

The Indictment of the West

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We in the West may argue over whether Islamist terrorists hate us for what we do or for what we are. But if we pay attention to what they say, it is clear that the Islamist jihad against the West is predicated not just on alleged grievances or religious doctrine but also on the perception that Western civilization is, in the words of Osama bin Laden, “the worst civilization in the history of mankind.”

Bin Laden and his ilk base their judgment mainly on the West’s perceived lack of spiritual values and its addiction to appetitive pleasures, an idolatrous materialism that drives its destructive behavior. Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, authors of *Occidentalism*, report that one of the most important Islamist writers of the 20th century, Sayyid Qutb, who lived in New York for two years in the late 40s, described America as obsessed with “money, movie stars, or car models.”ⁱ Similarly, they note that Ali Shari’ati—an intellectual godfather of the Iranian Revolution—“attributed many ills to the West, and to what was imported from the West by the countries under its spell—imperialism, international Zionism, colonialism, multinational corporations, and so on.”ⁱⁱ The Islamist solution to what another Iranian Islamist called “Westoxification” is the jihad-driven return to the spiritual purity of Islam.

Yet the Islamist caricature of the West is merely the latest manifestation of what Buruma and Margalit call “Occidentalism.” This reduction of Western civilization “to a mass of soulless, decadent, money-grubbing, rootless, faithless, unfeeling parasites,” as they describe the caricature, is in fact a creation of Westerners themselves, and the Islamist for the most part reprises the indictment that generations of Western poets, philosophers, and artists have repeated.ⁱⁱⁱ

According to this indictment, Western technology and science and their bastard child, industrialism, have ravaged the earth and exterminated whole peoples, and now threaten to destroy the human race along with all other life. Radical individualism has reduced Westerners to insignificant atoms, bereft of the warm nurturing ties of more organic communities. The uniquely Western sins of imperialism and colonialism have wiped out or

deformed more authentic and life-affirming native cultures, reducing their rich variety to a debased Western model based on capitalist consumerism, frenetic acquisition, a “disenchantment of nature,” a racist fear of the “other,” the repression of natural impulse, and a neurotic obsession with power embodied in high-tech weaponry.

Despite their ill-gotten wealthy life-style, the inhabitants of the West are still not happy. Living in polluted, crowded, crime-ridden “air-conditioned nightmares,” they are riven with anxiety and angst, trapped in the soul-killing “cash nexus,” and subjected to the wasteland of popular culture and the machinations of advertisers and political hucksters. Besotted with trashy movies, web sites, and television shows, distracted by gadgets and toys, numbed by drugs and shopping, their fears and anxieties manipulated by political and economic hegemony, modern Westerners stumble through lives of “quiet desperation,” having forgotten the richer, more fulfilling, more natural lives their ancestors once lived before the Western disease began its malignant spread through history.

If this litany of crimes and dysfunctions is true, then the jihadist hatred of the West is justified. It is merely an understandable response to simple facts obscured by the cheerleading propaganda of the economic and political elites who profit from these delusions. Our world is threatened with war, pollution, resource depletion, spiritual debasement, and economic collapse—all caused by a Western civilization that neurotically worships power, conquest, and profit in compensation for its failure to meet the spiritual and communal needs of its alienated people. What sane person would *not* criticize such an engine of dehumanization and apocalyptic destruction? And given that this indictment originates among elite Western intellectuals, who themselves despise their own culture and obsess over its crimes, why shouldn't the jihadist believe that Western cultural dysfunctions justify his terrorist attacks?

But what if it's not true, and the pessimism and hatred are unfounded? What if the indictment reflects not the facts of history but rather a welter of myths, discredited ideologies, and wish-fulfilling longings, some as old as civilization itself, others peculiar to our age?

