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The Waning of Universalism

By Chantal Delsol

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During the 19th century, Westerners provided ideological justifications for their colonization, namely spreading the Enlightenment across the globe. This project was received favorably until the second half of the 20th century. Over the last 20 years, it has met new hostility. The “universal values” promoted by the West are viewed today as a form of imperialism to be opposed – especially by China, Russia and Turkey.

politique étrangère

During the two centuries following the French Revolution, Western culture has claimed its status as upholder of universal values to justify its spread around the world. Our conquests were disguised as missions, in keeping with a long tradition – from Pericles bringing democracy to subject cities, through to Christians leading crusades in the name of Truth. A faith in human rights was the new gospel preached by its disciples. And the message was getting through. After Peter the Great’s Westernization of Russia by force, Japan and Turkey followed suit. Over two centuries, foreign cultures all became Westernized, more or less of their own will, and often laying claim to our principles and using our terminology.

All regimes, even autocratic ones, were keen to call themselves “democratic.” Western leaders, who toured the world to lecture on human rights, were frequently received in host countries with protestations of the countries’ excellent democratic credentials. The general feeling that there was some virtue attached to Western culture came from the idea of progress. Everyone wanted to be “modern.” History was even reinterpreted. Perhaps more out of diplomacy than conviction, the Chinese went so far as to claim around the time of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights that they had played a role in starting the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.¹

1. P.-E. Will, “La contribution chinoise à la Déclaration universelle des Droits de l’Homme,” in M. Delmas-Marty (ed.) *La Chine et la démocratie*, Paris: Fayard, 2007, p. 306.

All this was true until the turn of the twenty-first century. For almost twenty years now, the Western message has been received differently. And on all continents: in China and many of its neighbors, in the majority of Islamic countries, and in Russia. What is new is that for the first time, we are confronted by foreign cultures that openly oppose our model, reject it with reasons, and justify a different type of society from ours. In other words, they dismiss the universality of the principles we sought to bring to the world and possibly see them as the results of an ideology. This rejection is new, not in its expression, but rather in its scale. It overturns the understanding of universalism we thought we upheld. It changes the geopolitical order. The ideological nature of the break is beyond all doubt: it is our individualism that is in question, and everything that comes with it.

Several points need to be made in order to gain a better understanding of this unprecedented situation. The cultural centers in question tend to put forward similar arguments to delegitimize the West. They question our role as a culture of emancipation and freedom; and their role, they say, is to defend communities, both small and large. One might say that in the face of the individualist West a huge holistic front has been opened up. Certainly, the bipolar world of the Cold War, which left a unipolar world after the fall of the Berlin Wall, has now become multipolar.² But rather than seeing here a “clash of civilizations,” one should first attempt to ascertain the extent of the anti-Western movement that is being expressed everywhere and giving way to a new era.

We are confronted with two rival paradigms. Western, liberal, globalist individualism is faced with several distinct cultures that all seek to oppose it and promote a form of holism and a sense of rootedness. The arguments deployed against the West echo those that have always been deployed by opponents of Enlightenment thinking and Western modernity. Certain Chinese thinkers, for example, employ arguments similar to those used by Maistre and Bonald in the nineteenth century to stigmatize democracy and justify authoritarian power. Moreover, even today, the modern West is undermined from within by illiberal opponents who are content to make alliances with foreign adversaries. These include alliances forged between French right-wing groups and Putin’s Russia, for example, or alliances between central European countries and China.

2. See communication from Jean-David Levitte to the Académie des Sciences morales et politiques on January 7, 2019.

The enlightened West has always had its gainsayers, but they have usually come from within its own borders. We are witnessing yet another attempt to challenge the West. This time, however, it is powerful and has multiple origins. In the days when the West was dividing up the world like gangsters carving up a neighborhood, colonized countries were dreaming of becoming exactly like us, and indeed, much has been written about the fortunes and misfortunes of Westernization. But now we find ourselves facing a clear desire for non-Westernization, or for de-Westernization. In addition to requiring politicians to draw in their horns, the situation obliges philosophers to question the West's status as upholder of universal values.

