

The Cultural Connections of the English-Speaking Peoples

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Earlier this year, the American author Kevin Phillips published a book called *The Cousins' Wars*, which argued that there are strong cultural connections between the English Civil War of 1640-1649, the American War of Independence of 1776-1783 and the Civil War of the United States of 1861-1865. [1] In each case, the protagonists on both sides were very much the same kind of people with the same religious beliefs, political affiliations and economic interests. And rather than representing three distinct contests, the wars should be seen as the deciding events in a long process that led from the origins of English Protestantism in the sixteenth century to the global dominance of the American political and economic system in the twentieth.

Over three centuries, Phillips argues, similar sides were taken in each of these three wars. On the long-term winning side were the constituencies of commerce, industry, the maritime sector, the centers of immigration, the principal cities, low church evangelical religion, and the proselytizing middle classes. The long-term losing side was based on landed agriculture, with its feudal remnants and servitude, its hierarchical and liturgical religion, and its greater ratios of horsemen, soldiers and cavaliers.

For example, the American War for Independence, Phillips argues, should be regarded more as a civil war within the colonies than as a colonial revolution against the crown. The disagreements that led to it show remarkable similarities to those behind the English Civil War the previous century. It was a fight over diverging interpretations of the rights of Englishmen and the British constitution. There were comparable objections from small producers to the policies of mercantilism and Crown monopolies. There were protests by Puritans and other anti-episcopalian dissenters against the monarchical imposition of Anglicanism and Catholicism. The war was led by New England Yankees, the direct descendants of the original Puritan settlers. They reproduced many of the political interests, and even the political geography of their ancestors. The "powder keg of the American revolution", Phillips says, was located in counties called Suffolk and Essex (Massachusetts Bay), as well as in places like Boston, Norwich, Chelmsford, Dedham and Braintree, named by Massachusetts and Connecticut settlers after their East Anglia hometowns.

Phillips draws similar analogies in the Civil War of the 1860s. By this time, however, there had been waves of Yankee migration westward from the old New England heartland. This had led to the creation of what he defines as Greater New England, a cultural region stretching west through upstate New York, Ohio, Michigan and Minnesota to Oregon and Puget Sound. The American Civil War occurred, Phillips argues, because the intense, entrepreneurial, Protestant

Yankees of this Greater New England were at cultural, religious and political odds with the Greater South. Ultimately, Phillips wants us to see the present globalization of liberal-democratic politics and market-driven economics as both the fulfillment of the English Reformation and the irresistible emergence of a new imperial community of English-speaking peoples.

Now, in terms of political and religious history, I think this thesis is flawed by its assumption that the English Civil War was a Puritan revolution. Had he read the most recent works by English revisionist historians Phillips might have become disabused of this idea and might also have played down the emphasis he places on Yankee Puritanism as the cause these conflicts. This apart, however, I think Phillips gets the sociological inheritance of the United States pretty right. In particular, I was impressed by his insistence on the Englishness of American history, of how loyalties, grievances, disputes and terminology that originated in England crossed the Atlantic and played themselves out on the American continent not only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but until well into the twentieth.

The third volume of Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was published in 1781. At that time, New York was still occupied by English forces and the outcome of the War for Independence that had started in 1776 was by no means certain, though to Gibbon and other intelligent observers it seemed the dissident colonists would eventually prevail. In a footnote towards the end of Volume Three of his magnum opus, Gibbon comments on this contemporary struggle, observing that as far as the future of civilized society was concerned, it did not matter if the Americans did break with the mother country. 'Whatever may be the changes of their political situation,' he wrote, 'they must preserve the manners of Europe; and we may reflect with some pleasure, that the English language will probably be diffused over an immense and populous continent.' [2] Gibbon's history is not only a story about the end of the Roman Empire but is just as much about the development of 'the manners of Europe', that is, of the civilisation of Western Christendom that emerged from the ruins of Rome.

If we are to talk sensibly about the culture of contemporary America we need to recognize that the United States is one of the chief products of Western Christendom and that, just like Australia, it was formed by the West as a whole as well as by England in particular. The notion that the United States is some separate, alien or essentially different country to Australia is historically untrue. As well as a common language, we share a common culture.