Let's start with a common idea lying at the heart of most modernist and postmodernist thinking: that the modern world is a sterile “wasteland”; that, as Freud put it in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, “what we call our civilization is largely responsible for our

misery”—for a modern world that is uniquely dysfunctional, its misery and suffering qualitatively different from mankind’s previous experience.^{iv} In fact, this anxiety over civilization is nothing new, and emerges with civilization itself. As soon as socially, politically, and economically complex urban societies arise, myths develop that idealize a simpler past lived more freely and more closely to nature. In *Plagues of the Mind: The New Epidemic of False Knowledge*, I observed that this nostalgic longing is expressed in two powerful myths that underlie so much social commentary these days: the Noble Savage and the Golden Age.^v

The Noble Savage is that inhabitant of a simpler world whose life harmonizes with his natural surroundings. He does not need government or law, for he has no private property, no desire for wealth or status, the twin dynamic of crime and war. His existence is peaceful, free from war, crime, and strife. He takes from nature only what he needs and needs only what he takes. Because he is at one with nature, he does not require labor or technology to survive. His social relations are egalitarian, uncompromised by the artificial distinctions of sex or class, the bitter fruits of complex civilization. Political power and hierarchies are unknown, as are law and coercion, unnecessary in a world of communal equality untainted by private property. He and his fellows are, as the poet John Dryden put it, the “guiltless men, that danced away their time/Fresh as their groves and happy as their climes.” They embody what Rousseau described in *The Discourse on Inequality* the “celestial and majestic simplicity of man before corruption by society.”^{vi}

The myth of the Golden Age is another idealization of lost simplicity that compensates for the burdens of living in a complex society. This vision of history imagines a time before cities and technology when humans lived in harmony with a benevolent nature that provided freely for all our needs: a life of leisure, health and happiness, free from the unnatural desires and appetites created by civilization. With no private property, gold, or other wealth, greed and status-hunger likewise did not exist, and so there was no reason for social strife, slavery, war, trade, and crime—not to mention law, courts, governments, prisons, and all the other consequences of a civilization whose degeneracy warps people and thus requires these oppressive controls.

Alas, the Golden Age passes away, and we are left in our own world, the Iron Age, a miserable time of sickness, hardship, war, crime, vice, hunger, and strife, all following from

the creation of an unnatural civilization with its repressive laws and hunger for gold.

Civilization itself is the greatest evil, for it has come between our natural mother, the earth, and us humans, as well as forcing us to repress our instincts. We see these mythic impulses at work among the jihadists, who want to return the world to the Golden Age of the Islamic caliphate and its alleged spiritual unity.

In both myths, civilization is the source of our troubles: the world of cities and technology, laws and wars, alienation and fear. Technology particularly is a villain in this interpretation of history, for it has alienated us from nature and fostered the miseries of war and competition for wealth. For the ancients, navigation, mining, metalworking, and farming were the culprits that signified our loss of pristine natural innocence. For us moderns, the rise of industrialism, large cities, mechanized warfare, high-speed transportation and communications, and all the social and psychological consequences of these changes have made this old myth even more appealing, which is why we find it everywhere. The anti-globalization movement is driven by these old idealizations of pre-industrial and primitive societies, the mythic fantasies of a leisurely life passed in the bosom of nature, all dressed up in anarchist costume. Much of what passes for environmentalism these days likewise comprises rehashes of these ancient myths—for example, Al Gore’s fulminations in *Earth in the Balance* against the “froth and frenzy of industrial civilization” brought on by our “technological hubris.”^{vii} And the jihadist too finds traction in condemning the effects of urbanization and industrialization: Sayyid Qutb described New York as a “huge workshop,” “noisy” and “clamoring.”^{viii}

