Western culture

Western culture (sometimes equated with Western civilization or European civilization) refers to cultures of European origin.

Western culture began with the Greeks, was enlarged and strengthened by the Romans, reformed and modernized by the fifteenth-century Renaissance and Reformation, and globalized by successive European empires that spread the European ways of life and education between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. European Culture developed with a complex range of philosophy, medieval scholasticism and mysticism, Christian and secular humanism. Rational thinking developed through a long age of change and formation with the experiments of enlightenment, naturalism, romanticism, science, democracy, and socialism. With its global connection, European culture grew with an all-inclusive urge to adopt, adapt, and ultimately influence other trends of culture.

The term "Western culture" is used very broadly to refer to a heritage of social norms, ethical values, traditional customs, religious beliefs, political systems, and specific artifacts and technologies. Specifically, Western culture may imply:

- a Graeco-Roman Classical and Renaissance cultural influence, concerning artistic, philosophic, literary, and legal themes and traditions, the cultural social effects of migration period and the heritages of Celtic, Germanic, Romanic, Slavic and other ethnic groups, as well as a tradition of rationalism in various spheres of life, developed by Hellenistic philosophy, Scholasticism, Humanisms, the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment, and including, in political thought, widespread rational arguments in favour of freethought, human rights, equality and democratic values averse to irrationality and theocracy.

- a Biblical-Christian cultural influence in spiritual thinking, customs and either ethic or moral traditions, around Post-Classical Era.

- Western European cultural influences concerning artistic, musical, folkloric, ethic and oral traditions, whose themes have been further developed by Romanticism.

The concept of western culture is generally linked to the classical definition of the Western world. In this definition, Western culture is the set of literary, scientific, political, artistic and philosophical principles which set it apart from other civilizations. Much of this set of traditions and knowledge is collected in the Western canon.\(^1\)

The term has come to apply to countries whose history is strongly marked by European immigration or settlement, such as the Americas, and Australasia, and is not restricted to Western Europe.
Some tendencies that define modern Western societies are the existence of political pluralism, prominent subcultures or countercultures (such as New Age movements), increasing cultural syncretism resulting from globalization and human migration.

**Terminology**

From its very beginnings in Mesopotamia and then ancient Greece, the East-West distinction has been somewhat difficult to define with precision. The Greeks were not so different from their Eastern neighbors for example. In the Middle Ages, where Islam was contrasted to the West, it is of the Islamic Near East, having, since the time of Alexander the Great, been Hellenized, ruled by Rome and Constantinople and part of the Orthodox communion, was as much under the influence of Byzantine and Biblical-Christian history as "Christendom". In addition, much of Southern and Eastern Europe had fallen under Islamic rule at various times during the Middle Ages.

In the later 20th to early 21st century, with the advent of increasing globalism, it has become more difficult to determine which individuals fit into which category, and the East–West contrast is sometimes criticized as relativistic and arbitrary.[2] [3] [4]

Globalism has, especially since the end of the cold war, spread western ideas so widely that almost all modern countries or cultures are to some extent influenced by aspects of western culture which they have absorbed. Recent stereotyped Western views of "the West" have been labelled Occidentalism, paralleling Orientalism, the term for the 19th century stereotyped views of "the East".

Geographically, "The West" today would normally be said to include Catholic and Protestant Europe as well as the overseas territories belonging to the Anglosphere, the Hispandad, the Lusofonia or the Francophonie.

**History**

Western culture is neither homogeneous nor unchanging. As with all other cultures it has evolved and gradually changed over time. All generalities about it have their exceptions at some time and place. The organisation and tactics of the Greek Hoplites differed in many ways from the Roman legions. The polis of the Greeks is not the same as the American superpower of the 21st century. The gladiatorial games of the Roman Empire are not identical to present-day football. The art of Pompeii is not the art of Hollywood. Nevertheless, it is possible to follow the evolution and history of the West, and appreciate its similarities and differences, its borrowings from, and contributions to, other cultures of humanity.

Concepts of what is the West arose out of legacies of the Western Roman Empire and the Eastern Roman Empire. Later, ideas of the west were formed by the concepts of Christendom and the Holy Roman Empire. What we think of as Western thought today is generally defined as Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian culture, and includes the ideals of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.
The Classical West was Graeco-Roman/Celtic/Germanic Europe.

In Homeric literature, and right up until the time of Alexander the Great, for example in the accounts of the Persian Wars of Greeks against Persians by Herodotus, we see the paradigm of a contrast between the West and East.

