



***Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of its Enemies*, by Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit**

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Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of its Enemies. By Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit. New York: The Penguin Press, 2004. ISBN 1-59420-008-4. Notes. Index. Pp 165. \$21.95.

A couple of months ago a colleague mentioned that he had been asked to present a paper at an academic conference whose theme was "Is There Still a 'West'?" This is undoubtedly a legitimate problem for European and American scholars worried about the recent fraying of the trans-Atlantic bond. Yet it is safe to say the question would never have occurred to someone who was Chinese, Arab, or African. Throughout the length and breadth of Europe's old imperia, the reality of the West is not seriously in dispute. For Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, however, the continued preponderance of Western influence around the world is of less concern than the images and emotions that influence has stimulated among those who have perceived the West as an unwelcome presence. Among the flood of recent books purporting to provide a skeleton key to the contemporary security environment, their slim volume stands out by virtue of its insistence upon the complexity of the lock. They lay a large share of the world's troubles at the feet of a pernicious ideology they call "Occidentalism," by which the core values of the West have been traduced in the minds of its enemies. This distorted image has in turn inflamed the hatreds that, over the last two centuries, have fueled resistance to the spread of liberal and democratic ideas. The current mess, they conclude, is neither a clash of civilizations nor the accidental product of recent policy mistakes, but a reflection of old and stubborn misapprehensions about what the West stands for, and what it wants.

These misapprehensions first arose in Europe itself, an observation of considerable importance, albeit one that reveals the book's title for what it is: a marketing concept rather than an analytic tool. The real subject of the authors' reflections is not the West as a historical reality but modernity as a complex of ideas, attitudes, and practices. For them the "West" is any place where modernity—here broadly synonymous with limited, responsible government and a respect for individual rights and scientific rationality—has prevailed. Occidentalists are those, wherever situated, who have found the modern to be intolerably corrosive of traditional values: decadent, rootless, alienated, materialist, morally soft, and spiritually bereft. Such people arose first in the West, because it was there that the challenges of modernity were first experienced.

Today they can be found literally everywhere. What to make of this is a good question, to which Buruma and Margalit offer a firm, if not entirely convincing answer. They argue that Occidentalists

are connected by a common intellectual descent, extending back to European romantic critics of the Enlightenment, and passing into our own time through a variety of fascist, communist, and religious conservative movements, while spreading around the world as part of the baggage of European imperialism. The history of Occidentalism is thus one of "cross-contamination, the spread of bad ideas." (149) This proposition requires a good deal more evidence than the authors adduce. It is certainly worth noticing that, up to a point, the German Romantics, Hitler, the Ayatollah Khomeini, Franz Fanon, Tojo, the Slavophiles, Osama bin Laden, and Mao (among others), all expressed their contempt for modernity in similar terms. But that is scarcely sufficient to demonstrate that they acquired their ideas from each other, nor to mitigate the obvious practical and ideological differences among them.

This is not a book to withstand the close scrutiny of academic experts but then it does not really invite that scrutiny. It is not organized to unfold the genealogy of Occidentalism, but rather to display crucial elements of its taxonomy, as manifest by a perennial preoccupation with a few recurring themes: the decadence and alienation of urban life; the pervasive reliance of modern societies on competitive markets to mediate human relationships; their hubristic faith in rationality and scientific reasoning; and their corresponding disdain for spiritual, aristocratic, and religious values, which always take second place to the pursuit of material comfort. These have been imagined, across an impressively wide range of time and circumstance, to reveal the corrupt essence of "the West" in its modern guise.

It is a picture well calculated to give pause to those who conceive the current struggle with radical Islamism in strictly tactical terms, as "war on terror," and also those who have been too quick to conclude that the world has been made altogether new by recent events. The global and historical unity of Occidentalism, as presented here, resides chiefly in shared resentments, and in the common rhetorical strategies that these have engendered. It is above all an ideology of disappointment, heightened as often as not by nostalgia for an imaginary past. Nevertheless, one is inclined to wonder whether the germinal experience of modernization in the West can really have been quite the same as it has been elsewhere. Those Europeans who first recoiled from the idea of the modern in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were at least confronting an organic, if bitterly despised, development within their own societies. Even granting that modernity is synonymous with what the rest of the world means by "the West," the fact remains that rest of the world has not encountered the West simply as a moral challenge to received ideas, but as a material force of immense coercive power. Whatever resentments the West's enemies may harbor have something to do with how that power has been employed, and represented symbolically. It is surprising that Buruma and Margalit, taking note of the great metropolises of Asia, should propose that, to the extent that those cities represent an Occidentalist rejoinder to the corrupt urbanism of the West, they "celebrate power instead of freedom." (46) Anyone who supposes that the skyline of lower Manhattan does not symbolize power is going to have a hard time understanding why the Twin Towers should have become the objects of such lethal violence.

