

FROM PLATO TO NATO: THE IDEA OF THE WEST AND ITS OPPONENTS

(DAVID GRESS)

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This is a ferociously erudite book. The author, David Gress, offers an analysis and synthesis of essentially all thought on the idea of the West, from the Greeks to the postmodernists, in a book that seems to contain more than its actual six hundred pages of small print. The amount of thought he presents is astounding. My habit is to write down interesting-sounding books to which an author refers, then buy them. I probably bought thirty books, maybe more, as a result of reading *From Plato to NATO*. Every portion of this book was interesting—but still, paradoxically, it left me unable to write the type of review I typically write.

I think that is because this book is primarily historiography—that is, a history of history. In many ways, it is more useful as summary of innumerable thinkers than for its own thought (many of those thinkers are translated here by Gress, not being available in English—I didn't buy those books!). That is to say, this extremely dense book is primarily a longitudinal history of happenings and ideas, seen mostly through the lens of the key authors of each era. This doesn't make it not worth reading. It does make my writing a lengthy review pointless, since I cannot add anything, really, or synthesize Gress's thought in any way that does not infantilize it. In fact, I wasn't going to review it at all, but I took some notes, and one thing led to another, so now I have a review!

The author's central plea is that the idea of the West not be identified as a straight line from Greece to the modern West, what Gress calls the (false) "Grand Narrative." Instead, it should be viewed as a synthesis of Greek and Roman thought, with political institutions and habits later borrowed in part from Germanic tribes, all as modified first by Christianity and then by the Enlightenment, and all messy and tracing far from a straight line. So, for example, Charlemagne plays as big a role as Socrates or David Hume, and the *Song of Roland*, along with many other cultural touchstones, gets much discussion. The general outlines of this analysis are not new, though it is not fashionable, and despite his detailed discussion of scores of thinkers and historians, Gress does not precisely follow any of them. If you want to grasp the basics of all

these lines of thought, here is the place to start, but I will not try to summarize. Still, I certainly know a lot more about a lot of things than when I started reading this book.

My sole original thought is that Gress, who published this book in 1998, anticipated the modern moment by a good twenty years. He saw the West veering off the straight path, and to analyze that, he talks about modern thought opposed to all aspects of the West, from postmodernism to radical environmentalism, but looks earlier as well, to talk about both the Enlightenment and its earlier critics. As to the Enlightenment, Gress identifies the modern West (i.e., the successful West, before the decay of the past fifty years) with only a portion of Enlightenment thought. Gress attempts to claim for the West the “skeptical” or “rational” Enlightenment of Adam Smith and Montesquieu, whose thought recognized the limits of human nature and eschewed utopia, and to reject as mostly an outlier the “radical” Enlightenment of Voltaire, Diderot, and Rousseau. In a common trope, the American Revolution yes, the French Revolution no. As the Enlightenment project grinds to a shuddering halt in the early twenty-first century, throwing off sparks and chewed gears, Gress seems to have anticipated this and made a pitch that the Enlightenment not be wholly rejected. Really, this book is an extended appeal to not throw the baby out with the bath water. I am not sure if this attempt to rescue Enlightenment thought makes sense, or if what Gress calls the rational Enlightenment is really the Enlightenment at all, since rationality and the Scientific Revolution far pre-dated the Enlightenment. More likely most of the truly original political ideas of the Enlightenment should just be thrown out as flawed from the beginning, and any fresh insights the Enlightenment offers into more traditional political systems kept, along with any new economic or scientific ideas (though none of those are derived from the Enlightenment itself, even though they are commonly lumped in by Enlightenment apologists).

As to the non-Left critics of liberalism, who have proceeded in parallel with liberalism since it began in the eighteenth century, Gress has a great deal to say. One of the thinkers Gress studies is the obscure Giacomo Leopardi, who died in 1837, and whom Gress treats along with Alexis de Tocqueville, Søren Kirkegaard, and Friedrich Nietzsche. “[T]hey were pessimists because they understood on the one hand that liberalism

was the destiny of the West, and on the other that this set of doctrines was unable and unwilling, by its very nature, to restore the sense of self, of continuity, of belonging, and of tranquility that they considered essential to any civilization with a pretense to last." If it appeared in 1830 that liberalism was the destiny of the West, that mirage is fading fast. However, that is not my point here, it is rather the narrow one that Gress's book, in this context, has a paragraph that I think encapsulates everything there is to say about the attitude that made the West great, the attitude we have lost in these emasculated and decadent days, where we fall back in confusion. One of my (few) heroes is Hernán Cortes, a man today too often deprecated. I have never fully enunciated why I admire Cortes, other than basically I think that because staying still is moving backward, human flourishing is impossible without the drives that Cortes, that man of contradiction, embodied. Gress spills a lot of ink talking about Leopardi, and it is worth quoting a paragraph, along with his embedded quotes from Leopardi:

A society that was becoming liberal and capitalist without that Old Western ballast was a society of timid, bourgeois cynics, incapable of great passion or of great joy. As [Leopardi] wrote, "this century presumes to re-do all skills and institutions, because it actually does not know how to do anything." Happiness, he believed, could only come from the sense of achievement, of having created something, overcome real challenges. In the age of faith, of Christendom, religion posed both the absolute challenge—of following Christ—and the absolute reward. Living under judgment, men conceived life as an adventure, and their vivid imaginations conceived great tasks—sometimes bloody, cruel, and murderous—and impelled them to surmount great challenges. Hernán Cortes conquered Mexico for God, gold, and glory, and only a mundane imagination would distinguish these impulses, for they were one and the same. In the liberal age, great desires, great efforts, and great risks were banished, but "the man who does not desire for himself and love himself is not good to others."

This, the quest for adventure and achievement informed by, not in contradiction to or attempting to overcome, human nature, is the spirit that animated the expansion and greatness of the West, which is solely

responsible, or rather a subset of which is solely responsible, for the good parts of the modern world as it is today. It is a spirit without which the entire globe would be living the same as in the sixteenth century, and having lost that spirit, we are unlikely to find our way through the valley of shadow unless we regain it. We will be left, and are currently left, in the unenviable position of a small child, as in the famous Twilight Zone episode, able to wish any thought into reality, but without the wisdom or even knowledge to choose rightly and to our and others' benefit. I suspect that this spirit cannot be animated without a combination of Christianity and baser, or at least less Christ-focused, human instincts, which, as in the case of Cortes, sit uncomfortably with each other. Here, still, lies the narrow path, given the inherent limitations of humans.

I don't think Gress spends enough time on this, though. He spends much more time on attacking the "Grand Narrative," exemplified in the mid-twentieth-century passion for the Great Books. I think he overstates the acceptance of that narrative even in that time, and in any case, the era in which the Great Books, or Will and Ariel Durant, or even Mortimer Adler, had any relevance to society is just as dead as Thucydides. I can assure Gress nobody teaches the Grand Narrative anymore, though the neoconservatives still buy into it, exalting Greek thought and rejecting the Christian and Germanic influences on which Gress focuses. But Gress's emphasis is perfectly reasonable. Twenty years ago the flaw embedded at the heart of the Enlightenment, its exaltation of autonomic individualism, which must naturally end in the Cthulhu state destroying all unchosen social bonds because of its crazed lust for so-called emancipation, along with the forced suppression of anyone or anything that opposes atomized liberty, was not so obvious, though Gress does cite Cyril Connolly in an epigraph to one chapter, "It is closing time in the gardens of the West." Truer words were never spoken—but maybe after some pruning and digging, they can be reopened.