

# What Is the West?

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**A**S WE ENTER THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY, WE FIND THAT MANY OF THE PEOPLE who influence public opinion—politicians, teachers, clergy, journalists, and television commentators—frequently refer to “Western values,” “the West,” and “Western civilization.” They often use these terms as if they do not require explanation. But what *do* these terms mean? The West has always been an arena within which different cultures, religions, social groups, values, political philosophies, and ideologies have interacted, and any definition of the West will inevitably arouse controversy.

## The Contradiction of Western Values

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The notion of “Western values” is fraught with contradictions. Values are the moral and philosophical principles that are held in esteem by a particular culture. The values typically identified as “Western” include universal human rights, toleration of religious diversity, equality before the law, democracy, and freedom of inquiry and expression. These values have a long history. Yet these values have not always been embraced by Western societies. For example, the rulers of ancient Rome extended privileges to a select few inhabitants of their empire (see Chapter 5)—thus only the privileged enjoyed the benefits of equality before the law. Medieval Europeans expressed an intense intolerance for religious diversity (see Chapter 9). As late as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, white men living in the United States enslaved blacks and excluded women from voting. And in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, totalitarian regimes terrorized their own populations and millions of others beyond their borders (see Chapter 25). The history of the West is riddled with examples of leaders who stifled free inquiry and who censored their followers. What are we to make of this contradiction in values? These examples demonstrate that the values that are often identified as Western today have always been contested and contradicted by competing values within the West.

## The West as Place

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A term related to Western values is the “the West.” The West is a geographic expression indicating where the values identified earlier originated—and where they continue to exercise great influence. Most people think of the West as Europe and the Americas, but when Japan, an Asian country, accepted some of these values after World War II, did it become part of the West? Another example complicates the definition even further. Until 1994, the Republic of South Africa was ruled by the white minority, people descended from European immigrants. Their oppressive regime violated human rights, rejected full legal equality for all citizens, and jailed or murdered those who questioned the government.



### ■ A Satellite View of Europe

What is the West? Western civilization has undergone numerous definitions throughout history.

Only when that government was replaced through democratic elections and a black man became president did South Africa grant full rights to non-Europeans. To what degree was South Africa part of the West before and after these developments? Closer to the core of the West is Russia, a Christian country with a long tradition of cultural, economic, and political ties with the rest of Europe. The Russians have always identified with their western neighbors, but their neighbors were not always sure about Russia. After the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, much of Russia was isolated from the rest of the West (see Chapter 10), and during the Cold War from 1949 to 1989 (see Chapters 27–29) Russian communism was contrasted with the democracies of “the West.” When was Russian “Western” and when not?

## Western Civilization?

The even more problematic term “Western civilization” implies not only a set of values and a certain geographical location but also a history—a tradition stretching back thousands of years to the ancient world.

During those long millennia, human society experienced profound changes, such as the fundamental shift from hunting and gathering to agriculture in the Neolithic age (see Chapter 1) and the much more recent transition from an agricultural to an industrial economy. Over this long period the civilization we now identify as Western gradually took shape. It acquired many salient characteristics, including distinctive political and social philosophies, forms of religious expression, methods of scientific inquiry, and systems of economic organization. As this civilization developed, the values identified previously as Western took root and found acceptance.

The geographical setting of the West has also shifted over time. This textbook begins about 12,000 years ago in the Middle East. At that time crops were harvested, animals were domesticated, and vast trading networks were being established. Cities, kingdoms, and empires gave birth to the first civilizations. By about 500 B.C.E., the civilizations that are the cultural ancestors of the modern West had spread from the Middle East to include the

Mediterranean basin—areas influenced by Egyptian, Hebrew, Greek, and Roman thought, art, law, and religion. By the first century C.E. the Roman Empire drew the map of what historians consider the heartland of the West: most of western and southern Europe, the coastlands of the Mediterranean Sea, and the Middle East.