Universalism and Western imperialism

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Alexander Zinoviev, the great dissident and author of *Yawning Heights*, published a work on the West tellingly entitled *L'Occidentisme, essai sur le triomphe d'une idéologie* ("Westernism, an Essay on the Triumph of an Ideology").³ His argument was as follows: The West has given birth to a rich civilization, characterized by a genius for work, risk, and organization, and this civilization has produced well-known results, both economic and cultural. Just as Russian culture is based on spirituality and patriotism, Western civilization is based on the principles of human rights and civil liberties. There is nothing surprising yet in these differences, but Western culture also has an additional characteristic that is not shared by others and that changes everything: it considers itself to be THE universal culture. It imagines that human rights, far from being particular principles unique to its own culture, and worthy of respect in this capacity, are also universal principles that all people are in need of, even without being aware of them. This claim, Zinoviev says, is as risible as if the Russians boasted that their spirituality or imperialism was universal. And the problem is that the Western claim is dangerous. It is deployed as an ideology, because that is exactly what it is: a vision of the world that claims to be universal and that thus legitimizes its spread around the world against the will of other civilizations – civilizations, it should be said, that aspire, as is only natural, to remain themselves.

Zinoviev goes even further: he believes that the West is aware that its ideology of "Westernism," of human rights, is particular, but is disguised as universal. In other words, universalism is nothing more than a weapon of war. Westerners impose their culture on others on the pretext that

3. A. Zinoviev, *L'Occidentisme, essai sur le triomphe d'une idéologie*, Paris: Plon, 1995.

it is for the good of all humanity, in order to appear different to what they are in reality: a particularity that dictates to others and seeks to conquer them by all manner of means, from weaponry to psychology. The so-called universality of human rights is just one feature of this psychology of conquest. Many Westerners, however, believe in their ideology to the extent that they do not know that it is an ideology; they see it as a reality. And this is typical of ideologues: *they believe that they know, but don't know that they believe.*

Zinoviev's work attempts to uncover this. But he was not the first or only person to do so. On the contrary, he was one more in a long-standing Russian tradition. The doctrine of Eurasianism, it should be remem-

For Putin, Western universalism is in reality imperialism

bered, was launched in Sofia in 1921 by four Russian intellectuals whose main intention was to question Western universalism. While Slavophiles, whose ideas originated in Russia in the first half of the nineteenth century, believed that it was Russian

culture that was universal (even if in this respect there were different phases and changes of direction), Eurasianism held to the belief that no culture is universal, that all are particular in a world of multiple cultural poles.

And it is this Neo-Eurasianism that Vladimir Putin espouses: for him, so-called Western universalism is really imperialism. He believes in particularism and, in line with the long-standing tradition, he sees universalism as imperialism hidden behind noble intentions.

Solzhenitsyn tackled this key question as soon as he arrived in Western Europe. His thinking is well summed up in his Harvard address entitled *A World Split Apart*, in which he states,

"No, I could not recommend your society in its present state as an ideal for the transformation of ours."⁴ "the blindness of superiority continues in spite of all and upholds the belief that the vast regions everywhere on our planet should develop and mature to the level of present day Western systems, which in theory are the best and in practice the most attractive. There is this belief that all those other worlds are only being temporarily prevented (by wicked governments or by heavy crises or by their own barbarity and incomprehension) from taking the way of Western pluralistic

4. A. Solzhenitsyn, *A World Split Apart* (Address delivered at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, June 8, 1978), available at: <www.americanrhetoric.com>.

democracy and from adopting the Western way of life. Countries are judged on the merit of their progress in this direction. However, it is a conception which develops out of Western incomprehension of the essence of other worlds, out of the mistake of measuring them all with a Western yardstick. The real picture of our planet's development is quite different.”⁵

