

The Uniqueness of Western Civilization, by Ricardo Duchesne. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011, 528 pp., \$155.00 hardbound.

Nowhere but the West

Stephen H. Balch

Published online: 7 December 2011
© The Author(s) 2011. This article is published with open access at Springerlink.com

What's happening to the West is without precedent. Other civilizations have collapsed following defeats; none till now has faltered in the full flush of triumph. For better or worse, the West always confounds expectations.

The West's uniqueness, and the West's endangerment, have called forth an important new work from an important new voice—Ricardo Duchesne, professor of sociology at the University of New Brunswick in Saint John, Canada. *The Uniqueness of Western Civilization* is the fifty-year-old author's first

Stephen H. Balch is editor-in-chief of *Academic Questions* and chairman of the National Association of Scholars, One Airport Place, Suite 7, Princeton, NJ 08540-1532; nas@nas.org.

book. But even had it been his twentieth, it would be remarkable for its command of disparate literatures, its elucidation of complex controversies, the dispositive nature of its critiques, and its provision of a genuinely fresh interpretation of the West's achievement. Above all else it constitutes an urgently needed contribution to “a discourse” gone awry—an evolving scholarly consensus that belittles the West except insofar as it can be denounced and demonized.

Duchesne is a scholar with a mission: the restoration of a proper appreciation for the West's spectacular exceptionality. And fittingly, *The Uniqueness of Western Civilization* is every inch the embodiment of the striving spirit the author finds so characteristic of the endeavors of Western man—a hankering after high achievement and a wish to make one's mark through the overthrow of accepted opinion. But Duchesne is no polemicist. For all its argumentative power, *The Uniqueness of Western Civilization* is old-school scholarship at its best: consequential, closely reasoned, richly evidenced, and professionally courteous.

In this case the received opinion to be overthrown is none other than

that of contemporary Western (and American) academe. Of about forty years' ascendancy, it encompasses a project whose scholarly roots stretch back to the early twentieth century and, within the broader culture, to Rousseau. Its dispositional pillars, carrying varying weight, are primitivism, relativism, and adversarialism, the last mainly compounded of Marxist alloys. Duchesne devotes his first chapter to its construction, describing the extensive edifice of "revisionist" interpretation has gradually been raised and the diverse worlds of learning it has come to overshadow.

Duchesne painstakingly charts three distinct currents that have contributed most to the West's intellectual downsizing, originating respectively in anthropologist Franz Boas's rejection of cultural hierarchy, "Critical Theorists" Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer's reimagining of science and technology as agents of barbarism, and "World System Theory" oracle Immanuel Wallerstein's attribution of the West's rise not to any inherent genius but conquest and expropriation.

These converging streams submerged an earlier narrative that saw Western history as an onward flow of progress and emancipation. In 1963, acclaimed scholar William McNeill could write a self-consciously

global history whose title, *The Rise of the West*, expressed a universal culmination. By the 1980s, McNeill had reinterpreted the history of the West—and all other civilizations—through the prism of "interactive webs" in which breakthrough discovery was replaced by anonymous borrowing and creative imagination by reaction to environmental stress.

The traditional Western civilization survey course was also swept toward oblivion at both the secondary and collegiate levels, supplanted, if by anything at all, with a feel-good contrivance known as "world history." Although the new outlook was in its varied manifestations decidedly materialist, Duchesne notes that sociobiology, emerging simultaneously as a theoretical perspective, was kept out of its mix—the emphasis on innate drives and competition meshing poorly with multicultural revisionism's egalitarian sensibilities.

This background having been established, there ensues an intellectual duel between Duchesne and a welter of revisionist opponents, whose intricate thrust-and-parry provides an impressive display of the author's knowledge and forensic skill. His antagonists, most notably Andre Gunder Frank, Kenneth Pomeranz, and John Hobson, all argue in one way or another for extrinsic, highly contingent explanations of Europe's

ascent. Frank emphasizes China's long-held status as a hub, perhaps *the* hub, of world trade, as well as putative possessor of the world's highest standard of pre-modern living. Europe, Frank believes, simply had the good fortune to begin its overseas expansion as China was entering a temporary, cyclical decline, filling a ready-made vacuum. Pomeranz underscores Europe's (i.e., Britain's) advantage over China in cheaply available coal and abundant colonial harvests that allowed it to escape the Malthusian trap into which a less lucky Celestial Empire stumbled. John Hobson argues that Asia not Europe has historically been the world's chief fount of technical innovation. Each propounds the notion that the "accidental" acquisition of the Americas by Europe's westernmost powers was indispensable to the West's economic and technological breakthroughs. They also offer as Europe's one singular contribution to world political economy the invention of the military-industrial complex, typified by the bellicose mercantile enterprises of the Dutch and the British.

