

Culture Wars or the Inner Clash of Civilizations: The Distress of the West

by [Christopher Garbowski](#) (October 2024)



The Edge of Doom (Samuel Colman, 1836–38)

For his first visit to a European country in 2017, President Donald Trump chose Poland. As a country that, after the end of the Cold War, having shed the shackles of totalitarian communism was now flourishing, it was an ideal place to forward the message of the values of Western Civilization. Standing in a square with a monument honoring the tens of

thousands of victims of the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, in his much discussed speech at the time he [proclaimed](#): “Those heroes remind us that the West was saved with the blood of patriots; that each generation must rise up and play their part in its defense and that every foot of ground, and every last inch of civilization, is worth defending with your life.” Inspired by their sacrifice, he went on:

Our own fight for the West does not begin on the battlefield—it begins with our minds, our wills, and our souls. Today, the ties that unite our civilization are no less vital, and demand no less defense, than that bare shred of land on which the hope of Poland once totally rested. Our freedom, our civilization, and our survival depend on these bonds of history, culture, and memory.

These words seem prophetic after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, when the West and what it stands for is once again under a serious threat from the outside. To say the least, the historical memory of Poles has been powerfully stoked. However, what was fairly clear in what the president said, were the echoes of inner tremors that threatened the West. The culture wars, first diagnosed in the United States but that had quickly spread to much of Europe, were now making their way in the country honored by the presidential visit; soon to be reported in a full length study by a journalist at the Warsaw Enterprise Institute in 2017. Culture wars are serious enough, and they have been escalating with new forms for several generations. But is that all that threatens the West from the inside, or are they a part of a malaise that is even more toxic?



President Trump speaking at the Warsaw Uprising Monument at Krasinski Square, Warsaw, Poland, 7/6/17 (Laszlo Balogh / Reuters)

Less than a decade after Poland joined the European Union from which toxic currents also flowed, political scientist and public intellectual Zbigniew Stawrowski published a [book of essays](#) with the significant title *The Clash of Civilizations or Civil War* (2013). In his introduction he discusses the debate between Fukuyama's "the end of history" and Huntington's "the clash of civilizations." But he felt neither author noticed the process that was corroding Western civilization from within that, in his view, had parallels with the communist "permanent revolution"—not that surprising given the fascination of a sizeable portion of elites, especially in Europe, with the Soviet system. According to Stawrowski, significant within this process "is the continuous reference to the basic values of the Western world, accompanied by a radical reinterpretation of them." He concludes this line of argumentation with the problem of the consent of citizens for

this process: “Internal enslavement and hypocrisy appears before us on a new and deeper level than during the communist system; a collective escape into thoughtlessness, enforced not by a system of direct violence, but by some form of soft power—political correctness, peer pressure or even fashion.” This was written before cancel culture and its ilk had grown to the extent to give “soft power” some teeth.

What Stawrowski is describing in part seems like two contrasting civilizations at loggerheads. What complicates matters is one civilization has evolved—or rather devolved—from the other. At any rate, currently far more scholars and thinkers have joined him in detecting serious threats to Western civilization. For instance, there is Frank Furedi, a British sociologist and public intellectual. In [*The Road To Ukraine: How The West Lost Its Way*](#) (2022), he studies the problem he regards as the moral disarmament of the West, and the weakness of the capacity of Western Civilization to engage with this problem—crucial at a time when the “peace dividend” has ended. Part of the evidence of the problem he provides in the book is from a survey in 2019 that shows the unwillingness of the citizens of many European states to defend their countries in case of attack. In the [essay](#) “Will Western Civilization Be Conquered From Within?” published two years later on his *Roots & Wings with Frank Furedi* Substack, he poignantly asserts:

The acceleration of the process of moral disarmament has reached the point that Western Civilization risks being conquered from within. The most striking symptom of this threat is that since the turn of the 21st century this process of disarmament has accelerated to the point that even within its intellectual and cultural establishment the term Western Civilisation has acquired a distinctly negative connotation. Their rejection of this term is not

merely animated by a commitment to Human rather than Western civilizational ideals but by a refusal to embrace society's inheritance of the legacy of the past.