In China, the paper known as Document no. 9 describes the ideological situation of a country threatened by the West, stating: “The ideological situation today is a struggle.”⁶ The text describes dissidents who, influenced by the West, promote the “rule of law” in China. These dissidents are described as a Trojan horse, a kind of fifth column of the West, determined to erase Chinese identity. One of the paragraphs asserts that “promoting ‘universal values’ [is] an attempt to weaken the theoretical foundations of the Party’s leadership.” The West’s value system, they write, “defies time and space, transcends nation and class, and applies to all humanity.” Upheld by dissidents who are stigmatized in the document, these values are dangerous not only due to their open opposition to Chinese principles, but also because they are not adversaries like any others, but rather principles that claim to be universal, and as such arrogate to themselves a kind of privilege. They are “made” for all the humans on the earth and are true throughout time and space. They lead to the globalization of neoliberalism, which has unleashed catastrophic crises in Latin America, Russia, and eastern Europe, and to the power of dissidents in China itself, who disseminate ideas that claim to apply to all of humanity.

The aim of the Chinese government is therefore first to fight against this claim to universality, to make the dissidents appear to support an alien, enemy, culture. The struggle is described as “perpetual, complex, and excruciating.” Not only because having to fight against the obvious attractions of personal freedom is a handicap, but mainly because a value held to be universal undermines its opponents from within instead of fighting them face to face. It denies the uniqueness of cultures and that is precisely what China and other cultures wish to restore. For Xi Jinping, so-called Western universal principles are no more than a pretext to justify their imperialist wars, like those in Iraq or Libya, and their disastrous consequences.⁷ No value, it is asserted, can produce benefits for all peoples.

5. *Id.*

6. “Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation,” *ChinaFile*, November 8, 2013, available at: <www.chinafile.com>.

7. F. Bougon, *Dans la tête de Xi Jinping*, Paris: Solin, 2017, p. 175.

Not only do these cultures embody essentially different values from us (spirituality for Russians, homeland for Russians and Chinese), but, more importantly, they deny the existence of a body of essential values common to all humans and which all cultures would tend towards. This differentialism, or accepted and militant relativism, figures currently in

New models of what it means to be modern are being asserted everywhere

much non-Western discourse. It can be found in the words of Lee Kuan Yew, Putin, Xi Jinping, and Erdogan. The argument has also been coherently voiced by internal critics of the West since the Enlightenment: the Germans adopted what was called the *Sonderweg* to justify their departure from the Western sphere of influence of the Enlightenment – unlike western European states, their state was authoritarian and feudal. Later, the Nazis would argue that so-called universalism was actually particularism: (respect for) human rights was tantamount to the worship of our ancestors (the Greeks!), and the universal was an invention for imposing authority rationally. One could say that we are now witnessing another retreat of universalist legitimacy, a rejection of Western liberal standards. New models of what it means to be modern are being asserted everywhere.

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The spread of radical Islam and the radicalization of several Islamic countries since the 1980s, and particularly since the turn of the century, represent both a revolt against the West, its colonization, its hegemony, its preaching, and its habits in general, and also probably the difficulties Islamic countries encountered in adopting modern customs that they both envy and reject. Olivier Roy and Gilles Kepel have argued over whether this is a radicalization of Islam or an Islamization of radicalism, but both analyses seek to find the origins of the transformations we see before us. At any rate, this rejection of Western imperialism, in its radical guise, aims to reestablish ancient Islamic society and advocates a return to traditional forms of Islamic holism.⁸

Like all historical societies, Islamic society is communal and organic, bound together with age-old ties. Unlike Western societies, it has not evolved towards a society shaped by contracts, where solidarity is voluntary and acquired. This process is only known in the West and emerged from the Enlightenment. The shift from holism to individualism, from an organic community to a society of contracts, is both strongly coveted and strongly rejected. Islamist movements are traditionalist in order to

8. For example, F. Khosrokhavar, *Radicalisation*, Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2014, p. 63 and subsequent pages.

respond to the threats hanging over their world.⁹ This reaction can even be seen in the West itself – one has only to note the increase in the wearing of hijabs and even burqas in the suburbs, which demonstrates the desire to conserve pre-modern communities.

