

What Is “Western Civilization”?

by [Stephen Baskerville](#) (June 2025)



The Song of Love (Giorgio de Chirico, 1914)

Dutch historian Hans Vogel has written a short but stimulating essay titled simply, "[Western Civilization](#)," summarizing the accepted wisdom about what it is. The simplicity and boldness of the title reflects his inclusion of only a few high points that are taken to define Western Civilization, though I believe he has identified essential ones, and he presents them in terms that I find helpful for critiquing some basic assumptions. It is not clear how far he himself accepts the definition he presents; he seems to have doubts. Perhaps my own may help clarify matters.

The argument he summarizes is widely accepted, to the point of dominating our self-image in the West. But I think it is misleading. Moreover, it is debilitating: It traps us in a paradigm that limits our freedom of action. More specifically, it serves the interest of today's ideological elites—both the now-dominant liberal-left establishment and the official conservative opposition—and impedes the rest of us from breaking free of the limited, one-dimensional range of options they construct. I will suggest an alternative.

He starts with the interesting and plausible observation that the very term and concept of "Western Civilization" is an American invention and serves "the idea that the United States forms an integrated part of the Western world as its undisputed leader." (Though arguably it elevates the entire Anglosphere, since Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and possibly South Africa and Israel have claims to be included, perhaps to some extent with Anglophone nations elsewhere, and England itself has traditionally distanced itself from "Europe.")

Yet then he immediately suggests that the United States deserves inclusion in that world (at least pre-1941) only "for the significance of the 'American Revolution' of 1776." He then boldly declares (whether on behalf of himself or the case

he is summarizing, again, is not clear) the pivotal point of the essay: "The US is not a part of Western Civilization, since unlike the rest of the world, it was not affected by the French Revolution of 1789 and the process of overall modernization of the Western world that resulted from it." Elaborating:

It is precisely the French Revolution that defines the West today, and according to this view...of all the countries in the world, only the US is unaffected by the French Revolution and what is more, it wholeheartedly has been rejecting all of its tenets ever since the end of the 18th century.

This specific observation is not only widely shared but potentially self-actualizing: If we believe fervently enough that the French Revolution (and "American exceptionalism" from it) is the defining criterion of our civilization, then by that belief itself we endow it with such importance. But the reason for wishing this to be so is that it facilitates the collusion between Left and Right elites around a certain understanding of ideological politics.

Now I certainly do agree with the principle that modernity begins with the arrival of radical and revolutionary politics. Radical ideology is a defining feature of the modern world, distinguishing it from the middle ages and antiquity. But the assumption that the French Revolution marks that arrival does not necessarily follow.

First, I am not sure why the American Revolution does not have an equal claim to have defined the process of "overall modernization of the Western world." But more, distinguishing the two revolutions so sharply is factually inaccurate. The American Revolution was driven, in large part, by the same

Republican ideology that drove the French and that dominated radical thinking at the time.^[1] Their proximity to one another was no accident. If their outcomes were vastly different, that can be accounted for (soon). The American Revolution played a central role in inspiring and sparking the French, and its leading instigators, most notably Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine, also played key roles in France. If the dominant American (and larger Anglophone) culture came to distance itself from the French Revolution, that too may have served the needs of elites, who may well project that divergence retroactively. If Anglo-American political culture has been largely immune to the allure of Jacobinism-Marxism, it is not free from all radical ideology.

The larger problem with attributing primacy to the French (or American) Revolution becomes clear if we go back and trace what connects the two. To begin with, they were not the first revolutions in modern history. They shared a common origin in the English Revolution of the previous century, which exerted a profound effect on both, and both revolutions are inconceivable and incomprehensible without understanding the English.

Its seminal importance becomes strikingly clear if we ask the most basic question: [Why is there a Left?](#)

The Origins of the Left

Most people seem to believe, or simply assume, that confrontation between the “Left” and “Right” is natural and will always exist. But both are historically specific and reifiable phenomena that require explanation.

Leftist or radical politics has a specific historical origin that can be identified and examined in its own right, apart from the grievances it voices and agenda it pursues at any

given moment. The conventional wisdom and standard conservative narrative simply assumes, without arguing, that the Left began with the French Revolution (when the terms “Left” and “Right” did originate). Yet even if true, that does not explain the emergence of a new kind of politics that did not exist in the ancient or medieval worlds: *radical* and *revolutionary* politics.

In any case, the world’s first revolution was in England, and it took a form that makes today’s liberal and liberalized elites uncomfortable and that no one therefore wishes to confront. It was [English Puritans](#) who invented the modern revolution.^[2]

This truth threatens professional politicians of all sympathies, and their immediate reflex is to invoke its most significant feature, not to elucidate it, but as an excuse to simply dismiss it out of hand, as unworthy of further discussion: that the ideology driving it was “religious.” English conservatives are unaccustomed to the notion of revolutionary politics in England, let alone the suggestion that England invented political radicalism. Americans likewise are uncomfortable at the thought that religious radicals founded what became the United States—a blind spot that seriously impedes understanding of their own origins. But undeniably, Puritan radicals began populating New England just as their comrades back in Old England were perpetrating the world’s first revolution. Their successors then agitated for the world’s next revolution in America, far surpassing in numbers (and possibly influence) the Enlightenment figures we venerate as our “Founding Fathers.”