Predation, Luck, or Ingenuity?

The argumentative choreography is too detailed to be rehearsed here,

but the issues in controversy revolve around patterns and balances of trade, comparative income, labor and agricultural productivity growth, tax burdens and uses of the public purse, technical and scientific prowess, constitutional forms, and the diffusion of innovation, about which Duchesne has mined copious stores of data. At its crux is whether the Industrial Revolution was a function of the West's lucky—when not predatory—access to resources, or of a native ingenuity issuing from its special constellation of institutions, traditions, and values.

This is not the type of scholarly combat likely to produce a knock-out blow, but Duchesne clearly wins on points. His exploration of the relevant sources is more complete and current than his opponents, and he is able to catch them in a variety of omissions, misconstructions, contradictions, and special pleadings. He acknowledges that the sugar plantations of the West Indies provided a significant fillip to British commercial growth, but shows that it was far more driven by ties to internal and European markets, had exceeded that of East Asia long before the advent of mass production, and was, indeed, of a different order, relying on "intensification" of resource use (getting more out of the same land and labor) instead of "extensification"

(merely employing more labor and land). He also dispatches more cranky arguments, based on anecdotal cherry-picking, that the East had a scientific project comparable to that of the West.

In evaluating a controversy of this kind it should be kept in mind where the burden of proof rests. Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries scientific and industrial revolutions happened in the West—not elsewhere. And there are a lot of “elsewheres” in which they might have taken place. China, most widely proposed as an alternative site, is generally thought to have reached its economic and technical apogee during the Sung dynasty, which began in 960 CE, about eight hundred years before Britain’s industrial revolution. Obviously, no equivalent industrialization occurred under the Sung or its dynastic successors prior to its import from the West—a process whose difficulties and convulsions hardly suggest fertile soil. Nor did industrial revolutions break out during the long histories of the high civilizations of South Asia and Islam. Whatever the conditions that permit industrial revolutions, they do not seem easy to obtain. Those making a case that they would have occurred in situations *where they did not* must either

assume a naturalness about the process that the historical record belies, or have a great deal of faith in their theoretical constructs. In either case a healthy skepticism would do well for their readers.

Is Science Sufficient?

A fascinating question amidst all of this is whether the Scientific Revolution was a necessary precursor to the Industrial. Scientific revolution was nowhere on the horizon in China in the late eighteenth century (or in India or the Islamic world either), so an affirmative answer would rule out any imminent industrial breakthroughs in those places. The debt the development of steam engines owes to science has thus been the fulcrum of a lot of scholarly debate. Duchesne reviews the course of the controversy, which has wavered back and forth. The view that it owed little was in fashion several decades back, but more recent research has shown that men like Savery, Newcomen, Smeaton, and Watt, key figures in Britain’s eighteenth-century “engine culture,” were quite conversant with contemporary research in mechanics and thermodynamics, as well as with experimental methods more generally.

While the possibility that tinkering alone might have produced a workable and efficient steam engine can't be dismissed—pre-scientific and non-Western engineers were ingenious problem-solvers—Duchesne, in one of his many extensive footnotes that pull together the work of other investigators, disposes of the larger issue by enlarging its context. Even if Chinese artisans could have found a way to make steam engines of tolerable efficiency by trial and error, it would have clearly been beyond their powers to sustain their industrial revolution into an age of synthetic chemistry, internal combustion engines, and electricity without science. QED: advanced technology, in anything like its present form, could not have come into existence except through science, and hence, as of the nineteenth century—and in all likelihood for centuries thereafter—nowhere but in the West.