Holism against individualism

Western cultures see holism as a bygone stage that humanity has outgrown, to be left behind and renounced without looking back. For them, progress consists of moving further and further away from society's original holism. Individuals have freed themselves from the chains that linked them to their community and they now belong only to the wider human community. The only obligation we have is to love all our fellow humans equally. Attachments to individuals that cause us to make preferences are considered to be backsliding, a sign of faint-heartedness. In other words, they are always treated negatively, as an incapacity to cut free – a refusal to develop out of fear of the new.

Many Westerners wonder naïvely why foreign cultures do not wish to abandon holism, this bygone stage of historical evolution, and they are furious when they see Western countries, such as Trump's America and certain central European states, reinvigorate and celebrate concepts such as that of the nation, which they see as outdated. For them, this is not historical backwardness that needs to be shaken off but a step backwards, an open rejection of progress. It is not unusual for intellectuals and those in power, caught off guard by differences they deem to be illegitimate, to treat the followers of holism as savages, promoters of "de-civilization."¹⁰

Countries, societies, or cultures that reject the West today do so in order to restore, fully or in part, the holism that has disappeared. The post-modern West considers these challenges not as different cultural expressions, but as incongruities. It considers the recognition of the importance of the individual to be an essential step in the history of moral progress.

In all cultures outside the West, the key questions over the last two centuries have been: Should we Westernize or not? If so, how far? Can we adopt the best of the West and reject the rest? Can we modernize without Westernizing? This debate continues to occupy minds, as one can see in Russia with the two centuries of dispute between Occidentalists and Slavophiles, a particularly visible dispute as the abundant literature shows.

9. N. Picaudou, *Visages du politique au Proche-Orient*, Paris: Gallimard, 2018.

10. For example, throughout H. Geiselberger (ed.), *L'Âge de la régression*, Paris: Premier parallèle, 2017.

The West would be particularly naïve to believe that it has finally won over the entire world to its views. The type of society that modernity erases – that of holism – remains well-established around the world. It could be said that it has tried, in all parts of the world, to change, out of a kind of fascination for the West, but it could also be said that those times have passed. Is this out of disillusion or an inability to resemble us? Without really being able to explain why this is so, the truth is that we are now no longer faced with foreign cultures that wish to imitate us and to become like us, but rather by cultures that are proud of their differences and ready to mock and discredit the principles and values that we tended to offer them as gifts. We have long believed that we were bringing beneficial universal principles able to replace ancient customs repeated by force of habit, that we were the New World, the Good News awaited by peoples mired in hierarchies and oppression. But it turns out that our principles are now being challenged by other principles, considered to be every bit as valid as ours by a humanity worthy of the name.

Holistic societies and regimes see political power through the paradigm of paternity. In Europe, the first separation between politics and paternity appears in a text in which Aristotle opposes his master Plato, arguing

Paternal power is naturally autocratic

that those who consider there to be “no difference between a large family and a small city” are mistaken¹¹. The differentiation expressed by Aristotle is what would make liberal or constitutional-pluralist governments possible in Europe. But the Platonic theory will never be erased; it is given new life every century by renowned writers and it continues to this day. It allows us to understand the holistic spirit of most of the governments on the planet.

The Russian Tsar is always considered to be the father of his subjects regardless of the era and whether he is progressive or conservative.¹² Paternal power is at the same time patriarchal: the Tsar possesses Russia as his property. Paternal power is naturally autocratic; autocracy has been vaunted as the natural regime by Slavophiles for two centuries, and the Tsar was called autocratic in all Russian Fundamental Laws until the 1917 Revolution (article 4). Putin’s “power vertical” is nothing other than an assertion of autocracy, even if it is disguised as democracy.

