

Does the West Hate Itself?

Western Self-Contempt: Oikophobia in the Decline of Civilizations, Benedict Beckeld, Northern Illinois Press, an imprint of Cornell University Press, 2022, pp. 264, \$25.80 hardcover.

William L. Howard

Today, what is natural, not to mention traditional, is subject to cancellation. It might seem perfectly natural for a school to be named after one of the Founding Fathers of the country in which it is located, but progressives are compelled to rename it. Celebrating Columbus Day? Racist. Singing the national anthem? Xenophobic.

Benedict Beckeld's *Western Self-Contempt: Oikophobia in the Decline of Civilizations* astutely identifies and explains these phenomena, arguing that they "reveal a civilization that has stopped believing in itself, that hates itself, and that is therefore

unwilling to defend the values of freedom, democracy, and scientific and scholarly skepticism that have been handed down to us since antiquity." Beckeld argues that these behaviors characterize a species of cultural decadence: a falling away from earlier cultural values. And they are nothing new. His study of political and historical philosophy makes a compelling case for a cyclical—or as he prefers—helical view of the rise and fall of civilizations. "There is never anything truly new in the world, but only new and sometimes heightened manifestations of the same tragic patterns."

Apparently, the publication of this book is a political act. Because it is not confined to remote periods of history but focuses a great deal on the contemporary, oikophobic West, the book faced "the best efforts of a number of individuals to suppress it." Congratulations to Cornell and Northern Illinois University Presses for defending academic freedom. The would-be censors likely did not appreciate Beckeld's acknowledgment of Roger Scruton, whom he credits

William L. Howard is Professor of English (ret.), Chicago State University. His previous article in *Academic Questions* was "Academic Racism" in the winter of 2021.

with first coining the term “oikophobia” and whom he identifies as one of the few disinterested commentators of recent years. Since Scruton as well as disinterestedness have been dismissed by the ideologically conforming members of the intelligentsia, it is likely that this book and its author will be treated the same.

Scruton defined oikophobia as “a stage through which the adolescent mind normally passes” but one at which intellectuals “tend to become arrested.” The “oik,” as he dubbed sufferers of this particular phobia, “repudiates national loyalties and defines his goals and ideals against the nation . . . defining his political vision in terms of universal values that have been purified of all reference to the particular attachments of a real historical community.” The term originally had a psychological application referring to those afraid of their own homes. But the philosophical and political application Scruton and Beckeld use is not about fear of one’s toaster but of hatred of one’s culture.

Consistent with current usage, the definition of phobia adopted in this book is not fear

but hatred, as in transphobic, homophobic, and xenophobic. Phobias, as the political power behind diversity has determined, are beyond therapeutic treatment and must be publicly discredited. Beckeld does not dwell much on the more hateful manifestations of oikophobia. Oikophobes to him are simply obnoxious highbrows who believe in “light Marxism, cultural snobbery, transnationalism, and multiculturalism.” They may champion the Third World without knowing much about it and, for that matter, without knowing much about the historical achievements and significance of the culture in which they live. Whereas xenophobia, its opposite, is absolutist, oikophobia is generally relativistic. While “the absolutism of xenophobia dictates that one’s own culture is superior to the rest, the oikophobe seeks to elevate other cultures—not to equality with, but to superiority over, the home culture.”

To explain the principle on which his argument is based, Beckeld cites Plato’s *Republic*: “the more freedom and equality are to be found in a society, the more its members will hold themselves

above the state.” In his survey of cultures from Greece and Rome to France, Britain, and the United States, Beckeld demonstrates that they each began with a xenophobic mindset and evolved into an oikophobic one. He focuses on the latter phenomenon “not because I think it is worse in itself than xenophobia, but only because at this juncture in time it causes more damage to our social fabric and intellectual life than its counterpart, which, at least in polite society, has been much more marginalized.”

Ultimately, Beckeld favors the Greek Golden Mean, the midpoint in a civilization’s progression when “the culture has abandoned its parochial tribalism, and become more self-observing and scientific, which obviously includes self-critique, but has not yet degenerated into oikophobia.” The high points of the civilizations treated in this book are mid-fifth-century B.C. Athens, early first-century Rome, early eighteenth-century France, mid-Victorian Britain, and early twentieth-century America.

Whereas xenophobia emerges early in a culture as it overcomes outside resistance and promotes itself, Beckeld describes

oikophobia as a product of its own success. In its upward trajectory, a strong culture wins existential wars. “For a people to thoroughly believe in itself, it helps to be close to extinction, as the Greeks were during the Persian Wars, the Romans during the Second Punic War, and the Americans during the Revolution.” Once power and peace have been attained, however, oikophobes begin to disparage their culture to make themselves look more enlightened or humane than their fellow citizens. Oikophobia is not so much thoughtful as “a vain malaise” occurring in a culture’s latter days.

