

Something Rotten in the state of the Whole Western World

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (July 2024)



Ruins of a Doric Temple, Hubert Robert (1783)

That something is rotten not in the state of Denmark, but in that of the whole of the western world, has become almost a truism. Even countries that were previously contented to the point of complacency, such as Sweden, now suffer from severe angst. Under no external compulsion or moral obligation to do so, the latter created an insoluble problem for itself by allowing, or even encouraging, an alien population to settle in it. If reports are to be believed, there are now 'no-go' areas in some Swedish cities, unthinkable before, and areas to

which no Swede will willingly go; certainly, the statistics of crime in Sweden seem to bear out reports of a profound change in Swedish society.

Perhaps part of the problem was moral grandiosity: Sweden thought that it was such a beacon to the world that it could demonstrate that it was able to do what other countries had found it difficult to do, namely assimilate successfully such an alien population. The beauty of its society would mean that anyone arriving in it would wish to assimilate as soon as possible, and would be able to do so.

But I think that there was more to it than mere grandiosity, something deeper and more general in Europe as a whole, at least among what might be called the intellectual classes: namely a loss of the right of Europe to exist as a civilisation except as an object of criticism, reprehension and even hatred, the reasons for which loss are no doubt multiple and impossible to designate with absolute certainty. I shall make only a few tentative suggestions.

The first is the history of Europe in the twentieth century, which decisively cast doubt on any Whig interpretation of history according to which the inevitable direction of history was that of progress, at least in its moral dimension. There is no historical event from which the wrong conclusion may not be drawn, but it is surely understandable that the mass slaughter of the First World War led many reflective people to the conclusion that there was something profoundly wrong with a civilisation that brought such a cataclysm about. The fact that other civilisations usually bring about such cataclysms as they are technically able to bring about was largely ignored, so great was the immediate impact of the First World War on the historical memory.

Even worse, it turned out that the war to end all war did no such thing, rather the reverse: it made the next cataclysm inevitable. In a certain respect the next cataclysm was even

worse: at least most deaths in the first war were either military or the unwanted side-effects of such war such as hunger and disease, whereas in the second the elimination of whole populations was directly aimed at. And this was without even counting the terrible depredations of communism (another European product).

Then, of course, there was European colonialism, attitudes towards which underwent a sea-change with decolonisation. The supposed *mission civilisatrice*, bringing enlightenment to the supposedly lower races or cultures, turned into its mirror image, a phenomenon wholly negative, destructive, cruel, rapacious, exploitative and murderous. The wealth of Europe was now thought to be based solely on the enslavement or expropriation, *de jure* or *de facto*, of non-European peoples. 'If such a one be fit to govern, speak,' says Malcolm to Macduff. 'Fit to govern?' replies Macduff. 'No, not to live.'

If it be objected that Sweden neither took part in the two World Wars, nor was a colonising power, except to a brief and minimal extent, it might be replied that its part in the second war was less than heroic and it profited from both; moreover, that if it was not a colonising power itself, it participated fully in, and benefited from, the world economic system of which colonialism was a crucial part.

Curiously, this self-denigration is not incompatible with the moral grandiosity to which I have alluded, for where crime is great, the duty of restitution, repentance and reform is great also. There is no one more grandiose, or likely to consider himself a beacon to the world than a reformed sinner who promises from now on to conduct himself impeccably. The greater the sinner, the greater the saint, may as doctrine be sentimental claptrap—does not the possibility of becoming a saint later in life not encourage earlier sinning?—but yet we cannot quite rid ourselves of the notion. And European countries, or their directing elites, having sinned mightily by inheritance, have now entered the autosanctification stage.

From now on, they must be better than good, even if such goodness were to destroy them.

Needless to say, this historiography, that leads to grandiose self-abnegation, is not without plausibility. After all, recent European history, and that of its civilisation, has been disastrous. The point, however, is that it has not been *just* disastrous. If there was horrible crime, there was also great achievement—from which everyone in the world, not least including ourselves, has benefited.

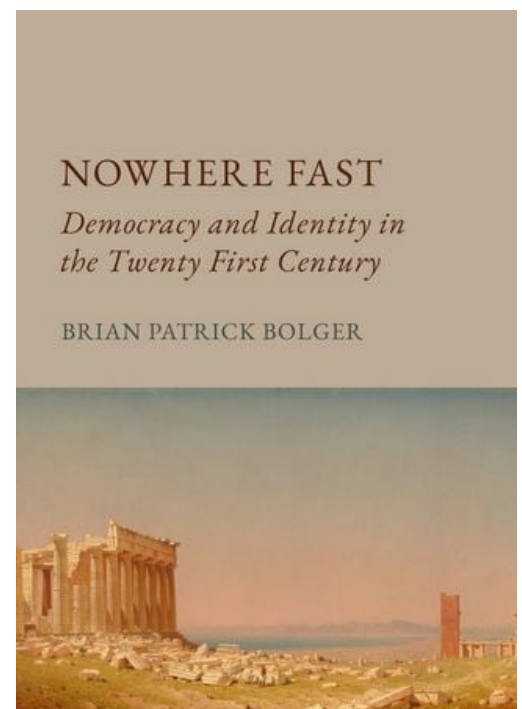
But the historiography of shame has triumphed, as once that of progress triumphed, at least in the minds of the educated elite, a class very much larger than it once was. It takes pride in its shame, which guarantees them an important place in the world despite the evident relative decline of their nations. If they can no longer be part of a civilisation responsible for all the good in the world, they can at least be part of a civilisation that is, or has been, responsible for all the bad in it. And as every psychologist knows, most people would rather be bad than insignificant.

