

The real threat to western civilization

Right-wing politics are undermining the health of western democracies and the values they espouse

By Radical Randy

Neoconservatives such as Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper are known for their alliance with the Religious Right, but there is another set of values they often try to lay claim to in an appeal to a broader base. As philosophy professor Christian Nadeau writes in *Rogue In Power*, Harper, in a speech before the conservative Civitas Society, cast those opposing conservatism as nihilists rejecting tradition and morality and the values of western civilization. The defence of our traditions and values is a recurring theme among politicians and pundits, as is their attack on anyone questioning them.

Author Chris Hedges laments in *Why I Don't Believe in Atheists* that some leading secularists lined up alongside the faithful behind George W. Bush's "war on terror," viewing the invasions as somehow vital for the preservation of our civilization. Even future federal Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff took this position.

Strangely (conveniently?), those invoking western civilization and its values rarely specify just what they mean by this. By not identifying exactly what these values are supposed to be, neocons are free to include almost anything they want to promote, ambiguity being an old friend of the Right. This is especially effective since the public naturally has a general identification with their civilization. It is therefore crucial to examine just what western civilization and its values are—or, perhaps more to the point—what they should be.

Cultural and artistic heritage

The imperialism, rampant consumerism, racism, exploitation, and environmental destruction that characterized the dominance of the West have led to critiques and even a naive wholesale rejection of western traditions by cultural relativists. Some seem convinced that patriarchy, ethnocentrism, and war are exclusive to the West.

Conservatives revile these critics and those pushing for a more multicultural approach to education in the "culture wars" as endangering our civilization, storming the battlements of *academe* and throwing down the collected works of the Dead White Men from the hallowed halls of learning. In reality, the corporatization of our universities pushed by these same conservatives seems to be doing a far more efficient job of destruction. University humanities and arts departments, embodying our civilization's cultural heritage, are increasingly being underfunded and marginalized as useless, unable to produce innovations or discoveries for industry's profit.

The cultural and artistic heritage of the West (for all its shortcomings) is one of its crowning glories. Stephen Harper's cuts to arts funding combined with his notorious disparagement of the arts community during the 2008 election give a good indication of the contempt he holds for this vital part of our civilization. The CBC has been subject to relentless funding cuts from the Harper government, making it virtually impossible to produce expensive cultural programming, with calls from Conservative MPs to eliminate its funding altogether.

Universal rights

The principles we take for granted as enshrined in the French Revolution's Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, the U.N.'s Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms, derive from the 17th and 18th Century Enlightenment. A major characteristic differentiating western civilization from the rest is the stress placed on individual rights and liberties rather than conformity to the community and its traditions. This de-emphasis of local loyalties has paradoxically been responsible for the universal extension of the concept of human rights. The problem arises when neocons try to conflate this with the supposed libertarian freedom of individuals to exploit others or damage the community in the pursuit of profit at any cost. Any attempt to reign this in is labelled a collectivist suppression of individual liberties. In actuality, western-style individual rights such as freedom of belief and expression are fully compatible with responsible communitarian economic behaviour. Additionally, for all their professed concern for individual political rights, conservatives seem largely oblivious to any basic economic rights to shelter, food, or water.

The individual rights the West cherishes include free speech and assembly, along with freedom from torture or arbitrary arrest but, as noted in the Fall, 2011 *Parkland Post* article *Dissent: Canada's latest endangered species?*, these fundamental Enlightenment values are under attack here in Canada, primarily from Harper himself. The George W. Bush legacy honouring these values includes the Patriot Acts at home and waterboarding and the outsourcing of torture through extraordinary rendition abroad.

Democratic ideals

Western-style governments are presumed responsive to the will of the people as expressed through the institution of democracy. The Enlightenment values of liberty, equality, fraternity dethroned the divine right of kings, leaving the public good the highest goal. This culminated in equal voting rights and supposed transparency and accountability in government operations. However, as Lawrence Martin relates in *Harperland*, Stephen Harper's tenure in the Prime Minister's office has been highlighted by obstructing Freedom of Information requests and muzzling his government's ministers and employees. Hardly the transparency true democracy demands.

Both liberals and conservatives equate capitalism with democracy but the more responsive government is to the peoples' will the less capitalist-friendly it will be. The

spread of democracy, replacing dictatorial regimes, is the stated rationale for so many western interventions. As detailed in the Winter, 2010 *Parkland Post* article *And they call it democracy* the U.S. and other western countries have used covert and overt force to impose a capitalist, so-called free-market economy on countries subjected to regime change as if this were somehow equivalent to western civilization's democratic ideal.