The Russian Occidentalists, who opposed the Slavophiles, had noticed how far the paradigm of paternity, applied to any power or authority,

11. Aristotle, *Ethics and Politics*, Book I, Chapter I.

12. M. Niqueux, *L'Occident vu de Russie*, Institut d'Études slaves, 2016, p. 123.

prevents a departure from holism and the birth of the modern individual. Paternal authority (and maternal authority in modern times) is based on a difference in nature between adults and children. Children, immature and as yet not complete, must naturally obey their parents, who know what is good for them better than they do themselves. Children can only become adults if their parents accept that they are gradually becoming adults and are capable of discerning what is good for them.

The paradigm of paternity applied throughout social and political authorities (paternalism in business, political paternalism, etc.) presupposes a difference in capacities between the rulers and the ruled. Rulers know what is good for the ruled better than they do. Thus, the ruled are held permanently in a state resembling childhood, an inferior state that requires succor (a state that women were held in until recently). They are not kept in this state to humiliate or belittle them, but because they are judged inferior and incapable of considering the common good. The Chinese political system, advocating autocracy, presupposes “a people deemed to be incapable of governing themselves, and individuals said to be unable to define their own conception of good. The people are relegated to a position of eternal childhood.”¹³ Paternalism, and hence autocracy, is based on a belief in the inequality of maturities, whereas democracy, on the contrary, is based on the belief, not in equality of intelligence or competence, as sometimes caricatured, but in equality of maturity. The question of maturity is crucial, as Kant said in his pamphlet *What is Enlightenment?* Everything is subordinate to maturity.

Autocracy, however, is based on a dangerous gamble: the autocrat has to be just; there is nobody to restrain him, nobody to monitor him. It is to be noted that all historical despotisms declared that the prince was good, as if by saying it they could make it so. This was the case, for example, both for Roman emperors and the Hellenistic kings.

Meritocratic mandarinate versus Western democracy

An important current of political thinking in China, widespread in the circles of power, is critical of Western democracy and in this respect is in accordance with long-held beliefs. The sinologist Daniel A. Bell¹⁴ advocates the application of the “Confucian tradition” to a reform of Western democracy. Western democracy suffers from the importance accorded to

13. P. Charon and G. Dutourneur's response to Daniel Bell, “Le confucianisme, un modèle politique?” *La Vie des idées*, June 15, 2010, available at: <<https://laviedesidees.fr>>.

14. For example, D. A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

the popular vote, which leads to irrational and changing decisions and pays little respect to the long term. In short, Bell reproaches democracy for too often resembling demagogic, and for giving a voice to incompetent people who are too often given over to their individual interests (which amounts to the same thing). He celebrates the Chinese mandarinate, a regime based on competence and efficiency, spared from pressure from below, and much more able to take decisions for the long-term common good. He questions European beliefs regarding the nature of humans that have led us historically to modern democracy: the belief in the equality of humans with regard to their good sense, all humans being capable of knowing what is good for them and for the community. He also questions our belief that politics is not only a matter of rationality but more importantly one of convictions or attachment to values.

The core of the Chinese argument, and that of Bell, is based on the political requirement for rationality. Any number of Western criticisms of this argument can be formulated, such as posing the question: What is more rational, Nazism or the White Rose movement? Was it rational to choose the White Rose? But this argument has no mileage if the only purpose is to rule the state with order and justice, for the prosperity of all, and with respect for traditions. The mandarinate meritocracy is paternalist in the sense that it is based on an anthropology of natural inequality. Citizens need order and prosperity; they do not need freedom of thought, or freedom of convictions. Citizens are less capable than rulers of deciding what is in the common good – hence they are not citizens but subjects.