Until the 1990s, discussion by historians about the nature of Western culture has been out of fashion for many decades but since the fall of Communism it has undergone a revival. One of the most adventurous of the new school is the work by David Gress, *From Plato to NATO: The Idea of the West and its Opponents*, which was published last year. Let me outline Gress's thesis, look at some of its major omissions and then suggest how it could be shored up by some considerations from English history.

Gress's book is an attempt to identify the chief causal elements of the historical development of western civilisation. He is arguing against an older version of this story that he calls the 'Grand Narrative'. This was created in the first half of the twentieth century by a group of American authors that included Will Durant in *The Story of Civilization* and William McNeill in *The Rise of the West*. It told an essentially benign story that saw liberty as fundamental to the West but

defined it as an abstract, philosophical principle devised by intellectuals and transmitted down through the ages in a series of great books. It said that liberty was born in ancient Athens, but subsequently honoured more in the breach than the observance. It was preserved not so much in practice but as a set of ideas until the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. It finally became manifest in the Constitution of the United States of America.

In his alternative version, Gress plays down the influence of Greece and elevates that of Rome. He emphasises that the West is just as much heir to Roman imperialism as it is to the Roman contribution to law. He also acknowledges that the Gothic invaders who emerged from the forests of Germany in the Dark Ages were not the negative forces they are usually portrayed but brought with them seeds of liberty. They did this, Gress writes, because they established monarchies based on ordered and law-governed hierarchies of nobility, security of ownership of land, and responsible administration that encouraged agriculture, commerce and useful arts. [3] I think Gress's critique of the Grand Narrative succeeds in that he does show how liberty has been transmitted as much through political practices as through books and thinkers, and he gives a much more historically grounded and credible version of the origins of the West.

He is also right to emphasise the Germanic role in the development of the West. However, in demolishing one myth, he creates another. I don't want to dispute his assessment of the Gothic era but it is not hard to show that, from the eighteenth century onwards, the positive contributions made by Germany to politics in the West have been thin on the ground, while their negative contributions have been disastrous. Gress confines his discussion of the major political movements in the eighteenth century to what he calls the 'radical Enlightenment' of Jean Jacques Rousseau and the French revolutionaries who followed him; and the 'sceptical Enlightenment' represented by liberals such as Montesquieu, David Hume, Edward Gibbon and Adam Smith. He largely omits discussion of the German Enlightenment and its two major theorists of history, Hegel and Herder. As everyone knows, the political and intellectual tradition that began with Hegel produced the thought of Karl Marx and eventually merged with French Jacobinism to produce the Bolshevik Revolution and its aftermath. Thanks to the collapse of the USSR in 1989-90, that tradition has now run its course and been consigned to the dustbin of history. However, the second product of eighteenth century Germany, the Romantic nationalism of Johann Gottfried von Herder, remains one of the major defining issues of twentieth century history.

Herder was the man who originated two of the most influential concepts of the modern era: cultural relativism and self-determination. He said that people who constitute a language group, no matter how small and undistinguished, have their own culture which cannot be judged by outside standards and which are authentic in their own terms -- all cultures are equal but different. He also argued that all unique cultures deserve to determine their own destiny -- every culture should form a nation.

Though Herder was a conservative, his ideas let loose on Europe the then radical concept of nationalism. Within a century, the wars of German unification were waged to enforce the idea that all German volkes must be affiliated to the German state. In the twentieth century the extension of this idea helped produce the First and Second World Wars. Under Hitler, its logic led to the extirpation of those who did not qualify as part of volk culture. In the Balkans today,

Herder's romanticism is represented by, on the one hand, the reckless pursuit of national liberation and, on the other hand, by the sinister euphemism of ethnic cleansing.