Church and state

The separation of church and state is one of the most important characteristics of western civilization, with citizens guaranteed freedom of and from religion. But some neocons who extol the virtues of our civilization make a practice of blurring the line between the church and state, such as George Bush's replacement of government run social programs with "faith-based initiatives." And, as revealed in the Fall, 2008 *Parkland Post* article *Modern Islamic Fundamentalism*, for decades the U.S. and other western governments encouraged Muslim fundamentalism, resulting in its ascendancy over secular governments. Is this their version of promoting western civilization's values?

Right-wing politicians often attempt to defend their merging of church and state by accusing critics of lacking any moral standards, thereby contributing to the decay of western civilization, but this can be easily negated. As Harvard psychology professor Marc D. Hauser has detailed in *Moral Minds*, the basic human moral instinct seems to be innate. Empathy, altruism, and a sense of justice and fairness are widespread inborn basic human characteristics, an essentialism that transcends culture.

Conservatives hold up Christianity, with its emphasis on compassion, caring, and sharing, as vital to the development of western civilization. It is thus strange that while professing reverence for these values they simultaneously venerate cutthroat capitalist exploitation with the suffering it perpetuates. Conservatives bemoan the decline of civility and community public spiritedness while their icon Margaret Thatcher infamously declared "there's no such thing as society," just a haphazard collection of individuals out for themselves.

Science

The dominant force shaping our lives for the past few centuries has been science and the resulting technology it produces. Although influenced by Greek and Arabic thought, it was in the West that experimental science took root. It is ironic that conservatives such as Harper's neocons, while professing their allegiance to western civilization, deny, downplay, or ignore any accepted scientific conclusions such as evolution or human generated global warming they find inconvenient.

The western rise of science may be viewed as a special case of the more general development of critical thinking. This is also essential to a coherent, beneficial public policy. Unpalatable facts or consequences cannot to be ignored simply because business leaders demand a particular agenda. Wishful thinking is no way to run a government. In this sense, the continued idolatry of market-supremacy neoliberalism is itself a violation

of this aspect of western civilization. This economic model is based on the need for limitless growth on our finite planet with its dwindling resources. The ongoing failure of this system to deliver benefits to anyone but the rich in total contradiction to its fabled trickle down promises is ignored, along with the underlying frailty of the global financial system. Actual application of critical thinking would lead to an independent disinterested questioning of the system and the search for real alternatives that would serve the public.

This is a glaring example of the problem plaguing western civilization, as decried by Canadian author John Ralston Saul. An abstract concept (whether communism, fascism, or capitalism) is elevated to an unchallengeable dogma, with the only consideration being the most "rational," technocratically efficient method of implementing the ideology. An alternative, the humanism of the Reformation and Enlightenment, involves applying demythologized reason and ethics for the benefit of the human race. This refutes ideologies assuming the unlimited malleability of human nature to fit some new society. Ironically, this humanist flowering of western civilization is often subject to attack by neoconservatives and their allies on the Religious Right.

Make it worth saving

One is reminded of Mahatma Gandhi's response to the query "What do you think of western civilization?" The Mahatma's cheeky reply – "I think it would be a good idea" – was only half right. Western civilization, embodying some of humanity's highest principles and aspirations, would be a good idea, if only it were practiced more often by those in power instead of being used as a pretext for imperialism, cultural chauvinism, and economic neocolonialism.

A common criticism—the West's universalist "missionary" impulse, especially regarding human rights—may be partially blunted by the recognition of the innate tendency to basic human values, regardless of culture. This may be seen in the broad similarity of the world's major religions' precepts concerning human conduct toward each other. And, as Pat Duffy Hutcheon argues in *The Road to Reason*, early Confucian and Buddhist thought closely paralleled western humanism. Noted scholar Edward Said, in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, points out that much of the West's humanist thought originated in the medieval Muslim world. Recognition of these commonalities could promote a more universal culture.

The Right has made tremendous gains by appropriating religious values for itself, the better to serve the interests of the wealthy. We cannot allow it to continue doing the same with our culture and civilization, especially since the values it imagines this involves include furthering capitalism, massive inequality, and conquest. A worthy civilization needs worthy champions. Western civilization is in a sorry state indeed if it must rely on the likes of Stephen Harper, George W. Bush, and the rest of the neocons for its survival.