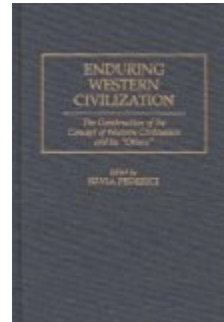


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Silvia Federici, ed. *Enduring Western Civilization: The Construction of the Concept of Western Civilization and Its "Others"*. Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, 1995. xvi + 210 pp. \$31.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-275-95400-0; \$106.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-95154-2.

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Enduring Western Civilization's objective is to understand the "political potential" of the idea that there is such a thing as Western Civilization "and to highlight the practices it has mystified and justified." That is, the editor desires to discredit both the idea that there is such a thing as a historically continuous Western Civilization and the political motivations that spawned the idea. Eight articles trace the origins of the idea of Western Civilization during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, dispute the accuracy of the idea that there is anything identifiable as a Western Civilization, and explore interactions among concepts of "Western" and "Other" civilizations. One "satirical appendix," a play, pokes fun at the defense of Western Civilization in the curriculum. Only one of the articles, Chris GoGwilt's, have appeared before. The level of research and analysis is high, yet most of the authors provide enough background to make their essays as suitable for undergraduates as they are for graduate students and instructors.

Part I, "A Genealogy of 'Western Civilization,'" traces some of the origins of the idea that there is such a thing as a "Western Civilization." The section begins with an essay by Martin Bernal. In "Greece, Aryan or Mediterranean?" Bernal sets out the heart of the arguments he's already made in the first three volumes of *Black Athena*. It is a helpful introduction to a controversial work more often criticized than read, and readers may be surprised by the modesty of the historiographical project Bernal describes. The first volume of *Black Athena* shows how ideology has influenced competing interpretations of African and European influences on ancient Greece since the early nineteenth century, while the next two volumes examine the linguistic, archaeological, and documentary evidence for the two views.

George C. Caffentzis' "On the Scottish Origin of 'Civilization'" argues that the word "civilization" stems from "civil law." Conflict between Scottish and English common law led Scottish lawyers to try to "civilize" English common law by making it more "rational," in its approach to contracts, i.e., like the Roman law of Scotland and the Continent. Attempts to enforce that civil law on English subjects led to riots, which in turn led the English to retain common law for contracts. By the mid-eighteenth century the word "civilize" was used by English and Scottish intellectuals to refer to the process of making people of the Scottish Highlands adapt to the capitalist commercial economy for which Scottish civil law was designed. Not all these things, particularly the last, is demonstrated beyond all shadow of doubt, but the essay points to a suggestive line of inquiry and merits close scrutiny. This, the introduction, and the following essay by GoGwilt do not provide quite enough background for me to be comfortable recommending them for undergraduate reading.

Chris GoGwilt's "True West: The Changing Idea of the West from the 1880's to the 1920's" argues that the idea of "the West" originated in debates among Russian "Slavophiles" and "Westerners." Ironically, the nihilist, rationalist philosophy of the "Westerners" came to represent the essence of Russian "Eastern" sentiment in the writings of later French, German, British and American authors of the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries. The notion of "Western" ideology was thus born out of comparison with the Russian "East." This essay assumes substantial familiarity with nineteenth century European literature, probably more than can be expected of freshmen and sophomores.

Silvia Federici's "The God that Never Failed: The Ori-

gins and Crises of Western Civilization,” tells us what’s wrong with the old way of teaching Western Civilization without providing much guidance for the future. She argues that “western civilization” cannot possibly “provide a pedagogically defensible framework even for a student of countries and cultures usually grouped under the name of ‘the West,’” because Western civilization courses start in Egypt and the Middle East, move to Greece and the Roman Empire, and then, illogically, to Europe. She accepts without much discussion Geoffrey Barraclough’s 1955 assertion that medieval Europe had little in common with the ancient Mediterranean, even though his subsequent editorship of the *History of European Civilization Library*, which includes titles like *The Greek Experiment*, *The Heritage of Hellenism*, and *The World of Late Antiquity*, would seem to indicate that even Barraclough himself renounced his own argument. The greatest sin of Western Civilization classes, according to Federici, is that they unquestioningly valorize and essentialize “Western” values without detailing any of the nastier aspects of European history. According to Federici, even though textbook writers have begun to incorporate the history of underclasses, women, and minorities, these additions are usually obvious tokenism. In short, she argues that the narrative itself is breaking down and must be replaced and seems to say that we can know what’s going on in Western Civilization courses by reading Western Civilization textbooks. It is hard to guess at the intended audience for the essay. Surely any teacher who would read *Enduring Western Civilization* would already be aware of the problems with the traditional Western Civilization narrative.