As well as omitting German romanticism, there is another problem about Gress's interpretation of the German contribution to Western culture. When he talks about the Germanic tribes emerging from the forests in the early Middle Ages bearing the seeds of liberty, he is including the Angles, Saxons and Danes who conquered and settled the British Isles. In other words, the Germanic liberty of the early Middle Ages was the precursor to notions of freedom on both the European Continent and in Britain. However, on the Continent by the seventeenth century, the political regimes established by these peoples had in a number of cases degenerated into monarchical absolutism. The most notable place where this did *not* occur was England. So we need an additional explanation to account for the difference between the political outcome that emerged from the Franks and the Goths on the Continent and their Germanic cousins in Britain. This answer is not hard to find. Indeed, among English and Australian historians it has long been the standard account -- the English Civil War of the 1640s. As a result of this conflict, the English Parliament emerged as the principal organ of royal government. From a country teetering on the edge of absolutism, England eventually produced a constitutional monarchy under which subjects were guaranteed liberty of person, property and conscience. The Parliamentarians of the 1640s, I should emphasise, were not revolutionaries. They were not trying to bring into being a brave new world but to defend their property and their age-old political rights to bear arms, to hold free elections, and to speak openly. In preventing their country from succumbing to absolutism, they were primarily responsible for the modern notions of civil society, a bill of rights and the social contract. They also enshrined Protestantism as the dominant religion, but under a system that tolerated other faiths. By the eighteenth century, English institutions were the envy of Continental intellectuals. The central argument of the *philosophes* of the pre-Revolutionary salons was that England, coupled with the Netherlands, demonstrated that societies that were freer and more tolerant became both richer and stronger than those in which oppression and dogmatism prevailed.

Both the United States and Australia are the direct heirs of all these traditions, that is, of both the wider culture of Western Europe that has been formed since the fall of Rome and of the specific political ideas and arrangements that emerged in Britain in the seventeenth century. Although the United States emancipated itself from the direct political control of Britain, and incorporated elements of both Athenian democracy and the eighteenth century Enlightenment into its Constitution, the underlying principles of its political assumptions derive from England, just as ours do.

Now, over the past decade, Australia has been through a period of extraordinary debate in which the option of throwing away our dual English-speaking and Western inheritance has been taken very seriously. This is especially so among the political elites, the national news media and the humanities departments of the higher education system. The argument that Australia should become an Asian nation, and that we should define ourselves by our geography, instead of our history and cultural inheritance, is still alive. Later this year, we are having a referendum over whether we should become a republic, which is a direct consequence of the earlier debate about whether we should become an Asian nation. At one stage, this debate reached the point where it was not only a live internal issue but led some outside observers to believe that some kind of

cultural defection was imminent. In 1996 Samuel Huntington listed Australia, along with Russia, Turkey and Mexico as one of the 'torn countries' of the world, by which he meant those countries trying to redefine their civilizational alignment. He noted that former Prime Minister Paul Keating was urging that Australia must cease being 'a branch office of empire', become a republic and aim for 'enmeshment' in Asia. Continued association with Britain, Keating said, left us a derivative society. It was 'debilitating to our national culture, our economic future and our destiny in Asia and the Pacific.' [4]

Huntington's book was published in 1996 but was written a year or so earlier. Huntington deserves our admiration because he pulled off an extremely rare feat in social and political science -- the equivalent of a golfing hole in one. He made a correct prediction. He said that the attempt by all these 'torn countries' to change their cultural alignment would fail. This was because culture was not susceptible to social engineering. Political elites who wanted to make dramatic shifts of this kind would produce an internal backlash and in democratic societies they would be forced to retreat. Huntington was right about this in regard to Turkey, whose attempts to Europeanize its culture produced a dramatic rise in votes for Muslim fundamentalist political parties. And he was right about Australia whose attempt to Asianize led to a similar electoral result by producing a new political party representing what you might call Australian nationalist fundamentalism.

Now, the Keating government was defeated in the election of 1996 -- in fact, it suffered the biggest electoral reversal of any political party since federation in 1901. In retrospect, this government appears to have been the high point of the Australian adventure with this kind of cultural engineering as far as the political system is concerned. However, it would be wrong to assume this is the end of the matter, for the question remains alive and well in other institutions, especially the media and the higher education system.

