In Defense of Western Civilization

Christopher Manes

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The American Indian lost the war of rifles but won by default the war of symbols. To the generations distracted by modernity, Native American culture has come to represent the simple, profound life this land proffered before technology botched everything. So many aspiring poets, graduate students of anthropology, and even a few sensible people have been making pilgrimages to medicine men that Indians now talk about a new tribe: The Wannabees. I imagine a good many environmentalists are also in the ranks, and that's fine. When the ideals of passionate people begin to come of age, aspects of history get reinterpreted, re-emphasized, romanticized. And that's fine too: romanticizing nature indicates a metaphysical disorientation, but romanticizing people is probably inevitable and suggests a healthy outlook on life (didn't somebody call *Earth First!* a romance novel?). My experience is that only very stingy people dislike heroes.

But it seems we can only take so much romanticism at one time. Somebody has to get the boot, and if the Indians were right about nature, then the rest of us with our Western values must be the original despoilers of paradise. And a righteous boot it is, stomping away at a civilization that gave the world dioxin, Mutually Assured Destruction, and the US Forest Service.

This kind of thinking is probably behind the curious turn radical environmentalism has taken: namely, it's "rejection" of Western civilization. I say "curious" because even a little reflection will show the contradiction here. Environmentalism as a more or less coherent set of beliefs rises out of Western history; it is an episode in the Western dream of reintegration with nature which has its origins in pre-Socratic philosophy and the pagan ethos. And although as a practical matter non-Western societies have wreaked less havoc on the environment (a situation which is of course changing), this was sometimes due more to a lack of means than any spiritual inclination. Great God! even the likes of Black Elk—for many a John the Baptist of deep ecology—even he has made statements that might just as well have come out of the Medieval *contemptus mundi* tradition.

I suppose this rejection is really a kind of shorthand for a deprecation of modern industrial society—which indeed needs deprecating. Still, it results in an historical displacement which assigns the unnatural values of the present to all of Western history. This distorts the issue. If the task at hand it defending Earth, then we have to be very precise about what we're defending it from. And that is not some generalization like Western civilization.

Europe was, after all, at one time as tribal as pre-Columbian America. You could evn argue that these were the glory-days of the West, when homer sang his epics, druids communed in sacred groves, and the tragic myths of the North were incubating. Nor is it a coincidence that the finest spiritual values of the West—fascination with the world, self-sacrifice in a just cause, acceptance of fate—developed here, *not* after the urban cultures of the Mediterranean had taken root and spread. If we can believe the Roman historian Tacitus (and we can, although he was doing his own romanticizing at times), the Germans of central Europe were a lackadaisical bunch, hunting and farming undiligently, never staying in one place long enough to cause much damage: "They do not plant orchards, fence off meadows, or irrigate gardens." In general, they preferred feasting and feuding to land development.

But this isn't intended as an apologia of Western civilization, which to my pre-Freudian mind doesn't require any. I merely want to emphasize that the problem lies in a particular relationship between man and the world, not in the vague evils of our fathers.

An example. The Celtic tribes of pre-historic Britain lived in harmony with nature. Light hunting and farming supported their flourishing Le Tene culture without diminishing the vast forests of the island. There was an iron mine or two, some extra cattle and grain to export, but the economy wasn't organized enough to cause any trouble. No cities, no central authority, no industry, because the Celts felt no *need* to control the world, but rather merely lived in it.

The Roman invasion changed all that. A heavy plough and slave labor brought virgin land under cultivation. A timber industry arose to heat the public baths of the new urban centers and to fire the forges of a developing ceramics industry. The Roman genius for exploitation developed lead, copper and tin mining on a large scale. In other words, all the familiar detritus of contemporary society. By the time the Empire collapsed and the Anglo-Saxons swarmed in, lowland Britain was on its way to deforestation. The Germanic tribes brought a short-lived sanity by destroying the cities and returning the economy to subsistence hunting and farming. Their conversation to Christianity in the seventh century, however, renewed Britain's contact with Rome and began the process of urbanization and centralization all over again. Viking invasions of the ninth and eleventh centuries returned a little health to the land, but England was already on its way to Order, Empire, and Cow Pastures.

My point is that Western civilization didn't deforest England (all the cultures involved were Western); a debased relationship with life did, one that challenges everything in nature to be organized into a network of human utility. Such is the goal of technology. It's important to think of technology not as an accumulation of machinery, but as a relationship, a one-dimensional relationship which subordinates the complex interplay between man and nature to the imperative of production and consumption. Unlike the *crafts* of our ancestors, which merely tapped into the natural qualities of particular things and brought them forward, technology seizes upon everything, everywhere, in such a way that things are permitted to exist only as a kind of standing reserve for us in a larger network. It is because of this relationship that we can have such strange concepts as "natural resource" or "human resource."

Technology, in this sense, whether ascendant in modern America or Russia, or first century Rome, impels societies to urbanize, centralize, and industrialize in an attempt to confront nature with the demands of utility. This isn't a cultural distinction, but a spiritual one, as applicable in Brazil and Ethiopia as in Illinois. World Technology nullifies all culture.

Rather than hoping for absolution at the hands of others for rejecting Western civilization, I say we can't have enough of the primal Wester values—the profundity of the Celtic druid, the

resolve of the Saxon warrior, the boldness of the Achaian seafarer. The legions of technology were defeated by the likes of these; perhaps we can defeat them again.

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