

The Crisis of Western Identity

Part I – The Rise and Decline of Western Civilization

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I. The Rise and Decline of Western Civilization

Western Civilization was birthed on December 25, 800 AD, in the chapel of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. Carolus Magnus, King of the Franks, was crowned Emperor of the Romans and successor to Constantine VI in an act that established Western Civilization as a distinct social, political, cultural, and economic entity. While the legitimacy of the coronation would be contested by the Empress Irene in Byzantium (itself the continuation of classical Mediterranean civilization), and continues to be contested by the Orthodox Church, the enormous consequences of the event are not. While at the time, neither Charlemagne nor the Pope would have considered their act to be one of a civilization's independence, we can definitively say the concept we name "western civilization" – the distinct social entity that united the majority of Europe and its colonial offspring under a framework of Christianity and Greek philosophy – was established in that moment.

It is important to remember, however, that while western civilization was given reality on that Christmas morning, its defining elements are almost as old as the human race. Christianity was a direct offspring of Judaism, a faith that stretches back to pre-recorded history. Greek philosophy is almost as old as the wheel. Generations communicate with each other through traditions as people communicate through words, and a civilization can no more be created in a vacuum than a man can be born in thin air.

Professor Leo Strauss was fond of referring to the two pillars of western identity after their spiritual capitols – "Athens" and "Jerusalem," the way of Reason and the way of Revelation. While the two pillars are often envisioned as having stood in a deep and bitter conflict throughout history, for nearly six centuries they worked in a harmony which made the nations of the West the most powerful and wealthy in the history of the human race.

Those six centuries begin in 1270 with the publication of Thomas Aquinas' Summa Theologica. By the time of the coronation of Charlemagne the majority of Aristotle – the first logician, scientist, and rationalist in world history – had been lost. When he was brought back by way of the Crusades, his work was deeply mistrusted, and the Church preferred to rely on the pseudo-mystical works of Plato. Faith, until then, held the ultimate status in Western thought and life. The Summa Theologica rejected the dichotomy of the two and instead worked them in a

masterful harmony. While there are significant flaws in Aquinas' work, his achievement marked a watershed moment in Western history.

Perhaps the most important specific point of Western thought was its understanding of human nature. With a metaphysics rooted in Christian faith and scripture, pre-modern philosophy considered mankind to be

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him” (Gen 1:27)

More specifically, since the Christian God is a Trinitarian monotheist deity, this means that human beings were understood to be communal by nature, in the likeness of a being who is both three and one simultaneously and in the same way. This has two specific implications. To quote Metropolitan Kallistos Ware of the Orthodox Church in America,

“Just as the three divine persons live in and for each other, so man – being made in the Trinitarian image – becomes a real person by seeing the world through others' eyes, by making others' joys and sorrows his own.”

And,

“I pray to God that your whole spirit and soul and body may be preserved blameless until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1 Thess. 5:23). St. Paul mentions the three elements or aspects that constitute the human person. While distinct, these aspects are strictly interdependent; man is an integral unity, not a sum total of separable parts.”

Such a philosophy had a practical effect in nearly every aspect of life. The State was considered an organic and integral part of society, rather than a distinct agency. Work Life and Personal Life were as undivided as faith in private and faith in public. Education was liberal and classical, rather than specialized and technical. The division of labor was considerably less developed. Today our conception of human nature continues to influence every aspect of our lives just as much, though our current understanding is rooted in enlightenment era individualism rather than theological organicism.

While the Enlightenment had its roots in the Italian renaissance, it is generally agreed to have become a distinct phenomenon with the publication of Descartes' *Method* in 1637. In it Descartes rejects the traditional understanding of human nature and instead grounds it on a radically subjective rationalism. God, Church, and Tradition were no longer the sources of truth; individual human beings using reason alone were now considered the ultimate arbiters of certainty and authority.