Westerners do not understand [radical religion](#), which is ironic because we invented it. Here a conspiracy of silence now operates between Left and Right, neither of whom wish to confront any of this. The Left is embarrassed by its religious pedigree and wants to forget it, and the Right is reluctant to

accept Christianity's radical past and its role in inventing and fomenting revolutionary politics.

Yet the latter, at least, do acknowledge its truth backhandedly. Leftist ideology is often depicted by its detractors as a [secular religion](#), replete with its own dogmas, heresies, and inquisitors. A historical reality undergirds this characterization, and lies behind the Left's continued missionary zeal. Political radicalism originated in [religious radicalism](#).

This perspective changes the equation fundamentally. For one thing, it accounts for several anomalies that Vogel observes: the "most significant" of which is that the US is a "theocracy" –precisely what the Puritan radicals intended it to be—and that other such "theocratic regimes" constitute "only brief exceptions" (but disconcerting ones) to the rule that "the French Revolution put a definitive end to the close-knit relationship between Church and State in the West and that since then, all over Western Europe, Church and State have been drifting apart"^[3]: Oliver Cromwell in England, John Calvin in Geneva, Girolamo Savonarola in Florence. But these brief exceptions constitute nothing less than the political high water marks of the Renaissance and Reformation themselves—defining eras in Western history, utterly unknown elsewhere. And both these reawakenings are also major events in the history of political ideas, equal in importance to their artistic and spiritual achievements.

This also accounts for the absence of Marxism and Marxist parties (and their alter egos, Christian Democratic ones) in the US and their limited appeal throughout the Anglosphere. Their political role as vehicles for expressing popular discontent and resentment was preempted by radical Calvinism. Since then, evangelical Protestantism has served as the conduit for every social and political movement in Anglo-American history: from the American Revolution itself (at the

popular, “grassroots” level), to the anti-slavery movement, working-class agitation, trade unionism, liberal reform movements in the 19th century, democratic socialism, civil rights and anti-war movements in the 20th century, and more.

Viewed ahistorically from our “secular” age and by our secular elites, evangelical Protestantism might seem like a peculiar language to express political protest (though its name indicates otherwise). Viewed as the legacy of a radical political movement, it makes perfect sense. Calvinism swept through northern Europe in the sixteenth century and set off semi-revolutions (including what might be called the first “war of national liberation,” the Dutch Revolt against Spain), before creating the first of the great modern revolutions in England and later America. This was similar to the way socialism and communism swept through Europe in the 19th century before culminating in the Russian Revolution of 1917. Or a particularly striking parallel is the spread of Islamist revolts in the Muslim world, culminating in one full-fledged revolution (also a theocracy), comparable to the “great” ones in England, France, and Russia: Shiite Iran in 1979.^[4]

This argument is also consistent with Vogel’s observation of how extensively “European history has ... been shaped by the Roman Catholic Church”: “There is probably no other single institution that better represents the essence of Western Civilization than the Church,” he writes, going so far as to say that “the history of the Church *is* the history of the West.” But this must also include revolts against it, of which secular socialism-communism was hardly the first and not the most direct. Protestantism is at least as important politically.

The “Sin Within”

But larger questions also arise from the perspective I

propose. It suggests that the content of leftist ideology at any given moment—which has changed to the point where it would be unrecognizable to its inventors—may be less important than the style of politics it created. It suggests that the Left exists not because it is necessarily right. The Left may exist because it devised political methods that have other advantages beyond its actual grievances: perhaps those methods achieve its aims more effectively; perhaps it satisfies emotional and psychological needs not served by traditional politics. Different explanations are possible. By the same token, it opens the possibility that some leftists' concerns may have merit, but that the political means they adopt to address them can have consequences that they themselves have not foreseen or intended. Finally, it opens another possibility: If the Left did not always exist, then possibly the day may come when it will exist no longer.

Another lesson is that the Left is not limited to the liberalism-socialism-communism with which we are familiar today. Rather, the Left periodically reinvents itself, and when it does it tends to triumph because the Right is caught off-guard. The Right fails (or refuses) to understand the new form of Leftism that has arisen and insists on fighting the previous war against the previous enemy. The Right's own defenses, however fortified by its often formidable financial and institutional power, are rendered out of date and become Maginot Lines that the Left easily maneuvers around.