Nevertheless the Greeks felt they were civilized and saw themselves (in the formulation of Aristotle) as something between the wild barbarians of most of Europe and the soft, slavish Easterners. Inspired by Eastern example, and yet felt to be different, ancient Greek science, philosophy, democracy, architecture, literature, and art provided a foundation embraced and built upon by the Roman Empire as it swept up Europe, including the Hellenic World in its conquests in the 1st century BC. In the meantime however, Greece, under Alexander, had become a capital of the East, and part of an empire. The idea that the later Orthodox or Eastern Christian cultural descendants of the Greek-speaking Eastern Roman empire, are a happy mean between Eastern slavishness and Western barbarism is promoted to this day, for example in Russia, creating a zone which is both Eastern and Western depending upon the context of discussion.

For about five hundred years, the Roman Empire maintained the Greek East and consolidated a Latin West, but an East-West division remained, reflected in many cultural norms of the two areas, including language. Although Rome, like Greece, was no longer democratic, the idea of democracy remained a part of the education of citizens, as if the emperors were a temporary emergency measure.

Eventually the empire came to be increasingly officially split into a Western and Eastern part, reviving old ideas of a contrast between an advanced East, and a rugged West.

With the rise of Christianity in the midst of the Roman world, much of Rome's tradition and culture were absorbed by the new religion, and transformed into something new, which would serve as the basis for the development of Western civilization after the fall of Rome. Also, Roman culture mixed with the pre-existing Celtic, Germanic and Slavic cultures, which slowly became integrated into Western culture starting, mainly, with their acceptance of Christianity.
The Medieval West

The Medieval West was at its broadest the same as Christendom, including both the "Latin" or "Frankish" West, and the Orthodox Eastern part, where Greek remained the language of empire. More narrowly, it was Catholic (Latin) Europe. After the crowning of Charlemagne, this part of Europe was referred to by its neighbors in Byzantium and the Moslem world as "Frankish".

After the fall of Rome much of Greco-Roman art, literature, science and even technology were all but lost in the western part of the old empire, centered around Italy, and Gaul (France). However, this would become the centre of a new West. Europe fell into political anarchy, with many warring kingdoms and principalities. Under the Frankish kings, it eventually reunified and evolved into feudalism.

Much of the basis of the post-Roman cultural world had been set before the fall of the Empire, mainly through the integrating and reshaping of Roman ideas through Christian thought. The Greek and Roman paganism had been completely replaced by Christianity around the 4th and 5th centuries, since it became the official State religion following the baptism of emperor Constantine I. Roman Catholic Christianity and the Nicene Creed served as a unifying force in Western Europe, and in some respects replaced or competed with the secular authorities. Art and literature, law, education, and politics were preserved in the teachings of the Church, in an environment that, otherwise, would have probably seen their loss. The Church founded many cathedrals, universities, monasteries and seminaries, some of which continue to exist today. In the Medieval period, the route to power for many men was in the Church.

In a broader sense, the Middle Ages, with its tension between Greek reasoning and Levantine monotheism was not confined to the West but also stretched into the old East, in what was to become the Islamic world. Indeed the debate between these two streams of thought which is said to define the west was preserved best there for a while, with Greek literature, and even some Eastern theology, making their way back to Western Europe via Spain and Italy.

The rediscovery of the Justinian Code in the early 10th century rekindled a passion for the discipline of law, which crossed many of the re-forming boundaries between East and West. Eventually, it was only in the Catholic or Frankish west, that Roman law became the foundation on which all legal concepts and systems were based. Its influence can be traced to this day in all Western legal systems (although in different manners and to different extents in the common (England) and the civil (continental European) legal traditions). The study of canon law, the legal system of the Catholic Church, fused with that of Roman law to form the basis of the refounding of Western legal scholarship. The ideas of civil rights, equality before the law, equality of women, procedural justice, and democracy as the ideal form of society, and were principles which formed the basis of modern Western culture.
The West actively encouraged the spreading of Christianity, which was inexorably linked to the spread of Western culture. Owing to the influence of Islamic culture and Islamic civilization — a culture that had preserved some of the knowledge of ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, India, Persia, Greece, and Rome—in Islamic Spain and southern Italy, and in the Levant during the Crusades, Western Europeans translated many Arabic texts into Latin during the Middle Ages. Later, with the fall of Constantinople and the Ottoman conquest of the Byzantine Empire, followed by a massive exodus of Greek Christian priests and scholars to Italian towns like Venice, bringing with them as many scripts from the Byzantine archives as they could, scholars' interest for the Greek language and classic works, topics and lost files was revived. Both the Greek and Arabic influences eventually led to the beginnings of the Renaissance. From the late 15th century to the 17th century, Western culture began to spread to other parts of the world by intrepid explorers and missionaries during the Age of Discovery, followed by imperialists from the 17th century to the early 20th century.