As the Enlightenment continued to develop, our understanding of human existence began to change. As community and integration were implicit in the Bible's definition of man as trinitarian, liberty and independence were implicit in the Enlightenment's definition of man as a rational individual. Though this definition became more and more popular, the fundamental integrity of the West and its mutual reliance on both faith and reason remained strong. Until 1789.

While the American Revolution had been a dramatic moment in world history, it is more accurately called a War for Independence than a revolution. The democratic institutions we would adopt had existed in our country for centuries; the concept of a written constitution was an increasingly important pillar of Anglo-Saxon society; slavery remained unaccosted, Patriot landowners kept their sprawling farms, political participation was limited almost as much as it was in England; the only element of society in which a true revolution was accomplished was the importance of Free Trade (and Alexander Hamilton would make short work of that before the century was out). In France, however, very little existed of a constitutional, democratic, republican, liberal, or atheist tradition. Society had been primarily feudal and Catholic throughout history. Enlightenment ideology had existed for less than two centuries, and was primarily popular among an elite class of wealthy and well educated philosophers. Yet in 1789 all of that was tossed out the door, the King was overthrown, the nobility genocided, a continental war of Republican liberation erupted, the Catholic Church was suppressed, and for a brief moment a totalitarian sect of mass murderers attempted to form a new religion around a Pagan inspired "Goddess of Reason."

While the immediate effects of the French Revolution were short lived, the country did emerge as the continent's first liberal, constitutional, and democratic republic. With America and France adopting Enlightenment philosophy with increasing speed, Western Civilization now stood polarized. On one side stood the champions of the New Order – the Republics of France, America, and England – and on the other, the defenders of Faith, Tradition, and Authority – Austria, Prussia, and Russia. This is not a post-mortem taxonomy either; the latter three formed the "Holy Alliance" in 1815 as a combined Catholic (Austria), Protestant (Prussia), and Orthodox (Russia) attempt to check the spread of 19th century liberalism.

The institutionalized political alliances of the two blocs would not last (the Holy Alliance dissolved in the 1880s, and France and England never quite saw eye to eye), but the socio-political and philosophical divisions did. As time went on they became more pronounced, reaching a fevered pitch with the unification of the German Empire in 1870. Yet still, despite the increasing metaphorical and literal demarcation of the West's two pillars, a central unity continued that made Russia just as much a part of "the club" as the United States of America.

That unity was finally and devastatingly shattered in 1917. In that year the Republican heirs of the Enlightenment and the Monarchies of the Ancient Faith tore each other to shreds on the blood soaked fields of France, while Russia committed a grotesque mass suicide in the East. When the war finally ended the Holy Alliance – and everything it stood for – was gone. The Kaiser had fled Germany, the Czar was a prisoner of his own people, and the Royals of Austria-Hungary watched their kingdom collapse beneath them. The West as an entity had jettisoned half of its very being in the bloodshed and began the year 1918 as a civilization defined by exclusively by Reason. Christ and Plato still remained in Locke and Aristotle’s new world, but as *elective* parts of Western civilization rather than *component* parts, and no longer as the definers of human nature but as mile markers along the road to the concept of the Individual.

II. The American Story

While Western Identity’s collapse occurred in 1917, the effect it would have on sub-identities would play out unique to each one. America, a liberal, protestant, democratic republic from its founding, had been born with few of the institutions of authority and faith common in Europe. Even here, however, an underlying identity outside of the political abstractions of the Constitution had taken shape between the Civil War and the 1960s. It was recognized that, to be *legally* an American, all one had to do was possess the proper papers. But in order to *really* be a part of the national community, one had to be an “all-American.” The image of the All-American citizen was an image of a God fearing anti-Communist middle class family man. This concept, which often served as the litmus test for social involvement, was rooted primarily in the union factories of the industrialized Midwest.

This began to collapse in the 1960s with the simultaneous explosion of alternative lifestyles, faiths, and political beliefs. In 1967, to be sympathetic to Ho Chi Minh was tantamount to treason; in 1969, an increasingly popular position. To be atheist in 1967 was cause for ostracization; in 1969, the cutting edge of youth culture. And so on and so on, down the list of traditional “family values.” Yet throughout this the Industrialized Midwestern middle class remained a bulwark of American identity and rooted our national consciousness firmly in an ideal, however much it faced competition from the new generation.