Sol Yurik’s “Satirical Appendix: Oedipus and the Coup” works as a commentary on the material in the volume. It is a play in which shadowy members of the military-industrial complex send their agents, Tiresius and Creon, to Thebes to be sure Oedipus plays out his part in the tragedy they’re having Sophocles write. It’s all done to prevent History from being destroyed by student rebellions in 1968. The play could be read as an interesting companion piece to *Oedipus the King* during a survey of Classical Literature or Mythology, but if I had time in my Western Civilization survey to discuss two plays during the section on the ancient world (Hah!), I would have my students read something else.

Part II, “One or Many Civilizations?” begins with George Gheverghese Joseph’s “Mathematics and Eurocentrism.” Joseph reviews the state of the literature on the history of “non-Western” mathematics and suggests ways “multi-cultural/anti-racist mathematics” (a teaching strategy proposed in Britain) can help all students at-

tain stronger math skills. He suggests math teaching emphasizing the historical situations surrounding and the problems for which particular maths were designed. This would expose students to the ways historic societies have all used math and to the hands-on applications of problems. I found the essay so intriguing I photocopied it for a colleague whose research specialization is mathematics education for non-traditional students. I am at something of a loss, however, to tell readers whether Joseph’s review is accurate or comprehensive: I invite historians of math and science to re-consider his essay for H-W-Civ.

John Roosa’s “Orientalism, Political Economy, and the Canonization of Indian Civilization” surveys the ways political agendas and ideologies have affected the study of India. Indology was invented by servants of the English East India Company to administer India, and because those servants’ informants were Hindu Brahmins, their interpretation of “India” became a purely Hindu and elitist one. Later, during the Bengal Renaissance, Hindus propagated this view, which has helped create a Hindu Nationalist ideology that artificially separates Hindus and Muslims. Roosa has nothing good or even neutral to say about any historian of India or Western ideas of India writing before 1983 (Romila Thapar and Rosane Rocher are praised). The essay works as an introduction to one mainstream of writing about India, but doesn’t deal with the current state of the literature on Indian history. (For the uninitiated, the state is chaotic. India’s “master narrative” history is crumbling even faster than Europe’s).

Alamin Mazrui’s “African Languages and European Linguistic Imperialism” argues against the idea that using the languages of colonial powers need not be oppressive. Simply thinking in another peoples’ language does not, contrary to the oft-cited but (according to Mazrui) long-discredited Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity, change one’s ability to think in certain ways or necessarily hurt one’s self-esteem. Some colonial powers, for instance, refused to teach Africans “their” language; others insisted Africans learn “their” language. He concludes that, like “any native resource, language is open to control and exploitation in favor of the oppressor or the oppressed, depending on the political context ... control of the means of communication is far more important than control of the medium of communication.”

Finally, Nicolas Faraclas suggests that the roots of Semitic languages, which are classified as part of the Afro-Asiatic language family, lie in the Dorfur-Kordofan region on the eastern edge of the Chad-Sudan border. He

uses linguistic, archaeological, and climatic evidence to trace the routes by which Afro-Asiatic languages seem to have spread. The Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan, and Afro-Asiatic languages all seem to have diverged in a migration that began with the Last Major Wet Spell of the Sahara, which ran from 10,000 B.C. to 5,000 B.C. I am not qualified to judge the linguistic evidence he summarizes, but the maps he draws from that evidence and on which he bases his conclusions are persuasive. Expect to see the article cited regularly in world history literature.

Taken individually most of the articles provide either solid research or helpful introductions to debates. But taken as a whole, the collection has two problems. It fails to address recent trends in European historiography and Western Civilization teaching, and it fails to consider the possibility that the idea of a "Western Civilization" might have some validity, assuming, apparently, that every politically charged idea is necessarily false. Thus, the collection cannot, logically, prove that the narrative and geographical sequence of Western Civilization courses are mistaken. These problems seem to result from the editor's choices. Except for Roosa, none of the contributors is a historian, even though historians have agonized over what to do with Western Civilization since World War II.[1]

Except for Faraclas and Joseph (a linguist and a mathematician), they are all modernists. None appears to hold an appointment that would normally include teaching Western Civilization, though this certainly does not mean there are no Western Civilization teachers in the group. There is, in any case, a lack of perspective on current Western Civilization teaching as well as on the historiography and current literature on Europe and its colonial period.