**The Modern Era**

Coming into the modern era, the historical understanding of the East-West contrast - as the opposition of Christendom to its geographical neighbours - began to weaken. As religion became less important, and Europeans came into increasing contact with far away peoples, the old concept of Western Culture began a slow evolution towards what it is today. The Early Modern "Age of Discovery" in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries faded into the "Age of Enlightenment" continuing into the 18th, both characterized by the military advantages coming to Europeans from their development of firearms and other military technologies. The "Great Divergence" became more pronounced, making the West the bearer of science and the accompanying revolutions of technology and industrialisation. Western political thinking also eventually spread in many forms around the world. With the early 19th century "Age of Revolution" the West entered a period of World empires, massive economic and technological advance, and bloody international conflicts continuing into the 20th century.

Religion in the meantime has waned considerably in Western Europe, where many are agnostic or atheist. Nearly half of the populations of the United Kingdom (44-54%), Germany (41-49%), France (43-54%) and the Netherlands (39-44%) are non-theist. However, religious belief in the United States is very strong, about 75-85% of the population,[5] as also happens in most of Latin America.

As Europe discovered the wider world, old concepts adapted. The Islamic world which had formerly been considered "the Orient" ("the East") more specifically became the "Near East" as the interests of the European powers for the first time interfered with Qing China and Meiji Japan in the 19th century.[6] Thus, the Sino-Japanese War in 1894–1895 occurred in the "Far East", while the troubles surrounding the decline of the Ottoman Empire simultaneously occurred in the "Near East".[7] The "Middle East" in the mid-19th century included the territory east of the Ottoman empire but West of China, i.e. Greater Persia and Greater India, but is now used synonymously with "Near East".
Politics

Despite the Western empires in the past, concepts of democracy and an emphasis on freedom has been seen as distinguishing Western peoples from non-western neighbors.

In the Middle Ages and early modern times, the concept of a separation of Church and state developed, allowing for the development of more distinctive political norms, such as the doctrine of the separation of powers, which make modern Western democracy distinct from democracy in general.

In comparison to many other cultures in the world, western cultures tend to emphasize the individual. Much of this respect for difference and individual liberties remain, however, still theoretical, in many ways, among mainstream society, when the individual factor encounters a strong opposition from social customs and consensus, and thus resists to be accepted or understood. This situation, has tended to change among most progressive sectors of society, as a consequence of the many social and counter-cultural movements that the last decades have come to see.

Creativity and the expression of the individual is commonly encouraged in Western culture. New subcultures, art and technology constantly emerge. Furthermore, capitalism which is found in almost every western country, supports a highly individualistic ideology.

The forms of government usually adopted in western societies, as a part of a wider, nowadays ruling social-economical liberal capitalist structure, are multi-party parliamentary or presidential (also 'congressional') systems, frequently referred to as figurative democracy, which favors some sort of majority consensus when coming to adopt collective decisions.

Widespread influence

Elements of Western culture have had a very influential affect on other cultures worldwide. People of many cultures, both Western and non-Western, equate modernization (adoption of technological progress) with westernization (adoption of Western culture). Some members of the non-Western world have suggested that the link between technological progress and certain harmful Western values provides a reason why much of "modernity" should be rejected as being incompatible with their vision and the values of their societies. These types of argument referring to imperialism and stressing the importance of freedom from it and the relativist argument that different cultural norms should be treated equally, are also present in Western philosophy.

What is generally uncontested, is that much of the technology and social patterns which make up what is defined as "modernization" were developed in the Western world.
Western culture

Music, art, story-telling and architecture

Some cultural and artistic modalities are also characteristically Western in origin and form. While dance, music, visual art, story-telling, and architecture are human universals, they are expressed in the West in certain characteristic ways.

The symphony has its origins in Italy. Many important musical instruments used by cultures all over the world were also developed in the West; among them are the violin, piano, pipe organ, saxophone, trombone, clarinet, and the theremin. The solo piano, symphony orchestra and the string quartet are also important performing musical forms.

The ballet is a distinctively Western form of performance dance. The ballroom dance is an important Western variety of dance for the elite. The polka, the square dance, and the Irish step dance are very well-known Western forms of folk dance.

Historically, the main forms of western music are European folk, choral, classical, Country, rock and roll, hip-hop, and Electronica.