Much of the indictment of modern Western civilization, then, is really an indulgence in this old set of dissatisfactions rather than an accurate assessment of either life in the West or life before industrialism. For the fact is, the average citizen of an industrialized country today lives a life of material prosperity, nutrition, leisure, amusement, and political freedom that previous generations imagined only for the gods. Our psychic dissatisfactions are luxuries affordable only by those for whom sheer survival is no longer an issue and physical comfort is taken for granted. Raymond Tallis, author of *Enemies of Hope*, notes, “Only to those who are not hungry, in pain, afraid of destitution in communities whose only source of welfare is the capricious charity of the well-heeled, do abstract forms of suffering seem more

important than the concrete ones that have been palliated by the material advancement of mankind acting in accordance with reason and a sense of justice and equity.”^{ix}

Yet many of us take for granted the material improvements we all enjoy. What would have been luxuries of the elite even a hundred years ago—indoor plumbing, for example—are today merely the bare minimum necessary for basic existence. This penchant of humans to be “ungrateful animals,” as Dostoevsky’s *Underground Man* put it, gives force to the indictment of the West sketched above. A few examples of the hard reality of life before the modern period, however, should remind us just how materially well off we Westerners are.

Some who decry modern technological society as a deformation of human life look at hunting-and-gathering societies as the Golden Age of human existence. For example, in *So Shall You Reap: Farming and Crops in Human Affairs*, Otto and Dorothy Solbrig blame the invention of farming for the “Fall” that ended a life “as close to life in the Garden of Eden as humans have come.”^x Much contemporary idealization of American Indians reflects this same mythic dissatisfaction with complex civilization rather than the reality of Indian life. We don’t know much, obviously, about how those people viewed their own lives, but we do know from archaeology that violence, pain, hunger, disease, and suffering were daily evils.

Take the catalogue of injuries suffered by Kennewick Man, an intact 9000-year-old skeleton found on the banks of Washington’s Columbia River. According to the account provided by James C. Chatters in *Ancient Encounters*, these include: a skull injury above the left eye, possibly from a human attack; fracture and hyperextension of the left elbow, probably from a fall early in adolescence, the resulting pain limiting motion and leading to underdevelopment of the whole arm; seven fractures in six ribs, similar to what a modern man might experience in a car-wreck that drives the steering wheel into the chest, an injury that would have made deep breathing painful; a stone spear-point embedded in the pelvis, with resulting infection that scarred the bone and drained continually; and two more injuries, to the left temple and the right shoulder blade, the former showing signs of infection that killed the bone. Kennewick Man may have drowned in the river while seeking relief from his chronic pain in its icy waters.^{xi}

What Kennewick Man reminds us is that, as Raymond Tallis puts it, the “history of the world is the history of pain.”^{xii} Pain from malnutrition, pain from injury and infection, pain from disease, pain from cold and heat, pain from parasites and insects, all unalleviated

by the cheap medicines like aspirin and antibiotics that have liberated us modern Westerners from this daily torture. Something as ordinary and unexceptional, for us, as a toothache was an occasion for excruciating pain before the advent of modern painkillers. Dostoevsky describes this brilliantly in *Notes From Underground*, in the scene where Underground Man parses every nuance of insulting absurdity from his affliction, the only resource for which is “to give yourself a thrashing or hit the wall with your fist as hard as you can, and absolutely nothing more.”^{xiii}

Almost worse than the pain were the remedies at a time when alcohol was the only anesthetic. The novelist Fanny Burney has left a harrowing account of her mastectomy in 1811, which she underwent with only a “wine cordial” as an anesthetic for the twenty minutes of torture:

When the dreadful steel was plunged into the breast—cutting through veins—arteries—flesh—nerves—I needed no injunctions not to restrain my cries. I began a scream that lasted unintermittingly during the whole time of the incision When the wound was made, & the instrument was withdrawn, the pain seemed undiminished, for the air that suddenly rushed into those delicate parts felt like a mass of minute but sharp & forked poniards, that were tearing the edges of the wound.

She goes on to describe the horrific experience of feeling the scalpel scrape her breastbone to make sure no particle of cancer remained.^{xiv} And if one were lucky enough to survive this sort of surgical torture, the risk of infection always remained: of the some 600,000 soldiers who died in the Civil War, most died not from their battlefield wounds but from the subsequent infections.