To the surprise of our all-American Joe Q. Factoryworker, the most devastating assault on his position did not come from communist hippies trying to seize the means of production. It did not come from blacks rioting in the streets of Chicago. It did not come from Russian invaders or Chinese spies. It came from the pro-Capital politicians in whom they had placed their trust and the multinational corporations who lined the pockets of those Washington insiders. Together they would greet the new millennium by crucifying the American worker upon a cross of free trade.

Free Trade became a staple of the international world order after World War II, but generally remained an intra-civilization arrangement until 1989. With the collapse of the Soviet

Union, the liberalization of China, the rise of the Asian tigers, the Middle Eastern oil boom, and the opening of India, free trade quickly went from an expansion of NATO to an expansion of the UN. Such a revolution reached its climax internationally, with the formation of the WTO in 1994, and in America, with the signing of NAFTA. The consequent gutting of the industrial Midwest left a vacuum in American identity.

Such an event in itself is not inherently a disaster. The idea of the all-American being a agrarian, landowning farmer was destroyed after the Civil War. The problem was that, in the individualist and rationalist climate of the post-1917 West and post-1968 America, nothing emerged to replace it. Political allegiance was no longer a part of an All-American identity – Communists and Nazis could each be “part of the community.” Religion, to, quickly vanished – an atheist and a fundamentalist were both equally American. Race hadn’t been a true test of citizenship or belonging since 1863 – a black and a white, whatever institutional privileges existed, were both Americans. The industrial workingman had disappeared, and the few that were left were not on equal socio-cultural footing with urban hipsters and Mexican migrant workers. Very quickly over the course of the early 21st century other meaningful markers of identity would start to vanish. All sexualities became regarded as normal; the idea of gender divisions came under increasing suspicion; the idea that even legal documentation was required became a rejected relic of a pre-modern past. Nothing set one out as an American anymore, not even the law.

America had finally joined the Western identity crisis.

III. The Crisis

Charles Taylor calls it “the malaise of modernity.” Karl Marx called it “alienation.” Pope John Paul II tells us we must relearn how to be “human beings instead of humans doing.” Sarte and Camus became international literary and philosophical sensations by denying that life ever had meaning to begin with. For the last 200 years every philosopher from Soren Kierkegaard to Alan Watts has opined on the existential crisis plaguing Western civilization, and suggested every possible remedy imaginable.

Such philosophers are not speaking to imaginary concerns, and the perennial popularity of existential thought is not without a reason. The last 200 years have seen a spectacular rise in divorce, single motherhood, sexual liberality, and drug abuse, and suicide, social isolation, alongside a spectacular decline in church attendance, conservative values, childbirth, and general social interaction. It is worth noting that for an individual, none of these are *inherently* morally corrupt – the particular circumstances of an individual’s life are not something that can be judged on the basis of abstract sociological principles. But on a civilizational scale, they present a serious danger. An individual functional alcoholic may be without reproach, but a civilization full of functional alcoholics is clearly dysfunctional itself.

The political history of the 20th century adds testimony to the reality of our identity crisis. While Bolshevism, Fascism, and other extremist ideologies came to power due to clearly identifiable political and economic factors, they were birthed in socio-cultural contexts. Communism was just as much a romanticist cry against the depersonalization of industrialism, as it was a response to class stratification. The Bolsheviks had a vague set of policy positions, but their pull was in the culture of the Party. Fascism was rooted in the bizarrely artistic revolution of Gabrielle D'Annunzio, and the National Socialist Party was led by a painter. The Messianic figure, the mass meetings, the symbols and songs and fellowship, these caused the success of the extremist movements of the interwar years just as much as the Great Depression and the patterns of global trade. They were an attempt to fill the void left in the Western soul after the catastrophe of 1917, attempts which gained success when economic prosperity no longer could cover up the problem.