Last night, Professor Véliz made the point that the term 'culture' means different things in different contexts. This is true. There is the Matthew Arnold concept of culture as 'the best that has been thought and said'. There is the notion of culture I have been using to describe the underlying components of a civilisation, which are the principles enshrined in the political, religious and economic structures of that civilisation. A civilisation can contain many sub-cultures, including ethnic cultures. And there is the German romantic notion of culture devised by Herder, which refers to the whole way of life of a people. This last view regards Western civilisation as just another culture. As I said before, Herder's notion is based on cultural relativism and cultural self-determination, and for two centuries it has provided the rationale for nationalist conflict, racism and ethnic cleansing.

In North America, Western Europe and Australia, the historic track record of Herder's culture in fostering the most primitive kind of tribalism is today blithely ignored. In our own societies, cultural relativism and self-determination remain inviolable, self-validating concepts from which the aura of innocence still shines.

In the eighteenth century, Gibbon, Montesquieu and other members of the skeptical branch of the Enlightenment had made a clear distinction between those societies that had attained the higher plane of civilization and those who languished as barbarians. Herder's cultural relativism,

however, would have none of this. There could be no barbarians since all cultures were authentic. Today, there are very few Western historians who dare to use the word "civilization" because of the politically incorrect value judgment embedded within it. As Herder's most recent celebrant, Donald Kelley says: "Herder's point was that in contrast to the civilization of scholars and philosophers, culture could involve the whole people (*Kultur des Volkes*) and so represented the best road to an understanding not only of history but also of human nature." [5]

Within literary criticism, this concept has been steadily gaining ground throughout this century. In the hands of Marxist critics like Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, the notion of 'authentic culture' was merged with the concept of class, in order to let them speak of an authentic working class culture. In history, the search for authentic cultures produced what Edward Thompson defined in the 1960s as 'history from below' or social history, which has been the fastest growing branch of the discipline since then. In the 1970s, these developments merged with the identity group politics and produced the notion that women, gays, blacks, indigenes or any other identity group could each be shown to have cultures of their own.

The political consequence involved in the identification of so-called authentic cultures is to undermine rather than extend the traditional Western concept of liberalism. The aim of defining identity groups has always been to show how their culture has been forced to take an alien form, that has contributed to the suppression or oppression of their members. For instance, Richard Hoggart argues that the tabloid press and television produce a working class with consumerist values rather than the natural and authentic socialism that would prevail if only the workers could see through the false consciousness imposed by the media. And feminists have long argued that patriarchy suppresses the 'natural' culture of women. In fact, the most recent feminist argument of this kind was in a recent edition of *Newsweek* where Germaine Greer was urging what was once called female genital mutilation be redefined as female genital 'cutting' and that, despite protests by some Western women critics, the practice should be recognized as an authentic manifestation of the culture of the Muslim women concerned. [6]

Another Australian version of the argument from authenticity has been the case of Aboriginal peoples who are now identified by anthropologists and others as possessing cultures that are beyond reproach. Though these cultures are neither liberal, nor democratic nor even literate, their supporters insist that the cultural assimilation of aboriginal people with Western civilization would amount to nothing less than genocide.

To make an argument of this kind you need to disparage the notion that there are some kinds of universal principles by which human beings should live. Cultural relativism is necessarily opposed to any form of universalism. But in doing so, it conflicts with the basic principles of Western liberalism, that is, with the notion that there is a universal human nature from which flows universal human rights. In other words, multiculturalism is incompatible with liberalism, and thus incompatible with the central political inheritance of Western culture.

Our society has always lived with a certain degree of inconsistency and hypocrisy and history has long taught us that it is better to accept this than try to impose some intellectually-defined purity of policy. So, although liberalism entails universalism, this does not mean it should be universally enforced, nor should the promotion of cultural relativism be proscribed in some repressive manner. In fact, don't think opposition to the multicultural romanticism that is now so prevalent within our institutions is actually a policy or political issue at all, even though it does sometimes produce some bizarre political manifestations, such as the attempt to make Australia

an Asian nation. The contest is primarily the responsibility of Western intellectuals, that is, writers, editors, educators, artists and those in the academic disciplines, and it should be fought out with the tools familiar to people in these fields -- debate, reason, evidence, rhetoric, ridicule and the like.