Our modern freedom from this sort of pain results from our liberation from the other daily suffering that in the past was an unexceptional part of human life, and that gives the lie to mythic idealizations of life before or without civilization, or life before modernity. Just consider the diseases we in the West are now mostly freed from or, if we still suffer them, kill us in miniscule numbers: salmonella, polio, cholera, typhoid, viral hepatitis, whooping cough, diphtheria, parasitic worms (pinworms, threadworms, hookworms), intestinal

parasites, malaria, chickenpox, smallpox, measles, mumps, influenza (25 million killed as late as 1918), plague (a third of the population of Europe in the 14th century, around 20 million people), tuberculosis, typhus (a million in Ireland from 1845-47), yellow fever (4000 dead in Philadelphia in 1793), and numerous venereal diseases, all of which devastated our ancestors, who simply had to endure the pain.^{xv} Throw in chronic hunger, famine, cruelty, back-breaking labor, and physical violence as other constants of daily life that we modern Westerners suffer rarely if at all, and one begins to take Underground Man's point about our monstrous ingratitude.

Just as ungrateful is the technophobia that drives much of the complaints about the modern West, for that same technology has improved our lot. As we have seen, the ancient Golden Age myth focuses on technology as the cause of our troubles in the Iron Age, especially agriculture and mining for precious metals—the “goads of evils,” as the Roman poet Ovid put it. With the rise of industrialism and William Blake's “satanic mills,” this ancient anxiety about technology was intensified and became a perennial motif of the Romantic sensibility. The horrors of two World Wars and the death camps seemingly validated this fear of a cold science constructing even colder infernal devices whose end would be the dehumanization of us all, if not our destruction—the banal thesis of countless science fiction novels and films.

Yet this tired theme of popular culture is also the received wisdom of many Western intellectuals. **[Bruce: to avoid the ponderous footnote, could you provide the first names for these following two writers, and their essay or book title?]** As Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno put it in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, their very influential Marxist expression of this prejudice, “Industrialism makes souls into things The countless agencies of mass production and its culture impress standardized behavior on the individual as the only natural, decent, and rational one. Individuals define themselves now only as things, statistical elements, successes or failures.”^{xvi} This view saturates the worldview of many so-called progressive intellectuals, and drives much of environmental thought. Listen to Kirkpatrick Sale, a popularizer of much of this received wisdom, in his *Nation* article about the Unabomber, the Luddite terrorist who murdered three people and wounded 23 others for perceived sins against nature: “The Unabomber and I share a great many views about the pernicious effect of the Industrial Revolution, the evils of modern technologies, the

stifling effect of mass society, the vast extent of suffering in a machine-dominated world and the inevitability of social and environmental catastrophe if the industrial system goes unchecked.”^{xvii} Of course, if Mr. Sale had lived before the invention of these evils, he would have spent his life in backbreaking labor or debilitating sickness, assuming he even survived birth and childhood. In those circumstances, he would have found little time for the complaints that today make him a comfortable living.

Obviously, modern technology has been misdirected to produce some evil results. Nothing we humans do lacks unforeseen consequences, and circumstances often require that we choose a lesser harm over the greater. The real question, however, is have the benefits of technology outweighed those consequences. As Carl Sagan pointed out in *The Demon-Haunted World*, more lives have been saved by modern medicine and high-tech agriculture than have been lost in all the wars ever fought, including this century’s industrialized carnage.^{xviii} He noted that modern obstetrics and gynecology have saved the lives of millions of women and infants who used to die in droves because of complications in childbirth; England’s last Stuart queen, Queen Anne, was pregnant 18 times; five children were born alive, and only one survived infancy.^{xix} In the Third World today, where that science is lacking, they still suffer and die at nearly the same rate. Tallis tells the story of a 14-year-old Nigerian girl who suffered a vesico-vaginal fistula, a passage between her vagina and bladder caused by an 80-hour obstructed labor. She survived this common affliction only because she was lucky enough to have the services of a Western-trained doctor and a hospital that could undo with its rational procedures and technology the effects of that “natural” childbirth and the primitive purification rituals to which she was subsequently subjected, including sitting in a room heated to over a hundred degrees and drinking large volumes of salty water.^{xx}

