazis, the Jew, the communist, the impure woman; for the GIs in Vietnam, all sorts of things, as the My Lai massacre showed. In other words, the beserk body has triggers just like the erotic body has: certain words and images make blood flow and hearts beat. Hence the link of Ares and Aphrodite

c. material forces: the economic system of the Eastern Med relied on internal class domination of warriors over peasants and on external piracy to do something with the excess warriors: only so many are needed after a few generations as peasants get acclimated to being dominated, but you can't have bunches of unemployed warriors hanging around causing trouble, like the suitors: drinking, wenching, and athletics is only able to channel a certain amount of the energy. (Compare the Crusades.).

## 4. A "multi-culturalist" reading of the House of the Dead episode of the *Odyssey*

After this history and theory, let's focus on the *Odyssey*. It's not true that multi-cultis or hist lib mats want to replace great works--comic books instead of Shakespeare, as you sometimes hear--but we do want to read them in new ways. So for instance, Odysseus' journey to the house of the dead in book 12. It's great stuff and wonderfully done, and it doesn't denigrate Homer to point out that many much earlier Middle Eastern works, including the wonderful *Gilgamesh* saga, have similar stories. Does this mean that the "stages of life" and the associated hero pattern, and the death/rebirth motif are universal psychological archetypes? I'm not sure. As a hist-lib mat guy, I'd look to trade routes for cultural transmission of such myths and to social systems tapping people's labor and instilling different trigger points in desiring bodies as explanations of the "stages of life" pattern. Thus the "stages of life" are not so much psychological as "social machinic."

Looking at the sharing of underworld stories by different but neighboring cultures reveals another way to question the continuity thesis, a multi-cultural way. We should look to the Greek world (the Aegean, Asia Minor, Sicily as well as the mainland) as open to the cultural ebb and flow of the Eastern Mediterranean, with Egypt (itself open to Ethiopia [another hist-lib mat story is the birth of modern racism in the African slave trade to the New World; the ancients were not racists, as Frank Snowden demonstrates in *Blacks in Antiquity*

{Harvard University Press, 1970}]), Persia (itself open to India [which is itself in turn open to China]), and the Semitic peoples, all mixing in a cultural soup carried by pirates, merchants, adventurers, sailors, scholars, diplomats, and so on. A rule of thumb: the interesting cultures are always in port cities: New Orleans vs. Omaha, for instance. Now I have no scholarly expertise to judge the claim that there is a direct link between Homer and *Gilgamesh* (or the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*) but it certainly seems plausible. If we can go with that and with similar claims--and while this is a controversial area, we can at least say there are many scholars who do support such work--then we can say that the Greece that supposedly serves as the foundation for the unified legacy of the "West" was itself profoundly multi-cultural well before the term was coined. (In fact, there's good evidence that the Greeks themselves recognized this situation, as laid out in *Black Athena I* by Martin Bernal [Rutgers University Press, 1989], a great and mostly misread book which despite some motivated claims has won guarded respect from a good number of classicists.)

Again, it's not that the Greeks weren't great, nor even that they weren't original in some sense: there really isn't much like Greek science and democracy in the ancient world--nor really again until the 17th and 18$^{th}$ Century in the European world for that matter! It's just that we should look for the roots of their innovations not in some "spirit of the age" or "Western values" that arise out of nowhere and then after 2000 years of hibernation are mysteriously reborn in us their "Western" descendants, but in the concrete social mechanisms of the Greeks and how they were shaped by geography, economic, and military forces, and so on, and how some of those same mechanisms were incarnated in later European societies. Thus for instance we can never underestimate the necessity of slavery either for the Greeks or for modernity, although we should also carefully investigate the differences between the systems (as we have already remarked, neither Greek nor Roman slavery had a racial component, for instance).