The fact that this existential crisis exists, and the extremes to which people have gone to solve it, sends a clear and disturbing message: *the way we have ordered our entire modern world is wrong*. We founded it on an abstract notion of individual man, isolated him from his social context, deprioritized his spirit and soul, and worked our way up the institutional hierarchy to depersonalize, abstract, and mechanize every part of society from the elementary school to the State. Now the West – and America in particular – sits in the midst of the most abundantly materialistic and commercially successful era in human history, gorged beyond belief on everything from fresh water to simulated realities, reaping the untold financial benefits of NAFTA and the WTO and GATT and the UN and the IMF, with poverty at an all-time low and health at an all-time high. And in the midst of it all we have no idea who we are and our lives have never been more empty.

IV. Donald Trump

If we accept that every aspect of post-1793 life, from our prayer-less morning rituals to our unprincipled international political alliances, are built on faulty premises, then we must have a plan for equally comprehensive change.

The most radical plan for accomplishing this change – Plan A - is advocating a revolution to dismantle the Western political system. This is not a viable path without the support structure of the West – our vast and overwhelmingly rich capitalist system – also collapsing. As 2008 demonstrated, modern techniques of central banking make it so that this may never happen. Even so, advocating for such a collapse is not so much principled radicalism as it is a vulgar form of accelerationism, widely lambasted as one of the most dangerously deluded ideas in human history. Who, upon seeing a cancer patient, even one you dislike, comes to the conclusion that the proper course of action is to give the patient more and more cancer until they do us the favor of finally dying?

Plan B is to attempt to, from within the system, seize the remnants of traditional Western identity while cutting away the sickness of Enlightenment philosophy. Once upon a time this seemed impossible. While Plan A hinged on the Federal Reserve collectively shitting itself at the next crisis and retreating into a bunker, such a fantasy could at least be imagined. Plan B seemed in the same realm as imagining a new color. That changed at 1:16 AM on November 9, 2016, when Pennsylvania gave Donald Trump the White House. Even if Trump does nothing with that victory, it shows that no matter how mocked, scorned, reviled, demonized, crucified, and buried a candidate or idea may be, no matter how close to 0% the chances of victory, a (counter)revolution from within is not a violation of the laws of physics. And that changes everything about anti-Enlightenment politics in America.

But Donald Trump's victory goes deeper than an in-system shakeup. Donald Trump has directly addressed the problem of our identity crisis, and proposed a solution. "Make America Great Again" is a nonsense, gibberish slogan. It means literally nothing. What Donald Trump actually proposed was to "Give America an *Identity* Again." That's the idea behind deportations, the Muslim ban, the reindustrialization of the rust belt, all of it; he has located the most recent nexus of American identity in the industrialized Midwestern middle class, and promises to revive it, reempower it, and reenrich it. His border wall physically restricts the definition of Americanness, but also provides a symbolic walling off of other identities and a literally concrete manifestation of American distinctness.

There are good arguments that other ideologies besides Trumpet Nationalism could have accomplished this revival of identity. In particular, Libertarianism and Communism are compelling options. Libertarianism has the advantage of already being rooted in mainstream Western thought, and can build on the admitted successes of neoliberalism. It fails, however, in capitalizing on its ability to revolutionize the Western notion of self, and instead pathetically panders to the center by offering a simple list of slightly unorthodox policy proposals. Communism suffers the opposite problem; while it has had more success than any other alternative in changing our collective worldview, identity, and way of life, it has focused so little on even theoretically achievable policy plans that it often runs itself into the ground before getting up to speed. But while each has pluses and minuses, they both fail against Trumpet Nationalism on one crucial point: Ron Paul and Bernie Sanders lost, while Donald Trump won.