That still leaves the question of whether the Scientific Revolution was *sufficient* to create an industrial one—an issue less readily disposed of. The revisionist argument about Western industrialization (even where science is conceded a role) boils down to an insistence on the necessity of other factors, either external, like newly-won imperial domains, or

accidental, like readily available coal—without which science would have been unavailing.¹ Duchesne, as already noted, makes a strong statistical case—contra Kenneth Pomeranz—that Britain wasn't facing, as the eighteenth century closed, the Malthusian bottleneck that throttled China. (This is a key point against the revisionists, since had this been Britain's plight, and had her overseas empire not been available to pull her through it, she couldn't have fed her pullulating proletariat.) But for argument's sake, let's assume that Pomeranz is right about Britain's looming demographic trap and ask instead whether science would finally have been able to loosen its hold.

I believe the answer is yes, because the key issue in evaluating *the sufficiency of science* isn't eighteenth-century rates of agricultural productivity and population growth but the returns we'd expect from

¹However necessary it arguably may have been, imperial exploitation clearly isn't sufficient to produce industrialization. There had been plenty of it, after all, before industrialization—think ancient Rome—as there also had been plenty of coal. Duchesne interestingly observes that China had extensive underpopulated territory in Sichuan, Manchuria, and elsewhere that she might have drawn upon to break resource bottlenecks, as in the revisionist view Western Europe was able to do in America. What China lacked, Duchesne concludes, wasn't agricultural reserves but the cultural will and organizational ability to exploit them.

scientific discovery. Assuming the resultant stresses didn't altogether derail the West's scientific progress (a less than likely outcome in light of the scientific project having been launched during the unusually stressful and unstable seventeenth century), a Malthusian impasse would have been eventually broken by the same succession of innovations involving chemical fertilizers and mechanization—to say nothing of transportation, preservation, and, where necessary, irrigation—as in fact occurred. “Green revolutions” are, after all, predictable scientific products. Insufficiencies of coal would have been remedied through the introduction of petroleum, hydroelectric, and, later, nuclear power sources—which eventually happened as well. QED: notwithstanding the constraints postulated by the revisionists, and without recourse to any overseas agricultural reserve, a continuation of scientific progress would still have transformed the West, though over a more prolonged and bumpier course, into a modern high-tech society.

Had China (or India or the Islamic world) developed rigorous, experimental, mathematized science, would it also have eventually industrialized? Until the intrusion of the West, China lacked patent protections, commercial banks,

corporations, stock and bond markets, an independent judiciary, and constitutional restraints on sovereign power—all generally thought vital for technical creativity and capitalist development. It did, on the other hand, possess nearly free trade over a continental-sized territory, moral and customary restraints on abusive authority, abundant commerce, a relatively high level of internal peace, and a skilled and industrious workforce. It seems also to have had lower levels of taxation and per capita government expenditure than did most eighteenth-century European states. Would these assets, coupled with a vigorous scientific enterprise, been enough to propel the Middle Kingdom over modernity's threshold?

Between the decline of Rome and the beginning of the second millennium, perhaps even into the sixteenth century, China was the world's technological leader. The Sung dynasty was an unusually fertile period for invention, most famously movable type, gunpowder and firearms, paper currency, and the magnetic compass, but also in many realms of agriculture and the crafts. A lot of Chinese obviously thought innovation worthwhile, and one supposes that armed with natural science they might have accomplished abundantly more.

Liberal institutions undoubtedly facilitate wealth creation and technical advance. In Britain, the Netherlands, and the United States they ensured an environment in which property, both real and intellectual, was secured, exchange freed, and contracts enforced. But Chinese history (as well as that of the most of the rest of mankind) demonstrates that such institutions are not indispensable to technological progress. Though it may otherwise be slower and halting, more susceptible to backslides and prey to political disruption, progress can take place without them. Given that, and given science, can it be said that the kind of transformed world we inhabit, absent Western liberalism—absent the West entirely—would have nonetheless been in the cards? An interesting question, but begging the even more interesting one of the origins of science itself, and whether China would have remained China, in its classic features, had it evolved a truly scientific culture. Not questions I can answer, but of the type Duchesne's fascinating book provokes.

What Sets the West Apart?