First, the volume tilts against the same strawman version of Western Civilization that appears in Federici's essay even as it fails to look at any European history between the Hellenic period and the Enlightenment. Instead, the collection attacks the presentation of Western Civilization as a sort of Whig History of the triumph of Western Values, a narrative structure so long since discredited (at least in the United States) that even middle school and high school history standards have mostly abandoned it. The last forty years of attempts to re-define Europe's place in world history all but disappear from the volume, as if irrelevant. Bonnie Anderson and Judith Zinsser, John Boswell, Charles Boxer, Fernand Braudel, K.N. Chaudhuri, Alfred Crosby, Philip Curtin, Donald Lach, Gerda Lerner, A.J.R. Russell-Wood, Joan Wallach

Scott, Lawrence Stone, Eric Wolf –these are just some of the names of writers for whose major works the reader will search this historiographical venture in vain. The volume also fails to address most of our Western Civilization sequences: the ancient eastern Mediterranean, Hellenistic and Roman worlds, and medieval Europe are ignored: even Bernal's article is really about modern historiography. To truly void the viability of the Western Civilization sequence requires more than a demonstration that Western Civilization courses were born out of a particular cultural and political milieu, a thesis others have already argued and to which these essays add depth. It requires a demonstration that European History can be better understood without the background we use now.

Also irritating is the lack of interest in the problems that have occupied the last two or three generations of scholars studying the relationships between "The West" and "Other" civilizations. All but Caffentzis and Mazrui ignore the institutional mechanisms through which the ideology of Western superiority and the actuality of Western dominance were transmitted, institutions which had their roots in the periods before the nineteenth century and which attracted the lion's share of attention from historians of encounters between the "West" and "Others" from the 1950's through the mid- 1980's. I have no problem accepting the proposition that ideology played a crucial role in colonialism and imperialism, but surely the work previous generations of historians have done on the role of guns and fortresses, stock companies and protection rackets, bureaucrats, businessmen, and missionaries, is critical to our understanding of how such ideology develops. Nor do I care for the several-times-repeated insinuation that most of the work of the last forty years done on "Third World" areas and their interaction with Europe did nothing but serve neo-colonial interests, since it came largely from Area Studies Programs and therefore had some approval from Western governments. Do these writers have any idea of the price many of my older colleagues paid to be permitted to do any research on matters other than European or US culture, of their struggles to get institutions to accept non-Western cultures as meaningful subjects of inquiry? Dismissing as tools of neo-colonial ideology the work of the very people who made it practical for younger scholars to study non-Western cultures is ungracious, to say the least.

Enduring Western Civilization's greatest weakness, from the perspective of Western Civilization teaching, is its failure to address current teaching concerns. The disjunction between the literature of institutions and the lit-

erature of intellectual history is a common problem in the literature of colonialism and imperialism, after all, not a trend begun with this book. Its greatest strength is its collection of articles, all of which are provocative. I enjoyed the book and recommend it to any college library.

Notes:

[1]. For an entertaining overview of the process by which this old narrative was introduced during WWI and discredited after WWII, see chapters two and three in Lawrence W. Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.

[2]. Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser. *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present*. 2 v. New York: Harper & Row, 1988; John Boswell. *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, and *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*. New York: Villard Books, 1994; Fernand Braudel. *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th century*. 3v. New York: Harper & Row, 1982-1984, and *The Mediterranean world in the Age of Philip II*. Trans. Sian Reynolds. 2v. New York: Harper & Row, 1972; C. R. Boxer. *The Dutch Seaborne Empire*. London: Hutchinson, 1965 and *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire 1415-1825*. New

York: Knopf, 1969; K. N. Chaudhuri. *Asia Before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the rise of Islam to 1750*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990; Alfred W. Crosby. *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1972 and *Ecological Imperialism: the Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986; Philip Curtin. *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex: Essays in Atlantic History*. Cambridge, England: New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990; Donald Lach. *Asia in the Making of Europe*. 3v. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965; Gerda Lerner. *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: from the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993 and *The Creation of Patriarchy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986; A. J. R. Russell-Wood. *The Black Man in Slavery and Freedom in Colonial Brazil*. New York: St. Martin's Press, Joan Wallach Scott. *Gender and the Politics of History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988; Eric Wolf. *Europe and the People Without History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

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