With the rise of Christianity and Islam between the third and seventh centuries C.E., the notion of a distinct civilization in these “Western” lands subtly changed. People came to identify themselves less as subjects of a particular empire and more as members of a community of faith—whether that community comprised followers of Christianity, Judaism, or Islam (see Chapter 7). These communities of faith drew lines of inclusion and exclusion that still exist today. From about 1,000 to 500 years ago, Christian monarchs obliterated polytheism (the worship of many gods), strove to expel Muslims from Christian kingdoms, and marginalized Jews (see Chapter 9). Europeans developed definitions of civilization that did not include Islamic communities. The Islamic countries themselves erected their own barriers, isolating themselves from the West.

The definition of the West has also changed as a result of European colonialism, which began about 500 years ago. When European powers assembled large overseas empires, they introduced Western languages, religions, technology, and culture to many distant places in the world (see Chapters 12, 19, and 23). In some of these colonized areas—such as North America, Argentina, Australia, and New Zealand—the European newcomers so outnumbered the

indigenous peoples that these regions became as much a part of the West as Britain, France, and Spain. By the mid-twentieth century, one of those originally colonized countries—the United States—stood as the predominant military and cultural force in the West. In other European colonies, especially in European trading outposts on the Asian continent, Western culture failed to exercise a widespread influence.

Brazil, a South American country inhabited by large numbers of indigenous peoples and the descendants of African slaves, epitomizes the complexity of what defines the West. In Brazil, almost everyone speaks a Western language (Portuguese), practices a Western religion (Christianity), and enjoys the benefits of Western political and economic institutions (democracy and capitalism). Yet in Brazil all of these features of Western civilization have become part of a distinctive hybrid civilization, in which African, European, and indigenous elements have been blended. During Carnival, for example, Brazilians dance to

African rhythms, dressed in indigenous costumes, to the accompaniment of music played on European instruments.

## Asking the Right Questions

So how can we make sense of the contradictions of Western values, the West as a place, and Western civilization in general? In short, what has Western civilization been over the course of its long history—and what is it today?

Answering these questions is the friendly challenge this book poses. You may be alarmed to learn that there are no simple answers to any of these questions. On the other hand, you may be relieved to discover that there is a method for finding answers that have meaning for the different periods of history covered in this book. The method

### Map 1 Topographical Map of the West

The geographical borders of the West have not changed substantially throughout history, but the concept of where the West is has changed.



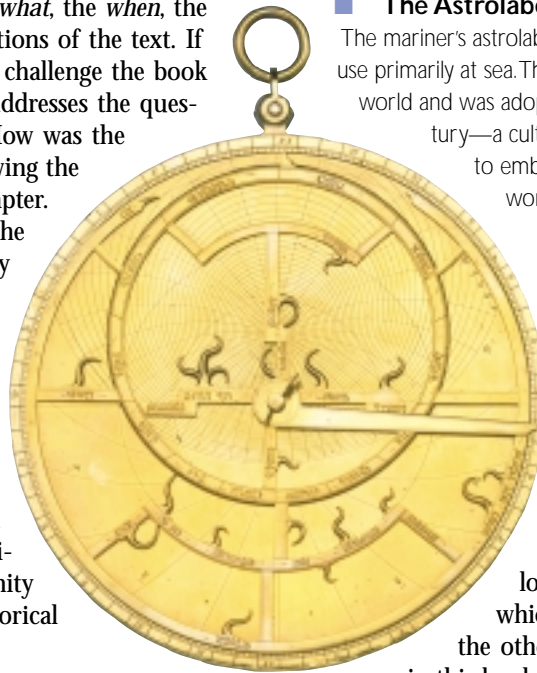
is straightforward. Always ask the *what*, the *when*, the *where*, the *how*, and the *why* questions of the text. If you do so, you will surmount the challenge the book poses. To aid you, every chapter addresses the question of “What is the West,” or “How was the West made” at its beginning following the story or event that opens the chapter. We revisit the question in the Conclusion at the end of every chapter. For example, in Chapter 11 we look at how the Italian Renaissance helped refashion the very concept of Western civilization. In the Conclusion, we see that the Renaissance interest in the history of the ancient world transformed the idea of the West from one defined primarily by religious identification with Christianity to one created by a common historical experience.