That said, *The Uniqueness of Western Civilization* isn't about the roots of industrialization, or of science. Its core contention goes deeper. For Duchesne, Western

exceptionalism is not just found in Industrial Britain or Periclean Athens, it is ingrained in the West's very tissue, present at every level of its existence and throughout the entirety of its history. The West constantly churns, fights with itself, splits, fractures, builds, and demolishes—revolution may not be its everyday state, but change is always the order of the day. Where else have architectural styles, musical modes, literary forms, the visual and dramatic arts, weaponry and tactics, fashion in dress, philosophic schools, religious beliefs, business practices, and political systems shown such continuing fluidity? Other civilizations, after an initial spate of creativity, have settled into relatively enduring molds, with subsequent change generally a variation on well-established themes. By contrast, Duchesne argues, the West has ever been restless, its inhabitants “pursuing personal renown through heroic deeds,” their heroism measured by the degree they can exceed, remake, or overthrow that which went before them.

Comparative analysts are typically at a disadvantage, knowing their own societies and history in finer detail than any other, and experts in Chinese, Indian, and Islamic culture may find some of this overstated.

But comparing, as Duchesne does, the way printing revolutionized almost every walk of Western life, with its far more modest effects on China and virtual rejection in Islam; or the explosion of exploration following Columbus's and Vasco da Gama's voyages with the limited and transient impact of the voyages of Cheng Ho; or the continuing stream of Western military innovations after the appearance of cannon with the staid and sometimes resistant reaction to firearms among non-Western armies; or similar juxtapositions in many other spheres, makes for a compelling case.

From whence this ceaseless motion? Duchesne devotes the final third of the book to offering his answer. As with his critical arguments, the multisided nature of the learning he displays in formulating his thesis is arresting—a seemingly effortless conscription of history, philosophy, anthropology, and archeology. Apart from everything else, *The Uniqueness of Western Civilization* is a monument to *ethos* as that term is understood in Aristotelian rhetoric: the cumulative building of authorial authority by sheer display of knowledge.

Western “Sturm und Drang”

Duchesne's theory consists of a sociological proposition nestled in a

historical conjecture. The proposition is the West's uniquely discordant nature. Far more than other civilizations, the life of the West has been strife. Some of this has involved large-scale organized violence—with its crowd of rival states and statelets the West is probably second to none among civilizations in the frequency of warfare. But Duchesne claims for the West a much more deeply seated, individuated contentiousness, born in its arms but also permeating its peace. For Duchesne, the West is the world's aristocratic civilization *par excellence*, not because it is unusually stratified, but because so many of its inhabitants have absorbed the psychology of aggressive one-upmanship and competitive honor-seeking characteristic of nobility. Westerners have in their social marrow an impulse toward nonconformity, a desire to make name and fame, a belief that they have been born into life in order to outdo both the living and the dead.

The first great flowering of this prideful exuberance occurred in Ionian Greece, writing the script for subsequent events. Duchesne points out a generally unremarked pattern in Greek life, the large number of institutionalized competitions among individuals—in athletics, in drama and poetry, in deliberative assemblies

and courts, and in philosophic, dramatic, and literary dialogues. Most of these traditions continued through Hellenistic and Roman times, and after a pause, gradually reasserted themselves in altered though recognizable forms during the High Middle Ages and modernity. To be sure there are some non-Western analogs—the exam system of Confucian China is probably the most striking—but championship, in a multitude of forms, does seem something Westerners have hankered after with notable obsession.

Duchesne's effort to define the psychology of this engrained competitiveness, and the moral architecture of the societies in which it has flourished, draws on an insight from Hegel: the willingness of the aristocrat to struggle to the death purely for the sake of prestige—a drive for mastery that inevitably results in paradox. A wholly successful aristocrat, subjugating those he defeats, is left without equals and hence forfeits his opportunity for status validation—a service that can only be performed through recognition by a peer. Duchesne finds the Western resolution of this paradox in the evolution of rights-based liberty, a system that guarantees perpetual contest without permitting anyone's victory to become complete.

Duchesne's next insight is unsettling. A crucial role in nurturing this system was played by Europe's unusually militarized environment—in other words, war, and its threat, is the history of liberty's dark side. The fragmented political landscape of ancient Greece was a prescription for endemic, if typically petty, conflict. Rome rose to dominance through almost constant armed struggle with its neighbors and among its own. There was, to be sure, a *Pax Romana*, but once disrupted no unifying, pacifying empire took its place, leaving Europe's history a writ-large version of ancient Greece's.