For all their technophobia, none of our Western or Islamist critics have any intention of actually abandoning the presumed evils of technology and living with the results—hard physical work, chronic pain, untreated disease, malnutrition, and hunger. For all their hysterical fulminations against the evils of technology, then, they have already voted with their feet to affirm that the benefits of technology outweigh any evil side effects. After all, the mullahs who took over Iran did not discard their jet fighters and antibiotics when they tried to outlaw cassette players.^{xxi} **[Another formidable citation; any way to abbreviate this, Bruce, or should we just forgo it? *We can just lost it; the info is public anyway*]**

Even so, an Occidentalizer might remark that technology's catastrophic effects on the environment will eventually outweigh these short-term benefits. As environmental organizations assert daily, our affluent lifestyle uses up resources, pollutes the air and water, destroys the ozone, overheats the planet, and threatens other species whose habitats we are systematically wiping out. Typical of this apocalyptic vision is the announcement from the Union of Concerned Scientists that "a great change in the stewardship of the earth and the life on it is required if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated. The environment is suffering critical stress."^{xxii} **[Bruce: note that this partial citation of "Hollander, p. 10" contains no prior source reference to a specific work. You must have cut a previous footnote. Since the organization is cited, perhaps we don't need a further reference for the quotation, though. Right, this stuff is probably online somewhere, so we don't need a reference]**

These doomsday pronouncements, however, are based more on mythic dissatisfactions with technology and civilization than on the hard science or empirical evidence. In the West, the environment is getting better, not worse. Concerning air quality in the United States, John Hollander writes in *The Real Environmental Crisis*, "emissions of the six principal pollutants have declined each year since 1970, and in 1999 emissions of these pollutants were 31 percent below 1970 levels," all at a time when the population increased by a third, vehicle miles traveled went up 140%, and the burning of coal tripled.^{xxiii} **[Full citation? Mentioning the book should be enough]** Rivers, lakes, and streams are cleaner and less toxic too, America has more forested land than it did 150 years ago, and species once on the brink of extinction are thriving. Predictions of mass starvation because of resource depletion are belied by improved nutrition and longer life spans even in the Third World. The only thing that keeps people hungry today is not a lack of food, but rather autocratic governments.

But what about the Third World? Doesn't our material comfort here depend on degrading the environment there? Aren't we burning down the rain forest so we can drive gas-guzzling SUVs? In fact, degradation of the environment in the Third World is a consequence of poverty, underdevelopment, and autocratic governments, not economic globalization. "Affluence and freedom," Hollander argues, "are friends to the environment [and] the road to affluence and freedom provides the only practical pathway to achieving a

sustainable future environment.”^{xxiv} Concern for the environment and resources is a luxury for those who no longer have to worry about sheer survival, and who have the political freedom to put their desires for a cleaner, more pleasing environment into government policy, as we Americans did by passing the Clean Air Act in 1963 and the Clean Water Act in 1972. A peasant struggling to feed his family doesn’t have the time to worry about whether his farming techniques damage the environment or not.

