

Hey, Hey, Ho, Ho, Western Culture, Please Don't Go

On a cool and breezy day at Stanford in January 1987—Martin Luther King's birthday—the Reverend Jesse Jackson told a capacity crowd, “All of us, red, yellow, brown, black and white are precious in God's light and every human being is somebody worth respect and fellowship and a chance.”

Well, who could disagree with that? In 1987, plenty of people, apparently. Not bad people, just people who didn't know better. Like Maya Angelou said, “You do what you know. When you know better, you do better.” When we learned there was more culture than Western culture, we did better. But we also started to do worse.

It is the stuff of legend that after his speech, Jackson led 500 students to the Law School chanting, “Hey, Hey, Ho, Ho, Western culture has got to go.” The truth, as it usually is, is much more interesting. An eyewitness to the event, a “lonely one-man truth squad,” has been trying to correct the record ever since.¹ The students were chanting, yes, but Jackson was not. According to the eyewitness, when Jackson heard what the students were chanting, he said, “No, we don't want to get rid of Western culture. We want to expand it and bring in new voices.” If only we had listened.

Western culture had been go, go, going for a while, but after that day at Stanford, it really went, went, went. It was such a heady realization that there was more to literature and history than what white, European males had given us. Unfortunately, in our zeal to include women, minorities, and non-Western cultures, we went a little overboard. We failed to heed the wise words of Reverend Jackson, which I'm paraphrasing as, “Don't throw the Western baby out with the bathwater.”

Regrettably, we didn't just throw the baby out with the bathwater, we cursed its very existence. We pursued a scorched earth policy where nothing white, male, and European was allowed to hold its head up. We definitely needed to acknowledge our sins and right our wrongs, but the mistake we made was demonizing ourselves in the process.

We only became aware of our sins and wrongs because a hallmark of Western culture is its capacity to stimulate intellectual and moral progress. In proper context, the West's inexorable progress in moral and civil rights is remarkable. The rightful attainment of moral and civil rights by all groups in our society is such a given, we take it for granted. Without proper context, we blame Western culture for *creating* racism, sexism, homophobia, and all the other ills.

Without knowledge of the grand, sweeping arc of our history, we find ourselves defined by the evil of slavery. Without evaluation of Western culture in reference to other cultures, we hate ourselves for sexism and homophobia. Without historical appreciation for the power of capitalism to lift human societies out of abject poverty, its inherent greed and inequality become the only story.

Were we to teach them in context, women's suffrage and the Civil Rights Movement would induce pride in our unique American brand of Western culture. They would inculcate in us a deep appreciation for our brilliant system of government, which allows political protest, Constitutional amendments, and civil disobedience to achieve such progress. Without context, we find ourselves living in a perpetual Victim Olympics where members of previously harmed groups jockey for power; the more harmed the more power.

Yes, we in the West practiced the sickening atrocity of slavery for 300 years. Why didn't we continue to practice it for millennia as did the rest of the world? Because of the Enlightenment, that moment in the history of the West that transformed medieval world to modern world. Hierarchical political and social orders—monarchy, privileges accorded only the nobility, power and absolute authority of the Catholic Church—were replaced with values founded in human reason: freedom and equality for all.

Enlightenment thinkers in the 17th and 18th centuries employed reason to contemplate God, nature, and humanity, which led to the French and American Revolutions. Freedom, equality, and human reason also exposed slavery as a gross violation of the rights of man. It was the West that first abolished slavery: Britain in 1807; France in 1848; the United States in 1862. In the East, slavery continued well into the 20th century; the West African country of Mauritania did not abolish slavery until 1981.

Yes, Christianity was used to rationalize slavery as God's will, but it also served to elicit condemnation of slavery by Quakers and others for its un-Christian qualities.

Yes, women were second-class citizens for the first 100 plus years; we couldn't vote, own property, or sign contracts. We didn't have full civil rights until Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 barred discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Once those rights were attained, however, they were permanent.

When we compare ourselves to other cultures, Afghanistan for example, we see that moral and civil rights can just as easily go backward. Women in late 20th century Afghanistan enjoyed modern lives: education, independence, self-governance. When the Taliban came to power in

1996, women were made to veil themselves completely, ask permission to leave the home, and submit to sex with their husband at his whim with no right of refusal.