In this view, the triumph of classical liberalism was, in its essence, a domestication of war. The spirit of liberty conceived and nurtured in violent struggle was reified in laws and custom; rivalry in arms became competition in the marketplace and among the electorate, commerce and canvassing gradually emerging as the moral equivalents of war. What's novel in Duchesne's argument is not that the diffusion of power produced by armed men preserved de facto local and corporate liberties—that case has been made before. What's novel (at least to me) is his argument that this deadlock helped preserve not just the fact but the psychology of freedom, an unwillingness to accept subjection, a tendency to heroic

self-assertion more pronounced than elsewhere in the world.

Where else, after all, did the mercantile and professional classes adopt as much of aristocracy's symbolism, practices, and rules of honor than in Europe—including the heraldic trappings of European towns and guilds, urban militia, representation in the king's councils, resort to the *code duello* (e.g., Hamilton versus Burr) and, eventually, the appropriation of knightly and noble titles for themselves? The differences in social tenor produced by this were often quite striking, as when Western visitors in Ming China were surprised to find that almost no one carried weapons. In Europe even peasants wore daggers.

Duchesne is telling us something we might not want to hear: liberty needs to be backed by combative ardor or, in any event, once did. And the feisty West has had this ardor, as a culturally diffused element, in no short supply. Duchesne is a complex thinker. He's not proposing a single explanation for the West's heritage of freedom, nor denying a role for the Hellenistic legacy of reason, the Judaic concept of a lawgiving God, the Protestant notion of a priesthood of believers, etc. But he is adding another interestingly rich explanatory layer.

Nomadic Roots?

The second part of Duchesne's theory strikes me as more conjectural. He anchors the West's tradition of aristocratic equality in the life of the Bronze Age steppe, particularly that part of it north of the Black Sea, from which at some time between the fourth and second millennium BCE, Indo-European horsemen dispersed into Europe, Iran, and northern India. In Duchesne's view, these Indo-European invaders—unlike later steppe warriors such as the Scythians, Huns, Turks, and Mongols—penetrated territories still uncivilized, and hence had a more lasting cultural impact on them. Moreover, when millennia afterwards the civilization they created radiated out of the Mediterranean and into northern Europe, its assertive spirit was refreshed, so to speak, through new encounters with still barbarous Germans, Norse, Magyars, and Slavs and, after that, in the unceasing struggles among European principalities.

Duchesne makes it clear that this is not a racial theory. The Indo-European nomads didn't leave Europe anything extraordinary in their genes. What was extraordinary—historically stupendous in its enduring consequence—was an Ionian cultural achievement that took the steppe

echo of Homeric myth and fashioned it into an aspirational dynamic whose drive has persisted for twenty-five hundred years.

Duchesne certainly musters plenty of archeological evidence for a penetration of early Neolithic Europe by warlike outsiders submerging an antecedent, more pacific, set of cultures. But the thesis has a number of problems. First, the radiation of Indo-Europeans proceeded eastward as well as west without producing similar results in the culture of the Anatolian highlands, the Iranian plateau, or the Indus and Ganges valleys that it putatively did in Europe. Second, it's a rather long while from the chariot invasions of the second millennium BCE to the glory days of Athens or even Miletus. Could an unusual cultural tradition persist through such a passage of centuries and altered circumstance? Duchesne contends that favorable circumstances (subsequent striving and strife, etc.) sustained it. But if they could sustain it, why could they not just have produced it in the first place? These nutshell objections hardly dispose of Duchesne's Indo-European thesis, which is thoughtfully and elegantly argued, but more evidence will be

needed to close its gaps and nail its conclusion.

A Sounded Call

Duchesne believes in the West and the greatness of its achievements, and looks with dismay on its postmodern disintegration, its exhaustion "in the nihilism, cultural relativism, weariness and lack of faith...that dominates today." It is for the sake of these achievements that he has courageously taken on a body of opinion not only with numbers on its side, but emboldened by a piety that can threaten opponents with moral opprobrium. Charlemagne's Roland, the rather Western man that he was, went down at Roncevaux, pridefully refusing to sound a rescue call until too late. In *The Uniqueness of the West*, a new scholarly paladin, unburdened by such compunctions, summons others to join him in intellectual battle against a wrongheaded and destructive orthodoxy. One hopes his call won't fail of timely answer.

Open Access This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Noncommercial License which permits any non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.