While epic literary works in verse such as the Mahabarata and Homer's Iliad are ancient and occurred worldwide, the novel as a distinct form of story telling only arose in the West in the period 1200 to 1750. Photography and the motion picture as a technology and as the basis for entirely new art forms were also developed first in the West. The soap opera, a popular culture dramatic form originated in the United States first on radio in the 1930s, then a couple of decades later on television. The music video was also developed in the West in the middle of the twentieth century.

The arch, the dome, and the flying buttress as architectural motifs were first used by the Romans. Important western architectural motifs include the Doric, Corinthian, and Ionic columns, and the Romanesque, Gothic, Baroque, and Victorian styles are still widely recognised, and used even today, in the West. Much of Western architecture emphasises repetition of simple motifs, straight lines and expansive, undecorated planes. A modern ubiquitous architectural form that emphasizes this characteristic is the skyscraper, first developed in New York and Chicago.

Oil painting is said to have originated by Jan van Eyck, and perspective drawings and paintings had their earliest practitioners in Florence. In art, the Celtic knot is a very distinctive Western repeated motif. Depictions of the nude human male and female in photography, painting and sculpture are frequently considered to have special artistic merit. Realistic portraiture is especially valued. In Western dance, music, plays and other arts, the performers are only very infrequently masked. There are essentially no taboos against depicting God, or other religious figures, in a representational fashion.

Many forms of popular music have been derived from African-Americans being such as jazz this is what most if not all modern music generally consist's of today.' folklore and music during 20th and 19th centuries, initially by
Western culture

themselves, but later played and further developed together with White & Black Americans, British people, and Westerners in general. These include Jazz, Blues and Rock music (that in a wider sense include the Rock and roll and Heavy metal genres), Rhythm and blues, Funk, Techno as well as the Ska and Reggae genres from Jamaica. Several other related or derived styles were developed and introduced by western pop culture such as Pop, Metal and Dance Music.
Scientific and technological inventions and discoveries

A feature of Western culture is its focus on science and technology, and its ability to generate new processes, materials and material artifacts.\(^{11}\) It was the West that first developed steam power and adapted its use into factories, and for the generation of electrical power.\(^{12}\) The electrical motor, dynamo, transformer, and electric light, and indeed most of the familiar electrical appliances, were inventions of the West. The Otto and the Diesel internal combustion engines are products whose genesis and early development were in the West. Nuclear power stations are derived from the first atomic pile constructed in Chicago in 1942.

Communication devices and systems including the telegraph, the telephone, radio, television, communication and navigation satellites, mobile phone, and the Internet were all invented by Westerners.\(^{13}\) The pencil, ballpoint pen, CRT, LCD, LED, photograph, photocopier, laser printer, ink jet printer, plasma display screen and world wide web were also invented in the West.

Ubiquitous materials including concrete, aluminum, clear glass, synthetic rubber, synthetic diamond and the plastics polyethylene, polypropylene, PVC and polystyrene were invented in the West. Iron and steel ships, bridges and skyscrapers first appeared in the West. Nitrogen fixation and petrochemicals were invented by Westerners. Most of the elements, were discovered and named in the West, as well as the contemporary atomic theories to explain them.

The transistor, integrated circuit, memory chip, and computer were all first seen in the West. The ship's chronometer, the screw propeller, the locomotive, bicycle, automobile, and aeroplane were all invented in the West. Eyeglasses, the telescope, the microscope and electron microscope, all the varieties of chromatography, protein and DNA sequencing, computerised tomography, NMR, x-rays, and light, ultraviolet and infrared spectroscopy, were all first developed and applied in Western laboratories, hospitals and factories.

In medicine, vaccination, anesthesia, and all the pure antibiotics were created in the West. The method of preventing Rh disease, the treatment of diabetes, and the germ theory of disease were discovered by Westerners. The eradication of that ancient scourge, smallpox, was led by a Westerner, Donald Henderson. Radiography, Computed tomography, Positron emission tomography and Medical ultrasoundography are important diagnostic tools developed in the West. Other important diagnostic tools of clinical chemistry including the methods of spectrophotometry, electrophoresis and immunoassay were first devised by Westerners. So were the stethoscope, electrocardiograph, and the endoscope. Vitamins, hormonal contraception, hormones, insulin, Beta blockers and ACE inhibitors,
along with a host of other medically proven drugs were first utilised to treat disease in the West. The double-blind study and evidence-based medicine are critical scientific techniques widely used in the West for medical purposes.

In mathematics, calculus, statistics, logic, vector, tensor and complex analysis, group theory and topology were developed by Westerners. In biology, evolution, chromosomes, DNA, genetics and the methods of molecular biology are creatures of the West. In physics, the science of mechanics and quantum mechanics, relativity, thermodynamics, and statistical mechanics were all developed by Westerners. The discoveries and inventions by Westerners in electromagnetism include Coulomb's law (1785), the first battery (1800), the unity of electricity and magnetism (1820), Biot–Savart law (1820), Ohm's Law (1827), and the Maxwell's equations (1871). The atom, nucleus, electron, neutron and proton were all unveiled by Westerners.