Today we are in the midst of a major such reinvention and one that is again sending conservatives down to defeat. I have described this at length [elsewhere](#) ([more recently](#) here) and will not dwell on it here. But another larger lesson, pertinent to all of us who do not identify with the Left, is that a politics that consists almost entirely of flogging the enemies of yesteryear, like liberalism and Marxism, is a formula for irrelevance, which pretty much describes the professional Right today. I do not raise the role of radical

Calvinism in the origins of the Left in order to identify another historical villain and refight the Protestant Reformation. Frankly, having changed my views diametrically on both politics and religion since the foolishness of youth, I am still not sure how I feel about Calvinism specifically. (As an Anglican, whose church incorporates Calvinism as its official doctrine, though not very enthusiastically, I see virtues and drawbacks in both Protestantism and Catholicism, as well as Orthodoxy.) I think it is likely that it imparted a certain energy (even, again, missionary fervor) to the English-speaking nations that helps account for their spectacular success and unprecedented global influence. Most revolutions are followed by empire or other forms of political expansionism and domination, and while the Anglo-American versions have certainly participated in their share of crimes, their influence is arguably more complex than some and at least worthy of dispassionate assessment.

With all the ideological confusion and apparent role reversals taking place today (left-wing plutocrats and militarists, right-wing anti-war activists), some people are proclaiming another “end of ideology.” Such proclamations are always premature. Ideology and the Left-Right dialectic will not disappear spontaneously. If it is something we want, it will require effort from the rest of us.

I suggest we start with what is closest to us and in our power to effect, by dismantling the professional Right, which claims to speak on behalf of all of us who are not on the Left. It does no good to hurl more anathemas at the Left, which is about all the establishment Right does. Marginalizing and eliminating the parasitic anti-ideology and anti-establishment on the Right, on the other hand, might achieve some good. They [lose all their battles](#) anyway. If we can wean ourselves from dependence on professional politicians, wrest control from them, and return it to a broad-based amalgam of citizens, sharing nothing but their patriotism and fatigue at being ruled by

ideologues, we might all rediscover true citizenship and self-government. A healthy and engaged citizenry does not need pressure groups, interest groups (not even “public interest” ones), or “NGOs” to fight their battles for them. The organizations they do need are [churches](#), which they can and must redeem from the ladies’ clubs they have become and revitalize and restore them to the robust civic institutions they were at one time.^[5]

So the still larger principle I am suggesting here is that if we want to redeem our increasingly pitiable civilization, we start not by trying to slay the nastiest dragons on the grand, global battlefields, but with what is closest to home. If we want to contain the Left, and break the Left-Right collusion, we must resist the temptation to imitate a cardinal leftist strategy: seeking to solve our problems by identifying historical and political villains, heaping our own sins on their backs, and driving them from the city. Instead, we must first examine our own roles in permitting their crimes. The warning of Alexander Solzhenitsyn—who certainly knew something about defeating leftist regimes (the regimes from which professional rightists wash their hands by dismissing them as “pure evil”) —is echoed by other dissidents from the Communist era:

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?^[6]

[1] For republican ideology in the American Revolution, see works by Gordon Wood, especially, *Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (University of North Carolina, 1969), Bernard Bailyn, and students inspired by them.

[2] Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Harvard, 1965); Stephen Baskerville, *Not Peace But a Sword: The Political Theology of the English Revolution* (Routledge, 1993; expanded, Wipf & Stock, 2018). An earlier proto-revolution was perpetrated by the Hussites in 15th-century Bohemia, with features strikingly similar to the English. See my "Hussites, Puritans, and the Politics of Religious Revolutions," *Communio viatorum*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2004).

[3] The fashionable but simplistic "secularization thesis" spread like wildfire among secular intellectuals and scholars in the 1960s and was widely accepted with little dissent, but it has come in for some hard knocks in recent years and been recanted by some of its leading proponents. I survey the literature in "Religion and Radicalism: The Puritanism in All Revolutions," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2022), 54.

[4] Another phenomenon that Left and Right collude to disapprove, ignore, misunderstand, dismiss, and distance themselves. See Baskerville, "Religion and Radicalism."

[5] Background information supporting these points, including the critical civic role of churches in Anglophone political culture (another legacy of Puritanism) is in my book, *Who Lost America: Why the United States Went "Communist" and What to Do about It* (Arktos, 2024), ch. 1.

[6] Though often accused of smug self-righteousness and held responsible for such traits in American culture, this was in fact a cardinal principle of the Puritan revolutionaries. Though they did divide the world into good and evil, they never, even at the height of their militancy, identified evil exclusively with their enemies, a habit that may well account

for their success. An old principle in Christianity, it was the Puritans who inculcated it on the population, casting it in terms of divine judgement: a sophisticated principle that not only promised that evildoers would receive their just desserts, but also reminded their victims that they too would be judged if they did not get off their own duffs and do whatever was in their power to rectify the evil that confronted them. “Whatever injuries are brought upon us by man, let us acknowledge them as deserved punishment of our sin in regard to God,” one minister urged. “Though we have given no cause to the one, and so are innocent, yet we have given just cause to the other, and so are nocent.” Habituating people to such principles was how the Puritans helped create modern Anglophone citizenship. See Baskerville, *Not Peace But a Sword*, ch. 2.

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