We who decry the technology that supposedly exiled us from our natural home should remember that only technology frees us today from nature’s brutal indifference to our pain, and allows us the affluence and leisure and protection from nature’s fury so we can idealize her awesome beauty...and complain about the very technologies that make our idealizations possible.^{xxv}

Still, our stubborn enemy of the West might respond, the history of European and American imperialism and colonialism alone is sufficient for condemning the West and criticizing the values and ideals that have provided the camouflage for such depredations. Europeans have ranged over the whole world, plundering its resources and subjecting indigenous populations to degrading oppression in order to feed the Western greed for power and profit. So ubiquitous is this judgment that it even appeared in a Disney cartoon, *Pocahontas* (1995), in which an Indian medicine man says of Europeans that they “prowl the earth like ravening wolves, consuming everything in their path.” But the Disney writers simply repeat the received wisdom of an intellectual like Jean-Paul Sartre 30 years earlier, in his Preface to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. Sartre could say to his fellow Westerners, “You know well enough that we are exploiters. You know too that we have laid hands on first the gold and metals, then the petroleum of the ‘new continents,’ and that we have brought them back to the old countries.”^{xxvi} As French social critic Pascal Bruckner put it in *The Temptation of Innocence*, “Every Westerner is presumed guilty until proven innocent. We Europeans have been raised to detest ourselves certain that, within our world, there is a certain essential evil that must be relentlessly atoned for. This evil is known by two terms—colonialism and imperialism.”^{xxvii}

The concepts of “imperialism” and “colonialism,” however, are just modern terms used to describe an ancient human proclivity to wander and migrate in search of resources and then violently take them from whoever happens to possess them. Whether it was the

Romans in Gaul, the Arabs throughout the Mediterranean and Southern Asia, the Huns and Mongols in Eastern Europe, the Turks in the Middle East, the Bantu in southern Africa, the Khmer in East Asia, the Aztecs in Mexico, the Iroquois in the Northeast, or the Sioux throughout the Great Plains, human history—all the way back to 150,000 years ago when the first *homo sapiens* left Africa and wiped out the Neanderthals—has been stained by man’s frequent use of the most brutal of means to acquire resources. Scholars may find subtle nuances of evil in the European version of this ubiquitous aggression, but for the victims such fine discriminations are meaningless. **[Bruce: In this paragraph, I substituted other words in the place of the term “human drive.” If brutal aggression is indeed a “human drive,” it would seem to contradict human free will, making its very designation as “evil” problematic. But human history is equally a record of choices other than brutal aggression; and if so, can brutal aggression really be some innate “drive”? I think this can be changed without remotely affecting your wider argument here. *Agreed, you change is fine*]**

There is, however, one critical difference between earlier human conquest and European colonialism. Although Europeans frequently displayed a primitive savagery in their treatment of the peoples they conquered—witness the Belgians in Africa—often they tried to civilize them as well. Those of us who enjoy the benefits of that civilization can sneer at the “white man’s burden” and other Victorian ideals as mere racist instruments of colonial false consciousness. But the fact remains that those colonies, like India, that underwent the Western civilizing process the longest, are light-years ahead of those that were simply brutalized or saw the job go unfinished. Moreover (as Thomas Sowell reminds us in *Black Rednecks and White Liberals*), the discrediting of slavery and its near elimination from the world was the result of the imperialistic British, who used their global power and influence to put an end to the slave trade. ^{xxviii}

Perhaps one can argue that colonialism should never have happened—which is tantamount to insisting that some humans not act as most humans have always acted. **[Bruce, once again I tempered your preceding generalization a bit; compare to the original, and let’s chat if necessary. *No problem*]** But once colonialism took place, the worst thing that happened was *decolonialization*: an abandonment that left indigenous peoples with the worst of both worlds, their own and the colonizer’s. This can be seen currently in Zimbabwe, where

aggressive attacks on white farmers by an autocrat (justified with anti-colonialist rhetoric courtesy of European intellectuals) has driven a one-time food exporter to the brink of starvation. At any rate, there's no historical warrant for seeing colonialism or imperialism as unique evils attributable to a sick Western culture. They are merely new variations on universal human constants.