In finance, double entry bookkeeping, the limited liability company, life insurance, and the charge card were all first used in the West.

Westerners are also known for their explorations of the globe and space. The first expedition to circumnavigate the Earth (1522) was by Westerners, as well as the first to set foot on the South Pole (1911), and the first human to land on the moon (1969). The landing of robots on Mars (2004) and on an asteroid (2001), and the Voyager explorations of the outer planets (Uranus in 1986 and Neptune in 1989) were all achievements of Westerners.

Themes and traditions

Western culture has developed many themes and traditions, the most significant of which are:

• Greco-Latin classic letters, arts, architecture, philosophical and cultural tradition, that include the influence of preeminent authors such as Plato, Aristotle, Homer, Herodotus, and Cicero, as well as a long mythologic tradition
• A tradition of the importance of the rule of law which has its roots in Ancient Greece.
• The Catholic and Protestant Christian cultural tradition and ethic.
• Secular humanism, rationalism and Enlightenment thought, as opposed to traditionally preeminent Catholicism and Protestant Christianity, religious and
moral doctrines in lifestyle. Though such opposition has not fully ended, it set the basis for a new critical attitude and open questioning of religion, favouring freethinking and questioning of the church as an authority, which resulted in open-minded and reformist ideals inside, such as liberation theology, which partly adopted these currents, and secular and political tendencies such as laicism, agnosticism, materialism and atheism.

- Widespread usage of terms and specific vocabulary borrowed, based or derived from Greek and Latin roots or etymologies for almost any field of arts, science and human knowledge, becoming easily understandable and common to almost any European language, and being a source for inventing internationalized neologisms for nearly any purpose. It is not rare for full loan Latin phrases or expressions, such as *in situ*, *grosso modo* or *tempus fugit*, to be in usage, many of them giving name to artistic or literatic concepts or currents. The usage of such roots and phrases is standardized in giving official scientific names for biological species (such as *Homo sapiens* or *Tyrannosaurus rex*). This shows a reverence for these languages, called classicism.

- Generalized usage of some form of the Latin or Greek alphabet. The latter includes the standard cases of Greece and other derived forms, such as Cyrillic, the case of those Slavic Eastern countries of Christian Orthodox tradition, historically under the Byzantine and later Russian czarist or Soviet area of influence. Other variants of it are encountered for Gothic and Coptic alphabets, that historically substituted older scripts, such as Runic, and Demotic or Hieroglyphic systems.

- Scholasticism.
- Renaissance arts and letters.
- Natural law, human rights, constitutionalism, parliamentarism (or presidentialism) and formal liberal democracy in recent times — prior to the 19th century, most Western governments were still monarchies.
- A large influence, in modern times, of many of the ideals and values developed and inherited from Romanticism
- Several subcultures (sometimes deriving into urban tribes) and countercultural movements, such as hippie lifestyle or New Age, that have left several influences on contemporary mainstream or subcultural tendencies (some of them, especially in the mainstream, can become merely aesthetic).

See also

- Eastern culture
- History of western civilization
- Western World
- Westernisation
- Western religion
- Western philosophy
- Globalization
- The Enlightenment
- Industrial Revolution
- Culture during the Cold War

Books:

- *Death of the West*
- *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture* by Jonathan Dollimore
Maps

- Latin alphabet world distribution. The dark green areas show the countries where this alphabet is the sole main script. The light green shows the countries where the alphabet co-exists with other scripts.
- Legal Systems of the World
- Religions of the world, mapped by distribution.
- Map showing relative degree of religiosity by country. Based on a 2006-2008 worldwide survey by Gallup.
- Human language families

References

- Pastor, Ludwig von, *History of the Popes from the Close of the Middle Ages; Drawn from the Secret Archives of the Vatican and other original sources*, 40 vols. St. Louis, B. Herder (1898ff.)
Further reading


References

[7] British archaeologist D.G. Hogarth published *The Nearer East* in 1902, which helped to define the term and its extent, including Albania, Montenegro, southern Serbia and Bulgaria, Greece, Egypt, all the Ottoman lands, the entire Arabian Peninsula, and western parts of Iran.
[8] Barzun, p. 329
[10] Barzun, p. 73
[15] http://books.google.com/books?id=0ZKPD5Crla31EgK&dq=%22the+popes+and+science%22
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