It is also puzzling, or at any rate disheartening, that Occidentalism should have persisted intact for so long in the face of accumulating experience of what modern societies are really like. European military officers in the nineteenth century were drawn disproportionately from pre-industrial agrarian elites, and they were inclined to worry that modernization and city life had undermined the fighting spirit of their armies. They suspected that proletarian workers were too radicalized and deracinated to be good soldiers, and they doubted that the commercial middle class, so caught up with getting and spending, could provide satisfactory officers. This, needless to say, was a strategic miscalculation of some significance, but those who made it at least had the excuse of having lived in ignorance. This is no longer the case. Buruma and Margalit quite properly take for granted that Occidentalism is not a set of "ideas," but of illusions, and they waste no time trying to prove that those who harbor them are wrong: that city life is not dehumanizing, that the bourgeoisie is not spiritually dead, that Western women are not whores, or that modern soldiers are not cowards. Nor, for that matter, do they attempt to trace the chain of reasoning (if that is the word) by which Occidentalists have periodically concluded that Western civilization is

on its last legs. Buruma and Margalit are both university professors (at Bard College and the Hebrew University, respectively), and if there is one thing all professors know, it is that it is not easy to change people's minds simply by acquainting them with the facts.

The imperviousness of Occidentalism to information and experience is undoubtedly its most troubling characteristic. The modern West puts great stock in the power of argument, and when it fails it is hard to know what to do. The problem is compounded by the West's routine failure to live up to its professed ideals and by the fact that, however wrong the West's enemies may be about the details, they are right that the inherited practices and prescribed hierarchies of traditional societies do not survive prolonged contact with those ideals—at least they do not survive sufficiently intact to satisfy the fantasies of Occidentalists. The core principles of political freedom, religious tolerance, scientific reason, and individual rights that they find so dangerous are dangerous precisely because their appeal is not culturally specific. The connection of "the modern" to "the West" is crucial, but it is also historically contingent. The love of liberty is not the same as a taste for cricket, foie gras, or large, gas-guzzling automobiles. If it were, the modern would be no threat to anyone.

Buruma and Margalit conclude with some mild, Tocquevillian ironies. They caution that, despite the preponderant role of Western imperialism in creating the contemporary world, the West should not feel too guilty about having somehow fostered the barbarism of its adversaries, for to do so would be to assume that those outside the ambit of modernity are basically children, incapable of taking responsibility for their own actions. They also warn against the temptation to "fight fire with fire." "We cannot afford to close our societies as a defense against those who have closed theirs," as they say, because "then we would all become Occidentalists, and there would be nothing left to defend." (148-49)

The latter point looks sharper if it is viewed from the other side. The self-restraint of the West is today the chief strategic resource of its enemies, who persist in believing in its weakness and decadence in part because of its reluctance to use the overwhelming power at its disposal. When a suicide bomber detonates himself at a Jerusalem bus stop, he knows that he (and others) will die, and also that some form of retaliation will be visited upon his comrades: a few buildings will be bulldozed, a few big-wigs assassinated. Jihadi firing from a mosque in Falluja know that if the mosque is destroyed they too will die but they accept the risk because they imagine that the destruction of a sacred building will dramatize their enemy's lack of spirituality. Neither considers that the price of their action might include, for instance, the systemic torture and execution of every living soul in the towns where they were born. Yet such things have happened: the jihadi of Falluja did not rise up against Saddam Hussein because they knew perfectly well that retribution of inconceivable brutality would follow. There is, in other words, a point at which strategies calculated merely to "heighten the contradictions" become self-defeating. The eclipse of liberalism in the West, should it occur, would quite obviously be nothing more than a prelude to the utter destruction of its enemies. The only victories available to the Occidentalists are of the Pyrrhic variety. Even should they succeed in setting the world ablaze, life among the ashes will be nothing like their dreams.

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