V. Beyond the Donald

Donald Trump's revolution is a critical moment in reversing the destruction of the post-1917 world and ending the Enlightenment once and for all. The restructuring of an identity, however, is a narrow horizon in the scope of political thought. What happens once a concrete identity based in the unity of the Christian faith and the philosophy of classical civilization is rebuilt for the Western world? Political action will, presumably, continue, and as all action must have an end so will post-reconstructionist politics.

Following the lead of Edmund Burke, and a considerable amount of his predecessors in political thought, the goal of political action in modern liberal democracies is assumed to be the welfare of its citizens. Such a concept is almost exclusive in history to these states. The Revolutionary states of the Soviet and Maoist blocs were dedicated to the furthering of the proletariat revolution; the Fascist states of Central Europe were dedicated to the establishment of a supreme race; the monarchies of pre-Enlightenment Europe were dedicated to the worship of the Lord. Liberal democracies have been the only societies to so drastically narrow and limit their horizons because only they are based on the narrow and limited conception of man as a rational individual.

When a society engages all of its members, as a fully integrated and unified society should, its horizons naturally extend far beyond a simple notion of 'welfare.' Welfare becomes an element of a much bigger concept of *greatness*. The specific kind of greatness to be achieved (cultural, scientific, theological, imperial, etc) is unique to each civilization, but common to all of them is the concept of bringing the whole community together in the pursuit of an end that transcends not just individuals but entire generations. Here in America our identity is rooted in the industrial middle class, just as the Soviet Union's identity was based in the proletariat, and so our achievement of greatness will probably be linked to industrialization the way Soviet greatness was linked to communization.

Considerable progress has been made toward such an achievement. But to continue the analogy, the Soviet Union also made great strides towards their goal. Both fell short by ignoring what the other was proficient in. The United States has achieved unrivaled commercial and industrial success, but not as part of any grand design. There is no unity, no purpose, and no meaning in what we have accomplished so far. Our identity has disintegrated and we have sold our spiritual homes overseas for cheaper goods. We have traded away greatness, and in return purchased prosperity. The Soviet Union mirrored our errors by having a clear and well-formed identity it could have conquered the world with, but utterly ignored any attempt at the material part of greatness. While the United States reduced human potentiality to matter, the Soviet Union reduced it to the spirit. The United States has created a torture chamber of souls to feed our bodies, the Soviet Union, a slaughterhouse of bodies to fulfill the longing of the soul.

A civilization must reject neither side. As a full and complete individual must balance their body, spirit, and soul, so must a full and complete society balance its body, spirit, and soul. This is the path to achieving the greatness instinctual in humans, desired by God, and embodied by the great Empires of the past, and this must be the conscious and directed goal of political action.

Just as the specific form a civilization's greatness will take is unique to it, so the structures and policies needed to achieve greatness will be equally subjective. Here in America we must begin an analysis and recommendation with the law of the land, the constitution.

Aristotle divides States into three different forms based on the structure of sovereignty: Monarchy, ruled by an individual, Democracy, ruled by the people at large, Aristocracy (more accurately today labelled as Republic), ruled by a group beyond a single individual but still a notably small subset of people. The list of great men who have taken their ship of state and built tremendous Empires out of them is long enough to constitute definitive evidence for the value of monarchy as a political administration that can achieve greatness. True democracies have rarely existed, but over the last two hundred they have sprung up around some of the great revolutions. 1790s France, 1920's Russia, 1940's south China, have all been examples, and they had certainly achieved a real – if short lived and widely undesirable – stature of greatness. Aristocracies and Republics have typically fared the worst in grand achievements. What body of legislators stands shoulder to shoulder with Napoleon? What council of representatives has achieved what Bismarck achieved? How many directories did to a country what the mobs of the early USSR did? Such bodies are not nonexistent, but they rarely exert the sort of glory common to monarchies or the might popular with democratic mobocracies.

