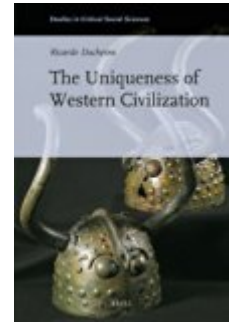


Ricardo Duchesne. *The Uniqueness of Western Civilization.* Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2011. 527 S. \$155.00, cloth, ISBN 978-90-04-19248-5.



Reviewed by Q. Edward Wang

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This is an interesting and bucking-the-trend book. As such, it is, perhaps, intentionally polemical. But it is also seriously written, showing author's strong commitment to redirecting readers' attention to the merit and liveliness of Western civilization in this increasingly globalized age. Let us start by discussing its organization. The book has a total of eight chapters with a total length of over 500 pages. As shown in its title, it addresses an encompassing subject—"Western civilization" which has been a fixture in most history curricula around the world for almost a century—spanning from ancient Greece to our time. It begins with the first chapter, entitled "The Fall of Western Civilization and the Rise of Multicultural World History." That is, while the book's title seems to be general history, it was rather written to engage readers with the recent trend of development in worldwide historiography. This trend, in the author's encapsulation, is marked by the rise of "World History" as a new course vis-à-vis the traditional "Western Civilization" in colleges and secondary schools in the US and elsewhere since the 1960s. Underpinning the introduction of "World History" survey in the schools is a "cultural rela-

tivism," which, in his opinion, is an umbrella term whose contents includes "scientific humanism, post-modernism, feminism, identity politics, and 'dead white European males'." And its manifestation is shown in the boom of such new academic programs as "international studies, post-colonial studies, and Asian studies" in recent years (p. 51). All together, these new changes in the academic world, the author claims, amount to an "attack against the idea of progress and the high culture of Western civilization" (p. 52).

In this first chapter, he details the rise of world/global history in Euro-America over the recent decades, summarizing the works of many leading scholars in the genre, ranging from William McNeill and Immanuel Wallerstein to Jerry Bentley and Patrick Manning. It also discusses the origin of the idea of progress in modern Europe, which is what the author identifies one of the unique contributions by the Europeans to world historical development.

Chapter two and three are entitled, respectively, "Eurocentrism over Sinocentrism" and "Whence the Industrial Divergence?" These two

chapters continue the discussion of recent scholarly developments in world history, focusing on the works of Andre Gunder Frank and Kenneth Pomeranz, among others. The thrust of these two chapters thus is to refute the argument put forth by Frank and Pomeranz that the rise of Europe was nothing unique, but coincidental. In comparison with the Chinese and others, Duchesne asserts, the Europeans were more active and creative. “European actors,” he writes, “were more dynamic in the higher degree to which they were able to reflect upon their actions and thus discursively give reasons for them. European actors were less passive or more reflective than non-Europeans in their acculturation to the conventions and beliefs of their society” (p. 92). What is interesting is that while the new works that challenge Eurocentrism have used more economic data, his rebuttal of them is intellectual and cultural—Duchesne believes that what sets the Europeans apart from the rest were their cultural uniqueness, a subject we will discuss below. Economically speaking, he has not shown much disagreement with the findings of Frank and Pomeranz. In fact, he acknowledges that recent works on Asian economic history are valuable because “they have positively challenged the notion that Europe’s economy was inherently superior centuries before industrialization, and have impressed upon readers the fact that China and India were major economic powers in the world market as late as 1750” (p. 115). In a word, he accepts their arguments.

If European economy was nothing unique, what was the uniqueness of Western/European civilization? Duchesne devotes five chapters to discussing it in the rest of the book. These chapters, as one now can well expect, cover such topics as the “creativity” among the Europeans, the advances of “reason and freedom” in Europe, the “restlessness” of the Western spirit, the entrenched tradition of “egalitarianism” and the strong notion of “self” in European culture. In discussing these subjects, he relies on and rehearses

the points made by major European thinkers in the past, ranging from Malthus and Hegel to Max Weber and, more recently, Jürgen Habermas and Francis Fukuyama. He then draws on his own conclusion, often in a sweeping manner and a highly subjective language. In extolling European’s “creativity,” for instance, Duchesne hypothesizes that “The West, I believe, has always embodied a reflective sense of self-doubt about what it knows and what remains to be known, a kind of restlessness that has been both destructive and productive of new literary style, musical trends, visual motifs, and novel ideas. By contrast, the intellectual and artistic order of China has remained relatively stable throughout its history” (p. 194). In other words, though he agrees that China and India had achieved economic successes in their past, the Chinese and Indians remained no match for the Europeans in terms of cultural and intellectual creativity. To his credit, he does cite some of the works by scholars of Asia in making comparison. With regard to artistic creativity in China, for instance, Duchesne quotes Jacques Gernet, a renowned French China scholar, that Chinese cultural life between 1650 and 1800 was not characterized by “conformism” but by “an openness of mind and intellectual curiosity.” He then quickly dismisses Gernet’s observation and states that the Chinese cultural accomplishment in the period was eclipsed by what the Europeans did, for the latter’s achievement showed, citing Thomas Kuhn, “fundamental novelties” (pp. 194-195). Needless to say, this kind of remarks piqued one’s interest, wanting to see more elaboration from him. But Duchesne simply stops here. Perhaps to him, this has been a foregone conclusion, rather a point of departure for further research.

To reiterate, Duchesne has written quite an interesting book. It is interesting because what it accomplishes is rather paradoxical. If his intention to write it was to rebut the recent advances in world/global history, and in economic history in particular, he basically misses his target be-

cause what he has offered is essentially an account of European intellectual history. But for the purpose of tendering a rebuttal, he has done a relatively thorough job in summarizing the recent works in global/world history, which some of the readers, including this one, would find it useful. Last but not least, after I realized that he was writing an intellectual history, I thought that he would have targeted more at Jack Goody, for Goody challenged most of his claims about Europe's cultural uniqueness. But to my surprise, Goody only received a ten-page discussion; given the massive size of this book, this is a mere passing notice.

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