The biggest failure in this regard at present is the education system, especially the humanities. This is true of both the high school and the university curriculum where the hallmarks of multicultural romanticism now dominate literary criticism, art criticism, anthropology and, sad to say, history. We are no longer educating our children to even understand western civilization, let alone value it. Indeed, much of the history curriculum now constitutes a litany not of western virtues but of western crimes.

Among those who designed the new national history standards for American high schools were educationalists opposed to the traditional notion that history should be disinterested and above ideology. Fortified by the claim that it is impossible to be non-political, they advocated a reversal of the traditional account of American history with its emphasis on the War for Independence, the making of the Constitution, westward expansion and the Civil War. Instead, they recommend a high school syllabus that focuses on how women, blacks and ethnic minorities 'have suffered discrimination, exploitation, and hostility but have overcome passivity and resignation to challenge their exploiters, fight for legal rights, resist and cross racial boundaries'. [7] Were it not for the unprecedented intervention of the Republican-dominated US Senate in November 1994 voting to prevent two government educational bodies from certifying these national history standards, a program of this kind would now be taught to the majority of American high school students.

In Australia, however, our high school syllabus has succumbed to just this kind of thing. Gender, race and ethnicity are now ubiquitous categories that students are forced to apply to most topics in the humanities. For instance, in the New South Wales Higher School Certificate course in history, it is still possible to study the political and military causes of the First World War, but this is an elective. It is *compulsory* to study the effect of the war on women at home, such as how they got jobs in the retail sector and how difficult it was under wartime shortages to go shopping. At the university level in Australia, the general story is that history is in a state of serious decline. There has been a deterioration in student demand to the point where a large proportion of academic historians have been forced into what is euphemistically called 'early retirement', that is, they have been retrenched. The total number of Australian historians employed by universities declined from 451 in 1989 to less than 300 in 1998, with the number in some of the once most prestigious departments being reduced by half. [8] Most who have retired have been those who once emphasised the importance to society of its political, legal and military arrangements; those who remain are for the most part multiculturalists, feminists, postmodernists or what are now called queer theorists. While some older humanities departments are being closed down, the University of Melbourne only this week announced it had created a new department of indigenous affairs to be headed by Professor Marcia Langton, one of the authors of the report into the so-called 'stolen generation' of aboriginal children.

However, even though the appointments system to universities in both Australia and the US is now being blatantly rigged by the Left, this does not mean that governments should intervene to

change this, or to sack the perpetrators. Academic freedom is one of the pillars of the civil society that characterises, indeed, defines Western civilisation, and is too important to override. You'd be throwing out the baby etcetera. As I said before, the best weapons are debate, argument and publicity, and for these we need forums both within and without the offending institutions. And on that note, let me thank the organisers of this particular forum for providing these surroundings and this company, which are a good example of how to defend and preserve those civilized values that many of us still prize.

Endnotes

1. Kevin Phillips, *The Cousins' Wars: Religion, Politics and the Triumph of Anglo-America*, Basic Books, New York, 1999.
2. Edward Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Womersley, Penguin Classics, New York, 1996, Volume Two, p 514, n 8
3. David Gress, *From Plato to NATO: The Idea of the West and its Opponents*, Free Press, New York, 1998, p 183
4. cited by Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of the World Order*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1996, p 151
5. Donald R. Kelley, *The Faces of History: Historical Inquiry from Herodotus to Herder*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1999, p
6. *Newsweek* supplement of *The Bulletin*, Sydney, 6 July 1999
7. Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1997, p 101. For a review and critique of this program see [Keith Windschuttle, 'The problem of democratic history', *The New Criterion*, 16, 10, June 1998](#)
8. *The Australian*, 30 June 1998, p 3, citing figures produced by the president of the Australian Historical Association, Stuart Macintyre.