### THE “WHAT” QUESTION

What is Western civilization? This is a question of definition. A definition requires precision—the statement of exactly what you mean in concrete, specific terms. Periodically throughout the text, this question crops up in a variety of ways. Remember that the answer to this question will vary according to time and place. In fact, for much of the early history covered in this book, Western civilization did not exist. The West was in no sense a single cultural entity. Rather, a number of distinctive civilizations were taking shape in the Middle East, northern Africa, and Europe, each of which contributed to what later became Western civilization (see Chapters 1–3). Today Western civilization still includes many different cultures. Thus our understanding of Western civilization will change from chapter to chapter. For example, in Chapters 12, 19, and 23, we examine how the place of the West changed through the colonial expansion of the European nations. In Chapter 16 we learn how the West came to prize the values of scientific inquiry for solving human and philosophical problems, an approach that did not exist before the seventeenth century but became central to Western civilization.

### THE “WHEN” QUESTION

When did the defining characteristics of Western civilization first emerge, and for how long did they prevail? To explore these questions, you will want to refer to the dates that frame each chapter, as well as the numerous short chronologies offered in each chapter. These resources will help you keep track of what happened when. Dates have no



### ■ The Astrolabe

The mariner's astrolabe was a navigational device intended for use primarily at sea. The astrolabe originated in the Islamic world and was adopted by Europeans in the twelfth century—a cultural encounter that enabled Europeans to embark on long ocean voyages around the world.

meaning by themselves, but the connections *between* them can be very revealing.

In particular, dates help you place people, movements, and events on a chronological scale. For example, dates show that the agricultural revolution that permitted the birth of the first civilizations (see Chapter 1) unfolded over a long span of about 10,000 years—which is more time than was taken by all the other events and developments covered in this book. Other dates reveal that wars of religion (see Chapter 14) plagued Europe for nearly 200 years before Enlightenment thinkers articulated the ideals of religious toleration (see Chapter 17). Still other dates show that the American Civil War, the war to preserve the union as President Abraham Lincoln termed it, took place at exactly the same time as other wars were being fought to achieve national unity in Germany and Italy (see Chapter 21).

By learning when things happened, you can identify the major causes and consequences of events, and thus you can see the transformations of Western civilization. For instance, the ability to produce a surplus of food through agriculture and the domestication of animals was a prerequisite for the emergence of civilizations. The violent collapse of religious unity after the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century led some Europeans to propose the separation of church and state two centuries later. And during the nineteenth century many Western states—in response to the enormous diversity among their own peoples—became preoccupied with maintaining or establishing national unity.

### THE “WHERE” QUESTION

Where has Western civilization been located? Geography, of course, does not change, but the idea of where the West is does. The location of the West is not so much a matter of changing borders but of changing ideas and behavior. In reading this book, you will need to follow carefully the places under discussion. Each chapter helps you do this with several maps. By knowing the “where” of Western civilization, you can keep track not only of its changing geography but also its changing definition. For example, we have taken pains to help you trace the ever-shifting borders of the West. The key to understanding the shifting borders of the West is

to study the peoples within the countries around the West. These groups include Muslims and the peoples of eastern Europe (such as the Soviet Union during the Cold War). In addition, the chapters help you trace the relationships between the West (as it was constituted in different periods) and other, more distant civilizations with which it interacted. Those civilizations include not only those of East Asia and South Asia but also the indigenous peoples of sub-Saharan Africa, the Americas, and the Pacific islands (see Chapters 12, 19, and 23).

## THE “HOW” QUESTION

How did Western civilization develop? This is a question about processes—about how things change or stay the same over time. We have designed this book to help you identify these processes in several ways. First, we have woven the theme of encounters throughout the story. What do we mean by encounters? Here is an example from Chapter 12: When the Spanish *conquistadores* arrived in the Americas some 500 years ago, they came into contact with the cultures of the Caribs, the Aztecs, the Incas, and other peoples who had lived in the Americas for thousands of years. As the Spanish fought, traded with, and intermarried with the natives, each culture changed. The Spanish, for their part, borrowed from the Americas new plants for cultivation and responded to what they considered serious threats to their worldview. Many native Americans, in turn, adopted European religious practices and learned to speak European languages. At the same time, they were deci-

mated by European diseases to which they had never been exposed. They also witnessed the destruction of their own civilizations and governments at the hands of the colonial powers. Through many centuries of interaction and mutual influence, both sides became something other than what they had been.