Of course Furedi is hardly alone in noting the problem of the Western elite and their negative attitude toward their own civilization. What makes his perception interesting is it is the result of the clear evolution of his focus, that shifted from a primary concern with the culture wars to the inner clash of the now competing inner civilizations of the West. Again, perhaps not unique, but it is primarily on his example I shall study the phenomenon in this essay.

His approach to the culture wars—he concentrates on the European version—stems from his broad range of interests in which the problem of authority and what values make a national community flourish are most pertinent for his [study](#) *Populism and the European Culture Wars: The Conflict of Values between Hungary and the EU* (2017). Not long before the book was written, he spent the better part of a year in Hungary and was upset by what he considered the unfair nature of the media coverage and commentaries on the country of his birth. And this affected the focus of his analysis, in which the relationship of Hungary with the EU elite plays a key role.

Furedi prides himself on possessing a deeply humanist and liberal—in the traditional sense—perspective ready to defend those with whom he does not necessarily agree: “Despite my attachment to the political values of popular sovereignty, secular humanism, freedom of speech, and freedom of movement, I have found myself defending a nationalist, Christian conservative government from criticisms that I consider to be manifestly unfair.”

The author stresses the paternalistic view of the EU towards East Central Europe and the double standard that is applied to

the allegedly more politically backward part of the extended union. Nevertheless the greatest hypocrisy according to Furedi is when the "anti-populists" act in an intolerant manner toward the "populists" and remain blind to their own illiberalism. The author feels the term populist is a misnomer in some instances, but maintains it to highlight the faults in the anti-populist stance regardless of how their opponents can actually be evaluated. Moreover, the populist reliance on patriotism and tradition which establishes a continuity with the past, Furedi forcefully argues, is virtually anathema to the post-nationalist mentality of the anti-populists.

Furedi meticulously develops a catalogue of competing primary values between the "EU oligarchy" and Hungary: the latter uphold tradition, the former is post-traditional; Hungary fosters historical continuity, the EU cuts off the significance of history before 1945, i.e. ostensibly the horrors of WWII negate the value of previous history; Hungarians value community, the EU promotes diversity, subsequently in the author's view, "Illiberal liberalism has lost sight of the need to affirm the common good and prefers to deal with different identity groups than with individual citizens." At the institutional level there is the attachment to the nation state in contradistinction to transnational institutions. To cap it off the value attached to popular sovereignty for the Hungarian polity contrasts with how the EU places much greater reliance on experts, often disregarding the popular will of a national community. Overall the contrast is between the largely top down value system of the transnational institution and the elites that subscribe to it versus the organic values of the national community.

At a number of junctures of his argument, Furedi indicates that this division between anti-populists and populists and the different values they hold is not just situated on the Brussels-Hungary axis, but also internalized within the larger national society. At times the author stresses common East

European concerns; for instance, the injustice the countries feel with regards to the substantially lesser role EU memory policy has placed on the oppression they experienced under communism than on the historical horrors of fascism in Europe.

These different sets of values would not be the source of such difficulties if genuine channels of communication existed. However, the anti-populists hurl calumnies at those who differ in their visions of how the EU can be organized and what values it should support, labeling the populists, among other things, as Eurosceptics with whom no genuine discussion is possible or necessary. "There is no dialogue between the anti-populist and the populist," the author claims, "which is why the current polarization between the antithetical values is so dangerous." Furedi sees greater danger from the post-nationalist anti-populists who steer dangerously close to denying the validity of representative democracy. Conversely, he asserts, "[t]he experience of history indicates that popular sovereignty and the values associated with its exercise is the most robust foundation on which public life can flourish."