Beckeld makes a distinction between oikophobic and healthy self-criticism. He believes Mark Twain’s criticisms of American society, for example, have no oikophobic dimension. But he is ambivalent about Thoreau, whose acerbic critiques are productive like Twain’s, but whose “antisocial self-indulgence” resembles a characteristic of later stages of cultural development. He maintains that Thoreau can be “sophomoric” and intellectually irrelevant and that *Walden* is read “almost only in U.S. high schools.” Beckeld is rather

behind the times if he thinks high schools teach *Walden* anymore; they are far more likely to assign young adult books about gender fluidity: a more apt example of oikophobia's triumph.

To Beckeld, the United States is in oikophobic decline. If it seems extraordinarily early in its young history to be on its downward trajectory, that is because it is essentially an extension of British culture and has had a long foreground. America reached its peak of power after World War II. The Beat Generation and the sixties marked the beginning of its descent. "Paradoxically . . . the lack of confidence in one's own culture arises precisely from that culture's success. The more overwhelming progress is, the greater the perceived gulf will be between the vanguard of that progress and those who feel left out." In the mid-twentieth century, it became popular to seek the Other in Buddhism and Eastern philosophy. This paralleled "the embrace of oriental mystery cults in the later stages of the Greek and Roman civilizations, and . . . Hinduism and Islam, by certain figures of the French Enlightenment." To adopt the far-away serves to put the oikophobe

on a higher plane than those who maintain their allegiance to the familiar.

Other indications that America's decline began in the mid-twentieth century include recreational drug use and sexual liberation, which controverted the ethical standards of the culture at its height. Likewise, diversity, although capable of strengthening a country with new ideas and energy, ultimately weakens its cohesion and ability to fight against a common enemy. Imitating Western cultures of the past, America has incorporated "previously marginalized and victimized groups" who disingenuously compete with each other and a perceived establishment for power: "ironically, the stronger and less victimized a previously victimized group becomes, the more it will insist on its own victimization."

The Vietnam War turned oikophobia into a mass phenomenon. The dissension laid bare during the war, Beckeld contends, was due not to a pretentious moral outrage but to divisions already embedded in American society, the difficulty of winning, and the number of casualties. He might have added

the military draft, which ensured that individual self-interest, as opposed to the country's welfare, would erode cultural unity. In the years following the war, divisions by sex and race and intellectual movements such as deconstruction and postmodernism "all [sought] the overthrow of American tradition and consider[ed] their own civilization to be, in the main, an instrument of tyranny." Thus, as in other countries of the West, the American intellectual class began to hate their homeland just after the previous generation had achieved predominance.

Beckeld identifies the first oikophobic president of the United States as Jimmy Carter and the second, Barack Obama, but also notes that all the presidents since Carter have exhibited some characteristics of it. Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump were the exceptions. He points out the irony of George W. Bush, a president who wore cowboy boots, announcing that Islam was a religion of peace in the wake of the worst attack on American soil since Pearl Harbor. Such a placating statement would have been unthinkable only a generation earlier.

Donald Trump's election is placed by Beckeld squarely in the middle of the war between oikophobic and traditional America. He likens it to the success of Brexit, both "a natural reaction against oikophobia and against the bourgeois elite's betrayal" of traditional populations. Instead of questioning their own positions, however, the intelligentsia's losses "caused them to dig their trenches even deeper." Vanity, "always . . . the engine of oikophobia," caused them to regard their own positions as morally unimpeachable and non-negotiable.

Although philosophers and political parties like to assume a progressive explanation of history so that they can position themselves at the vanguard, Beckeld argues that "the belief in eschatology is totalitarian." The result of "progress" in the twentieth century was the genocide of tens of millions, different only in scope from an earlier cycle when Alexander the Great massacred millions "to establish an eternal brotherhood of man."

Philosophers and theorists always seem to believe that they

are the privileged ones who are to experience the end of history. Just as dictators, revolutionaries, and college students want to be able to say that they experienced the radical moment in history when everything changed . . . so too philosophical totalitarians want to be the embodiment of the end of history and preside over its . . . conclusion.

In contrast, Beckeld's helical theory of historical development incorporates both a progressive and cyclical element, "with each circle pushing ahead of the previous one." He cites democratization. Political power becomes more diffuse as societies progress, but it takes another cycle to spread it further. Likewise for religion: "Societies become less religious as they advance, but the irreligiosity of each new society is more extreme than was the earlier ones." The advancement of women follows a similar pattern. The beginning of a

civilization is dominated by masculinity; the end, by femininity.

Beckeld's analysis of technological development is a particularly interesting example of how phenomena common to all eras become more intense with each new iteration. Throughout Western history, advances in technology contributed to mobility and democratization, but they also expedited cultural uprootedness and decline. Technology today, being even more widespread and influential, has contributed to more extreme democratization and more intense oikophobia. Mastery of technology makes more "experts" who feel they owe less allegiance to cultural traditions. This leads to the contemporary irony that "the masses think that they are not part of the masses and explicitly make fun of the masses." Even as it has given greater access to information to a greater segment of society than ever before, technology has also produced a monopoly that is more powerful than any monopoly of the past. One thinks of the media, which give the illusion of providing open fora for the free exchange of ideas even as the oikophobic oligarchy that

controls them has a stranglehold on what is allowed to be said.