After the Taliban was ousted in 2001, Afghani women returned to “fragile but reversible” legal status,² which lasted only until US troops began withdrawing from Afghanistan in 2011. As the US withdrew, the Taliban resurged, and the Ministry of Justice banned family member testimony in criminal trials. Women are once again powerless to fight domestic violence and child and forced marriage.

Yes, sodomy was illegal in this country for a long time. Illinois was the first state to decriminalize sodomy in 1961, and not until 2003 did the Supreme Court rule that it is a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment to ban consensual sex between adults. Today, gay marriage is legal in all 50 states.

Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Syria today—today—punish men accused of homosexuality by beating them, lashing them, and/or throwing them to their death off building rooftops. ISIS arrogantly releases videos of same.

Yes, capitalism has created extreme disparity in wealth between the very rich and the very poor. It has also lifted more people out of poverty than any economic system in the world. In the socialist country of Venezuela—where everyone has free access to the same crappy healthcare—the people are so desperate for food they’re butchering and eating flamingos, not to mention dogs, cats, donkeys, horses, and pigeons.³

Venezuela is sitting on the largest oil reserves in the world but can’t extract and upgrade the heavy oil because it’s too expensive. In the way that capitalism works best, Western companies invested billions of dollars in Venezuela’s oil sector to unlock the reserves. As the price of Brent crude rose to \$72/bbl in 2007, Venezuela’s proven oil reserves increased, and it looked like the investment was going to pay off handsomely all around. Then, because Venezuela is socialist, the government expropriated the heavy oil investments.⁴

Instead of investing profits back into further development of the reserves—the most basic idea of Capitalism 101—the government siphoned money off for other things. Despite the significant rise in its recoverable oil post-Western investment, Venezuela’s production of crude oil dropped 20 percent over the last decade. (During that same decade, US oil production rose more than 80 percent.) Venezuela still has a boatload of oil, but it is unrecoverable without outside investment, and you flunk Capitalism 101 if you burn your investors. Not only are ConocoPhillips and ExxonMobil out, so is every other Western oil company who saw what happened to them.

Because socialism destroys economic freedom, confiscates private property, and controls price and currency, the people are eating dogs and cats they find in the street. Imagine a Venezuelan in your local Whole Foods or Costco, overwhelmed by its colorful profusion of fresh fruits and vegetables; its variety of fresh-baked breads and pastries; its cases full of different kinds of yogurt—regular, fat-free, Greek, probiotic, soy, frozen, fruit-on-the-bottom, blended. That’s what capitalism can do. Why don’t we teach that?

We don't teach that the universal rule of human society was poverty until capitalism came along. We don't teach that private enterprise and competition make life better. We don't teach that America is Western civilization's pearl of great price, a nation whose rights cannot be taken away because they're bestowed by our Creator. We don't teach that our American experiment is fragile and needs constant tending to preserve. We don't teach that, in context, America is something to be very, very proud of.

America is Western culture's highest expression and its last hope; we're the only ones left with much Western culture to speak of. Europe, which embraced a little too much multiculturalism a little too quickly, is trying desperately to put the genie back in its Western culture bottle, but its attempts are probably futile. When a culture is gone, it's gone.

We in this country are at a turning point. Do we unashamedly preserve what is best about Western culture? Or do we wring our hands and gulp *mea culpa* all the way to obliteration of the greatest country the world has ever known?

I love Western culture in America, and I am not ashamed. Let me make the case for it.

¹ "Jesse Jackson Didn't Lead Chant Against Western Culture," letter to the editor, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 21, 2016, <http://www.chronicle.com/blogs/letters/jesse-jackson-didnt-lead-chant-against-western-culture/>.

² Rod Nordland, "Taliban and Government Imperil Gains for Afghan Women, Advocates Say," *New York Times*, February 7, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/08/world/asia/womens-rights-seen-as-vulnerable-to-reversal-in-afghanistan.html>.

³ Gustavo Ocando, "Hungry Venezuelans killing flamingos and anteaters for food, biologists say," *Miami Herald*, February 10, 2017, <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/venezuela/article131778819.html>.

⁴ Robert Rapier, "Venezuela's Oil Reserves Are Probably Vastly Overstated," *Forbes*, July 1, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rpapier/2016/07/01/venezuelas-oil-reserves-are-probably-vastly-overstated/#5be87b2f4497>.