The United States government was built to balance those three types of systems; the Monarchical, in the executive branch, the Democratic in the House of Representatives, and the Aristocratic in the Senate. If we are to preserve the Constitution, a powerful pillar of American heritage and identity and an important part of our traditions, while simultaneous limiting the country's exposure to the Enlightenment principles it inherited, some changes to the current balance of powers will be necessary. To achieve proper greatness, the Executive power will have to be strengthened to be able to provide the leadership any civilization needs to progress, a task currently harassed by the Senate and the House. In addition, the term of office must be considerably extended. What civilization can achieve lasting importance if its national direction is hijacked every four to eight years?

Since the basis of our identity as a nation will be found in the industrialized Midwestern working class, the democratic principle will have to be maintained without letting it assume complete control of the system. Keeping 300 million people all on the same track and united the same purpose voluntarily is incredibly difficult, and should the executive's power be usurped by the power of those 300 million, it will become impossible. Thus the House of Representatives should continue to exist but without the power to overrule or bypass the President on any topic, and with less legislative power. The Senate, however, as the basis of the Aristocratic element of the American system, must be stripped of any decision making power. The stability of an aristocracy is valuable in the cultural, social, and religious sphere to which it rightfully belongs, but in politics it serves only to hold back the leader and the people.

Before delving into specific policies, it is worth noting that no one remembers the Roman Empire as the greatest civilization that ever existed because of its land distribution policies, despite the fact that such topics were the dominant theme of Roman politics in nearly every generation. Issues of the day are just that; of the day. Temporal in scope, narrow in interest, parochial in value, and while not utterly meaningless they are certainly very nearly so. When the

world ends and the American nation is called before the court of history, it will not be judged on the basis of federal marriage law or corporate tax policy. It is especially important to remember that, however much issues of social justice might impact the groups affected by them, we cannot let our concern for our particular minority to outweigh the greater glory of America or the West. With that being said, such issues are real and are worth some comment.

Economically, free markets have shown an incredible ability to provide wealth and material prosperity to society, and have given us no reason to distrust them. They have shown an especially strong ability to fuel industrialization, which as stated before is likely to be the center of American greatness. Our government would do well to lower taxes, regulations, and other handicaps on free exchange. However, such policies must be remembered in the context of American identity and its source. Where free trade and free markets threatens the industrialized Midwestern middle class, the notion of a concrete and distinct American identity, and the achievement of greatness, they must be curtailed. Since all three are on the brink of extinction, strong measures of protectionism and constraint will be necessary evils.

Socially, the crisis of Western identity is closely connected to the decay of traditional values. The response of modern conservative philosophies, which see the state as a distinct entity of regulation rather than as an integrated component of a civilization, has been to legislate against such a decay. Libertarianism is more logical in admitting such a distinct and regulatory agency is poorly equipped to legislate on such an organic system as social norms, but is content to condone or ignore the decay of those norms. A conception of the state as an integrated component of our civilization changes the question; the issue is no longer one of which laws are or aren't passed, but which networks and relationships are institutionalized parts of our culture. What we need isn't to make gay marriage legal or illegal; we need to turn marriage over to a nationally accepted, State-affiliated social institution with the status and structure of a Church (ideally, such an institution would be actually be a Church, though some States have had success with turning such functions over to a political party). Drugs need not be made illegal, but the socially marginal institutions which deal with them must be suppressed. Morality need not be preached from the floor of the Senate, but State tax breaks, funding, protection, etc., should be granted to Hollywood studios which reflect noble ideals and provide sources of cultural strength.

In terms of international policy, our highest priority must be the reconstruction of a Western identity, and this will involve the longer-term project of instituting the Third Rome. God has appointed Holy Russia for that capacity, and it is critically important that we work alongside them to secure their domination over the realms bequeathed to them by heaven. Second to that civilization-wide goal, our foreign policy must be one that supports our program of industrial greatness. The acquisition of resources from Africa, the control of Atlantic and Pacific trade routes, and the securing of trade ports up and down the Western Hemisphere are priorities. China, as the other rapidly industrializing super power, is our natural rival, but since no one State can control all the world, it would make sense to divide the world into spheres of influence between them, us, and Holy Russia.