But—I can hear the Occidentalist protest—even if all that is true, our material comfort and freedom from physical pain do nothing for the new psychic pain created by the modern Western world and its machines and noise: the anxiety, hurry, fear, loss of organic community, and absence of meaning that comes from living in a “disenchanted world” cluttered with concrete and asphalt and vulgar entertainment. This dyspeptic view of modern society is as old as modernity itself, but was popularized in the sixties by Herbert Marcuse. In *One-Dimensional Man* he synthesized two centuries of such Romantic/Marxist complaints into a guidebook for the countercultural sensibility that has shaped so much of contemporary received wisdom. An affluent, free West, he concluded, is really a “one-dimensional” industrial society that suffocates our primal needs “while it sustains and absolves the destructive power and repressive function of the affluent society”—masking this oppression with “deceptive liberties as free competition at administered prices, a free press which censors itself, free choice between brands and gadgets.”^{xxix}

In other words, the material prosperity and freedom of the West are *really* just the instruments of oppression and misery; our happiness is an illusion, the false consciousness of intellectual oafs. Raymond Tallis is worth quoting on the value of this view for well-heeled intellectuals who have no intentions of abandoning the world that is presumably so oppressive: “This discovery of a form of unhappiness worse than toothache, or the savagery of pre-modern surgery, or any of the immemorial woes of mankind such as hunger and thirst and brutal cruelty, has the advantage not only of helping to prove that this is the worst of times, but also deals with the potential guilt of those who seem to be having a fairly cushy time in this worst of times.”^{xxx} I can't recall Marcuse ever explaining how *his* freedom to write that freedom is an illusion was not itself an illusion serving the interests of capitalist overlords.

The indictment of the West ultimately collapses on one simple reality: never in history has so many ordinary people been not just as materially well off, but as politically

autonomous and free as are the inhabitants of the West today. Critics of the West, when they simply aren't fabricating sophistries such as Marcuse's "deceptive liberties," have the burden of explaining this fact of political freedom in light of the supposed corruption and dysfunction of Western societies. For even if the indictment were true, then the blame would have to fall on us—the ordinary, everyday people who with their vote determine the shape and direction of their societies. The Islamic jihadist understands this fact about freedom very well: the spiritual leader of the Iranian revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, rationalized that Western political freedom is merely a "freedom that will corrupt our youth, freedom that will pave the way to the oppressor, freedom that will drag our nation to the bottom."^{xxxii}

The constant criticism of the West and its values is not based on fact, and the claim of Western evil founders on the reality that *no* poor Westerners migrate to the non-West, whereas millions of non-Westerners, including Muslims, risk their lives daily to try to reach a supposedly oppressive culture. As Pascal Bruckner puts it in *The Temptation of Innocence*, "The tepid hell of our countries that are 'infected with well-being' is a heavenly dream for millions."^{xxxiii}

Am I then claiming that Western culture is perfect? Of course not. But the evils of the West are evils known to humans everywhere at all times. The peculiar cultural advantages of the West, science and technology, have merely magnified their effects. **[Once again, Bruce, I very slightly tempered the preceding generalizations concerning the universality of human evils. The rewording makes your point equally well, without adding claims which many readers, self included, would find problematic. *No problem*]** But on the other hand, the goods of the West have been its invention alone: secular rationalism, rather than tradition or superstition, is the source of knowledge; individuals are valuable as individuals and possess inalienable rights regardless of their clan or sect or tribe; and all people are worthy of freedom and autonomy and the political power to shape their own lives according to their vision of the good. And that same science and technology have magnified the effects of these goods, too—which is why the average Westerner today lives a life freer and more prosperous than 99% of the humans who have ever occupied this planet.^{xxxiii} **[Citation needed? Your call. *Nah, we can give to complainers*]**

To be sure, some people use that freedom and prosperity to live merely for appetite and pleasure, and no one can argue that the jihadist indictment of our widespread cultural

vulgarity and spiritual debasement is not based on reality. But giving people freedom does not guarantee that they will use that freedom wisely or well. It just means that they are responsible for their choices. After all, we are all free to be as spiritual as we wish, and to reject the vulgarity and hedonism so widespread in Western culture—if thy television offends thee, pluck it out of thy house. Any alternative to leaving it up to individuals to choose how to use their freedom ultimately leads to control by some elite, and history shows us that this is a recipe for tyranny and oppression, whether that elite comprises the Communist Party or Islamist mullahs. For as the Roman poet Juvenal put it, “Who will guard the guardians?”