No civilisation can long withstand the kind of relentless self-criticism to which Europeans now, albeit with much bad faith and insincerity, subject their civilisation, and which they have successfully communicated to the rest of the world. The self-hatred insinuates itself everywhere: cowardly museum curators often now feel it necessary in annotations to eighteenth century paintings or *objets d'art* to draw attention to the fact that such-and-such a commodity or object was produced by or made possible (perhaps) by slave labour. They are terrified of the monstrous regiment of the self-righteous self-haters.

I once heard a German refused to admit that he was a German, claiming merely to be a generic European, so great was his sense of national shame. On another occasion, the head of a German forestry company told me that when someone suggested

Timber with Pride (Holz mit Stolz) as a company motto, a long discussion followed as to whether pride was not the first step down the slippery slope to Auschwitz. I do not want to minimise the horrors of the Nazi regime (from which, by the way, my mother was a refugee), indeed it was responsible for many of our identity problems today, but it seems to me that no civilisation or cultural identity can long survive such a prolonged assault on itself on the grounds of its past crimes. The slightest avowal of cultural pride or attempt at self-defence is now equated with the horrors of Nazism: for if you claim a national identity worth defending, it is now often assumed that you are, *ex officio*, a xenophobe who roams the streets looking for foreigners to attack and that you long for the days when your country invaded other countries, oppressed and exploited them. Attitudes to other cultures are a lot more forgiving: *their* crimes are explicable and excusable, if acknowledged at all.

I recently read Brian Patrick Bolger's *Nowhere Fast: Democracy and Identity in the Twenty First Century* (Ethics Press). Mr Bolger, in this book about the existential impasse in which the whole of the occident now finds itself, or rather has created for itself, devotes much attention to the difficult and contentious issue of identity. He does justice to its complexity. There is the Scylla of the absolute freedom of the individual as once espoused by Jean-Paul Sartre, in which humans are like particles in Brownian motion, always choosing for themselves, and the Charybdis of the denial of all individuality because it is subsumed by a collective identity.



The dilemma seems a false one to me. I have little choice but

to write in English, my mother tongue, and my command of other languages is not sufficient to be able to write in any of them. But the fact that I must express myself in English if I am to express myself at all, does not determine *what* I express. The miracle of language is that, while rule-governed, it is also infinite in what it can express. Those who say that grammar limits freedom are mistaken: grammar is a precondition of freedom.

But in the modern world, our identities are complex and not only hierarchical, but in a constantly changing, almost shimmering hierarchy. For example, among doctors, I am mainly a doctor; among writers, mainly a writer; when I walk in my town I am mainly a townsman—or, as I suppose I must put it these days, a townsperson. In a pub, I am a drinker.

As to my nationality, I am English and British (which are not the same), but this does not mean that I necessarily feel more at ease with my fellow-countrymen (or countrypersons) than with foreigners. I know many foreigners with whom I have far more in common than with, say, the young English people who gather on Saturday nights in a pub not far from me and whose braying, which could as well be that of a riot as of a party, frightens me by its uncouth stupidity. And yet, at the same time, I have at some level or other more in common with them than with the aforementioned foreigners.

Adding to the complexity, of course, is the increasing presence of immigrants from the four corners of the world, in some cases in numbers sufficient to form societies apart, for whom integration, let alone assimilation, is not necessary. Indeed, there are those who are opposed to such integration or assimilation, because it is to impose the host country's culture on people to whom it is alien, and a variety of cultures is said to conduce to creativity (as if it had been lacking before). Thus our large cities come to resemble caravanserais, places where people take shelter but do not really live together. So far, it must be admitted, there has

been remarkably little violent friction as a result, apart from instances of terrorism; day to day, people seem to rub along together. So far, however, it seems to me that the enormous cultural benefits of such promiscuous admixture, touted by those who celebrate it, has yet to appear. We do not live in a golden age of art or music or literature or architecture, very far from it. Our age is barren except in science and technology.

But in any case, I think there is an undercurrent of tension or anxiety which gives everyone the impression of walking on eggshells. Where you live merely side by side with people, without really knowing what pleases or offends them, without having many cultural references in common, you have the subliminal feeling always of walking on eggshells. It is a mistake, moreover, to imagine that all minorities live in perfect harmony merely by virtue of their minority status. The history of the world hardly suggests that that would be likely, and hatreds endure in new surroundings.

I would not like to be taken as a xenophobe, all the more so since I am myself the product of immigration and I live half the time in a country that is not my own, so far without difficulties. A leavening of foreigners is obviously good; they, the foreigners, often contribute disproportionately to the culture to which they emigrate. But this is not what we have now, when balkanisation of sensibility, not only of nationality but of sexual orientation and proclivity, disability, religion, and political views is in the process not only of dissolving things held in common, but of the very possibility of holding anything in common. And I do not think that this a recipe long-term for a viable society.

I have not yet even mentioned the economic and political divisions in western society, irrespective of cultural balkanisation, that so weaken it, and make it vulnerable to outside attack, to which Mr Bolger alludes in his book. Perhaps I will return to economic matters later.

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are [*Neither Trumpets nor Violins*](#) (with Kenneth Francis and Samuel Hux) and [*Ramses: A Memoir*](#) from New English Review Press.

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