It goes without saying that oikophobes do not like tradition. They dub as tribalism any rallying around custom but, without self-awareness, seek to replace it with what Beckeld calls a new tribalism: “defending their particular interest group and . . . viewing other domestic groups as their enemies.” Had this book been written just a year or two later, Beckeld might well have defined this phenomenon with President Biden’s declaration that the half of the country that did not vote for him was out of step with progress and more dangerous than external enemies to “our democracy.” Beckeld anticipated the President’s rhetoric: “Whenever one hears politicians say that so-and-so are on ‘the wrong side of history,’ as if history had its own right and wrong and as if things absolutely must go in a particular direction, they are actually putting forward a highly totalitarian and absolutist Hegelian-Marxist language of history.”

To the all-important question why the educated class is the most oikophobic, Beckeld

essentially identifies three major causes:

1. Higher levels of education tend to shield the elite from common sense. A high level of competition for elite status fosters conformity to any idea promoted as progressive that gives the sense of something higher and more important than the norm. Thus does “nonsense” become propagated without check in the centers of power.
2. The more privilege one attains, the less loyalty to his culture’s tradition and to those who remain true to it. The privileged absorb foreign ideas that they spread with relish, especially if they are subversive to their own culture.
3. Elites are animated by vanity. Having access to more information, education, and status, they “can thereby elevate themselves . . . by specifically denigrating the rest of their civilization.”

Despite their privileges, oikophobes are not well educated by Western historical standards. They superficially cherry pick philosophies, usually without knowing where they come from. As an example, Beckeld traces the preference for “values” over virtues to Nietzsche’s perspectivism. Values are useful to the narcissistic oikophobe because they dispense with universal truths in favor of something “assigned *ad hoc*, suggesting an appraisal. A value is thus intrinsically bound up with the subject that holds that particular value.” Believing that something is true only if one believes it to be true represents “the oikophobic rejection of the standards of one’s own civilization.”

Likewise, poorly educated oikophobes are oblivious to the fact that belief in both relativism and progressivism is profoundly contradictory. Progressivism “implies a higher goal, which implies a higher truth of some kind, which is antithetical to relativism.” A similar contradiction lies in the simultaneous embrace of postmodernism and Marxism. The one deprecates grand narratives, while the other is a grand narrative that impelled the

murder of tens of millions. These unlikely marriages serve the purposes of oikophobia, however, because they “have the same ultimate goal: leveling.”

The oikophobe despises few things more than his own society—and when postmodernism assures him that this society has no greater claim to truth than any other society, and when socialism assures him that the keepers of his nation must fall and give way to redistribution and a socialist utopia, then he will happily incorporate both those promises into his worldview, with little thought about the deeper hostility that actually exists between the two.

Can hope be found in the younger generation? Unfortunately, Beckeld argues, the natural rebelliousness of youth lends itself to oikophobia. Moreover, the young today are so poorly educated that they fail

to see that “historical positivism has a totalitarian streak,” and “relativism not only destroys the ideas they dislike but also the ideas they treasure.” More than any philosophy they may dabble with, however, the constant among students preparing to become part of the elite is simply an inflated sense of self. A familiar example to anyone who has been a teacher is a student’s self-righteous assumption that he, in the narrow time and space he happens to occupy,

might have adhered to contemporary moral standards in different historical circumstances. That is, the belief in the self allows us to claim moral superiority vis-à-vis the past. This makes it easier for us to oikophobically reject our past, our history, and the figures who took part in it—to deface or tear down statues of the founding fathers, for instance—in the illusory belief that we would have done better than they.

In concluding his book, Beckeld offers little hope for a reversal of course. He praises the achievements of Western civilization even as he pinpoints reasons for its inexorable demise. The pinnacle of civilizational achievement, he reiterates, is Greece: “To be neither xenophobic nor oikophobic, we must imitate to some degree that portion of Greek civilization where a balance first appeared . . . with neither self-exaltation nor self-hatred.” Classical Greece fostered not groupthink but individualism “in the sense of personal rights, a person forging his own fate, and . . . the state’s existence by consent.” At the same time, Beckeld cautions, the individual must be part of a close-knit community for a culture to thrive.

The Apostle Paul said it was inexcusable for humanity to ignore the self-evident truths of the created world. *Western Self-Contempt* is an encouraging book despite its pessimistic outlook if only because it clarifies what should be self-evident to the unbiased mind. Its historical overview of each civilization’s rise and fall and its chapters on relativism, positivism, and cyclical and progressive theory have

philosophical depth and justify judgments that, effectively, skewer the politically correct obscurers of truth. Interspersed throughout the argument are pithy aphorisms about the contemporary political scene that are a delightful bonus and inspiring alternative to the dismal orthodoxies of the present day.