

TD 1: The Notion of the West: An American Definition

Source: Samuel P. Huntington. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*. Simon and Schuster, 1996, pp 46-47

....Western civilization is usually dated as emerging about A.D. 700 or 800. It is generally viewed by scholars as having three major components, in Europe, North America, and Latin America.

...Latin America, however, has a distinct identity which differentiates it from the West. Although an offspring of European civilization, Latin America has evolved along every different path from Europe and North America. It has had a corporatist, authoritarian culture, which Europe had to a much lesser degree and North America not at all. Europe and North America both felt the effects of the Reformation and have combined Catholic and Protestant cultures. Historically, although this may be changing, Latin America has been only Catholic. Latin American civilization incorporates indigenous cultures, which did not exist in Europe, were effectively wiped out in North America, and which vary in importance from Mexico, Central America, Peru, and Bolivia, on the one hand, to Argentina and Chile, on the other. Latin American political evolution and economic development have differed sharply from the patterns prevailing in the North Atlantic countries. Subjectively, Latin Americans themselves are divided in their self-identifications. Some say, «Yes, we are part of the West." Others claim, «No, we have our own unique culture, » and a large literature by Latin and North Americans elaborates their cultural differences. Latin America could be considered either a sub civilization within Western civilization or a separate civilization closely affiliated with the West and divided as to whether it belongs in the West. For an analysis focused on the international political implications of civilizations, including the relations between Latin America, on the one hand, and North America and Europe, on the other, the latter is the more appropriate and useful designation.

The West, then, includes Europe, North America, plus other European settler countries such as Australia and New Zealand. The relation between the two major components of the West have, however, changed over time. For much of their history, Americans defined their society in opposition to Europe. America was the land of freedom, equality, opportunity, the future; Europe represented oppression, class conflict, hierarchy, backwardness. America, it was even argued, was a distinct civilization. This positing of an opposition between America and Europe was, in considerable measure, a result of the fact that at least until the end of the nineteenth century had only limited contacts with non-Western civilizations. Once the United States moved out on the world scene, however, the sense of a broader identity with Europe developed. While nineteenth century America defined itself as different from and opposed to Europe, twentieth-century America has defined itself as a part of and, indeed, the leader of a broader entity, the West, that includes Europe.

The term «the West» is now universally used to refer to what used to be called Western Christendom. The West is thus the only civilization identified by a compass direction and not by the name of a particular people, religion, or Civilizations. This identification lifts the civilization out of its historical, geographical, and cultural context. Historically, Western civilization is European civilization. In the modern era, Western civilization is Euromerican or North Atlantic civilization. Europe, America, and the North Atlantic can be found on a map;

the West cannot. The name «the West» has also given rise to the concept of «Westernization» and has promoted a misleading conflation of Westernization and modernization: it is easier to conceive of Japan «Westernizing» than «Euroamericanizing." European-American civilization is, however, universally referred to as Western civilization, and that term, despite its serious disabilities, will be used here.

Study Questions

1. *When did Western civilization emerge, according to Huntington?*
2. *What are the main geographical components of Western civilization mentioned in the text?*
3. *How did Americans view Europe in the nineteenth century?*
4. *How did the American view of the West change from the nineteenth to the twentieth century?*
5. *Why does Huntington consider Latin America different from Europe and North America?*