Whatever the basis of their obsessive criticism, then, Occidentalists—whether Western or Islamist—cannot attribute it to the facts. An honest appraisal of human existence in times past and outside the West today shows that the more Western the world becomes, the better off the average human being will be.

ⁱ In *Occidentalism*, Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit (New York, 2004), 31-32.

ⁱⁱ Buruma and Margalit, 110; see also 116-22.

ⁱⁱⁱ Buruma and Margalit, 10.

^{iv} In *Civilization and its Discontents*, 1929; trans. James Strachey (New York, 1961), 33.

^v For a more detailed discussion of these myths see my *Plagues of the Mind. The New Epidemic of False Knowledge* (Wilmington, Del., 1999), 27-52.

^{vi} In *The Discourse on Inequality, 1755*; trans. Julia Conaway Bondarella (New York, 1988), 4.

^{vii} In *Earth in the Balance* (New York, 1992), 220, 206.

^{viii} In *Occidentalism*, 32.

^{ix} Tallis, *Enemies of Hope*, 42.

^x Otto and Dorothy Solbrig, *So Shall You Reap: Farming and Crops in Human Affairs* (Washington, D.C., 1994), 14.

^{xi} James C. Chatters, *Ancient Encounters* (New York, 2001), 128-42.

^{xii} In *Defense of Realism* (1988; rpt. Lincoln, NE and London, 1998), 11.

^{xiii} *Notes from Underground*, trans. David Magarshack, in *The Best Short Stories of Dostoevsky* (New York, 1992), 128.

^{xiv} Fanny Burney, *Journals and Letters*, Vol. 6, ed. Joyce Hemlow et al. (Oxford, 1975), 612.

^{xv} See Roy Porter, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind* (New York, 1997), 14-30.

^{xvi} In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA, 2002), 21.

^{xvii} In “Is There Method to His Madness?” *The Nation*, 261.9 (1995), 305.

^{xviii} Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World* (New York, 1996), 11.

^{xix} Sagan, 9.

^{xx} *Enemies of Hope*, 117-18.

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- ^{xxi} Tallis' essay "The Murderousness and Gadgetry of this Age" discusses this issue in more detail. In *Newton's Sleep: The Two Cultures and the Two Kingdoms* (London, 1995), 42-54.
- ^{xxii} Hollander, 10.
- ^{xxiii} Hollander, 114-15.
- ^{xxiv} Hollander, 14.
- ^{xxv} Tallis, "The Murderousness and Gadgetry of this Age," 53-54.
- ^{xxvi} In his Preface to Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York, 1968), 25.
- ^{xxvii} In *Tears of the White Man*, trans. William R. Beer (New York: 1986), 4.
- ^{xxviii} See Thomas Sowell, *Black Rednecks and White Liberals* (San Francisco, 2005), 130-33.
- ^{xxix} In *One-Dimensional Man* (London, 1968), 23.
- ^{xxx} In *Enemies of Hope*, 207. See too the excellent essay by J. G. Merquior, "In Quest of Modern Culture: Historical or Hysterical Humanism," *Critical Review* 5.1 (1991), 399-420.
- ^{xxxi} In *The Legacy of Jihad*, ed. Andrew G. Bostom (New York, 2005), 228.
- ^{xxxii} In *The Temptation of Innocence* (New York, 2000), 51.
- ^{xxxiii} Gregg Easterbrook's calculation based on an estimate of 80 billion people who have lived since our species emerged. In *The Progress Paradox* (New York, 2003), 80.