The European encounter with the Americas is an obvious example of what was, in fact, a continuous process of encounters. These encounters often occurred between peoples from different civilizations, such as the struggles between Greeks and Persians in the ancient world (see Chapter 3) or between Europeans and Chinese in the nineteenth century (see Chapter 23). Other encounters took place among people living in the same civilization. These include interactions between lords and peasants, men and women, Christians and Jews, Catholics and Protestants, factory owners and workers, and capitalists and communists. Western civilization developed and changed through a series of external and internal encounters.

The features included in the chapters can also help you formulate answers to the question of how Western civilization developed. For example, each chapter contains an essay titled “Justice in History.” These essays discuss a trial or some other episode involving questions of justice. Some “Justice in History” essays illustrate how Western civilization was forged in struggles over conflicting values, such as the discussion of the trial of Galileo in Chapter 16, which examines the conflict between religious and scientific concepts of truth. Others show how efforts to resolve internal cultural, political, and religious tensions helped



### ■ Cortés Meets Montezuma

As the Spanish fought, traded, and intermarried with the native peoples of the Americas during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, each culture changed.

shape Western ideas about justice, such as the essay on Spanish *auto da fé* in Chapter 14, which illustrates how authorities attempted to enforce religious conformity. At the end of each “Justice in History” feature, you will find several questions tying that essay to the theme of the chapter. These questions will also ask you to explore the value-based conflicts or disputes embodied in the incident described in the essay.

Some chapters include two other features as well. Essays titled “The Human Body in History” demonstrate that even the body, which we typically understand as a product of genetics and biology, has a history. These essays show that the ways in which Western people understand their bodies, how they cure them, how they cover and uncover them, and how they adorn them tell us a great deal about the history of Western culture. Chapter 24, for example, explores how the bodies of World War I soldiers afflicted with shell shock were treated differently from women experiencing similar symptoms of hysteria. Shell-shocked soldiers gave people a sense of the horrors of war and stimulated powerful movements in Europe to outlaw war as an instrument of government policy.

The “Places of Encounter” features show how encounters between different groups of people were not abstract historical processes but events that occurred in actual places. Chapter 23, for example, focuses on the nineteenth-century soccer stadium. In the nineteenth century soccer was a sport reserved for gentlemen, but in the great industrial cities it became the favorite sport of the industrial workers. In the soccer stadiums they began to experience their common identity as a class.

## THE “WHY” QUESTION

Why does Western civilization matter? This is a question about the bottom line—about the significance of lasting developments in the history of the West. The “why” question often prompts us to think about the way historical change alters people’s lives. Among the innumerable encounters that have shaped Western civilization, some have had greater

effects, lasted longer, and influenced the course of history more powerfully than others. And some of them—particularly the two world wars of the twentieth century—still profoundly influence the lives of peoples across the globe today.

Western civilization matters for all of us because the global civilization in which we now live was partially forged out of the West’s encounters with the rest of the world. Part of Western civilization’s contributions to global civilization include democracy and the concepts of human rights that dominate international institutions such as the United Nations. The West produced the legal foundations of international diplomacy, which ultimately derive from Roman law. The West started the engine of industrial capitalism, which was fabricated out of the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions. The collective experiences of the peoples of the West nurtured popular culture—from Hollywood films to hip-hop music.

Western civilization now matters beyond the borders of the West and to peoples who have only recently arrived in the West because of global migration. Many Western countries are now struggling to absorb massive numbers of emigrants from other parts of the world who have left their native lands in a search of greater freedom or economic opportunities. As a result, many people consider the ethnic, racial, and religious diversity of the West its most meaningful characteristic. Such diversity, however, has always been an attribute of the West. The Hellenistic world in the centuries before the birth of Christ, for example, was teeming with peoples speaking many different languages and worshipping many different gods (see Chapter 4). In fact, the West itself arose from the complex and ongoing interactions among very diverse groups. It is precisely the high level of cultural diversity that makes Western civilization distinctive and a model for how different peoples can learn to live with one another.

In the end, the civilization in which Western people live, study, and work today is not just a repository of received truths, a legacy of past achievements, or even a specific place. Rather, it is an open-ended process, an ongoing effort to determine the values by which people conduct their lives.