Doubtlessly some readers will remain unconvinced by Furedi's arguments. But what needs to be stressed is he has given the problem of populism a broader context, which some are already beginning to partially perceive. Most notably, in [*The Road to Somewhere: Populist Revolts and the Future of Politics*](#) (2017) David Goodhart looks at the Brexit phenomenon and draws some conclusions similar to those of Furedi. Within that extended context, what *Populism and the European Culture Wars* presents is the cultural discourse and rhetoric that at some level correlates with the democratic deficit attributed to the highly technocratic EU. Furedi observes that by imposing one size fits all solutions and not listening more closely to the voices of the new East Central European member states, because of their real or imagined populism, the EU is missing an opportunity for genuine integration that seems so elusive at

present with Europe mired in crisis; integration that could be based on complimentary values, if not necessarily identical ones. This would be a form of diversity in itself worth cultivating.

What can be observed in Furedi's take of the cultural wars is his elevation of them from the usual societal context that most scholars and studies focus on to the political communities at the national and transnational level—if the term is not an oxymoron for the latter. Thus his transition to civilizational concerns is a natural consequence, and has greater resonance than the specific case he presents. Significantly, even before the publication of the discussed book he had delivered a paper at the Living Freedom Summer School in London on 12 July 2014 entitled "In Defence of Civilization." He opens the paper with the question: "Civilization is an important concept that alludes to the legacy and achievement of humanity's journey through the ages. So why is it that in our era, the term has acquired such negative connotations?" He follows this query with the poignant concern: "And why is it that, Western Civilization is so frequently framed as a toxic destructive force?" In his paper the two questions are interrelated: because if what it is that a civilization stands for is misunderstood, it follows that those in the West who essentially misunderstand it undervalue the contribution of their own civilization.

When he published the paper on *Roots & Wings with Frank Furedi* Substack on July 2024, Furedi added that he was currently engaged in researching the questions he raised at greater length. The essay "Will Western Civilization Be Conquered From Within?" mentioned above is obviously part of that research, which has been presented in [book](#) form in *The War Against the Past: Why the West Must Fight for its History*, in the summer of 2024, where among other matters, he discusses how the achievements of human civilization are trashed. As noted above his claim that part of the reason for the negative attitude

stems from “a refusal to embrace society’s inheritance of the legacy of the past” is worth a further look from the perspective of the refusal to understand what creates a civilization.

For one thing, knowledge on the part of a society of what creates a civilization and what are its values are crucial. But this has declined in crucial areas. Pertinently, at one time this knowledge was derived from Western civilization courses that were quite popular in American universities. How this changed also has its own history. Most famously this subject was attacked in January of 1987 when during a protest at Stanford University students chanted, “Hey ho, ho ho, Western culture’s got to go.” They essentially succeeded in terminating Stanford’s required course of the history and great works of Western civilization, which simultaneously augmented a “multiculturalist” movement that swept across most American colleges, with a relativist epistemology, deconstructionist history, sprinkled with “imagined communities” and cosmopolitanism. In his report *The Lost History of Western Civilization* (2020), where that attack on the knowledge of civilization is presented, Stanley Kurtz, from the independent National Association of Scholars, maintains that “in 2016 came the return of the repressed, as the West, the nation-state, and the idea of America rushed back to grapple the cosmopolitan foe.” He continues: “Although it’s too soon to predict the outcome of this struggle, a lesson does suggest itself. Something at the core of globalizing multiculturalist thinking underestimates the persistence and solidity—indeed the very reality—of its national and civilizational antagonists.”


And indeed, even if this partly optimistic diagnosis is correct it is too early predict whether the West will manage to overcome this inner opponent; not to mention the question arises of how much the struggle with its inner counterpart will weaken the civilization, which will make external threats

more dangerous. From the latter perspective, the war in Ukraine and against Hamas provide evidence of how much is at stake.

[Table of Contents](#)

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