Our French model of Republican elitism owes much to the Chinese mandarinate: it is also based on a fairly widespread lack of belief in the merits of democracy among the ruling circles. This is not expressed openly, as the French public would not accept it. Democracy, at least for the moment, enjoys a commonly held consensus. However, the fact that China no longer claims to be democratic when responding to Western pressure and that it defends its mandarinate proudly with arguments rooted in classical political philosophy is the sign of a new era in which Western hegemony has given way to an ideological conflict.

Plato's point of view (of the enlightened despot), advocated throughout the nineteenth century in the West by a number of conservative writers, has its twin in Asia. The Chinese vision of what we call human rights is based on a holistic understanding of humanity: humans are essentially social beings, and as such require social rights. It is also based on a Marxist understanding of humanity; there are no rights outside the

historical context. The Chinese vision rejects what for us are natural rights, which it considers to be abstractions.¹⁵ Bringing in Confucius reinforces the idea that individuals are entirely contained within their communities, mainly the family, in which no such thing as individual rights exists.

“Asian values” have often been considered by Westerners to be pretexts put forward by autocratic Asian governments to justify their pursuit of autocracy. This is a weak argument: the aim (and **Plato in Asia** consequence) of the Asian discourse on values is to propose another way of understanding rights, which is based on a different kind of anthropological understanding, in which man is social before being an individual, and is defined by his relations and not by his autonomy.

In Document No. 9, the Chinese government clearly lists its ideological adversaries: the separation of powers, the multi-party system, general elections, and an independent justice system. It strongly rejects “the West’s idea of journalism”, *i.e.* freedom of the press, as well as what it calls “historical nihilism” which is the historical memory that would lead to recognition of the Maoist revolution and its massacres. It provides a powerful and worrying description of Chinese dissidence, which it says has infiltrated Chinese society everywhere and is disseminating theories of Western origin. And it demands that its cadres do all they can to prevent the spread of false ideas that divert the people from the right path, from development, and from their purpose. “Maintain[ing] the correct political direction” means preventing people from speaking out and writing, by controlling the internet and the media. The Party commits to doing this and demands the active support of those it addresses.

The core of the message here is a rejection of personal freedom, and a conviction that, through the Party, the government knows what is good for the people better than the people themselves. Personal freedom, which gives rise to free speech and protest, to the rule of law, and to democracy, is described as opening the door to all kinds of disorder, even to anarchy and nihilism, and is thus unpropitious to the harmonious development of a people.

This Chinese conviction has existed from time immemorial. A holistic understanding of humanity has no room for individual freedom. And personal freedom means virtually nothing in the absence of the idea of the person. When nineteenth-century European anti-modernists attacked

15. D. A. Bell and J. Chan, “Arrêt sur les droits de l’homme en Chine,” *Raisons Politiques*, No.3, 2001, pp. 87-100, available at: <www.cairn.info>.

the freedoms of the Enlightenment, their arguments naturally echoed the arguments that have always been voiced by the Chinese: freedom engenders disorder, threatens civil peace, and prevents major undertakings. Document no. 9 attacks all forms of freedom, from freedom of the press to economic freedom. This is the core of all their objections.

Several very different cultures and civilizations are currently involved in a cultural debate or combat with the West. Their demands are pre-modern. They reject individualism, all kinds of liberty, and pacifism. And these cultures harbor the belief that Western post-modernity fosters a false and uninhabitable world in which individuals are deprived of their essential roots.

It may be that the West has ended up provoking hatred by wishing to impose a model that is so different to the others. It is also possible that it has become so extreme that it has made itself intolerable to many, as it causes major resistance even within its own borders. Can a culture be a force for peace when everywhere it goes it awakens currents of ancient thinking? At any rate, we find ourselves faced with a clash, not of civilizations, but of anthropological paradigms. Individualism and holism will continue to confront each other. And perhaps the first thing we should do is to begin to ask some questions of ourselves.

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Keywords

Universalism
Western values
Democracy
Human rights