

WHY I DISLIKE WESTERN CULTURE

One who has made a lifelong study of the civilizations of many lands and times explains why the contemporary of which he is a part annoys and frightens him.

By **ARNOLD J. TOYNBEE**

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Times Magazine Editorial Preface: In a recent article, the British historian Arnold J. Toynbee, who has just turned 75, remarked: "I came to look on this modern Western world with alien and unadmiring eyes." Here, at the suggestion of The Times Magazine, Arnold J. Toynbee tells why he feels that way,

WHEN I say baldly that I dislike contemporary Western civilization, I am, of course, saying this partly to tease my fellow Westerners. The stand that I take is partly a joke, but it is also partly serious. My dislike of the West, though genuine as far as it goes, cannot really be unmitigated. If it were, I should not feel lost — as I know that I should —if I did not have a *pied-à-terre* in London. I am a Londoner born and bred, but I have not reacted against my native city; and, though I dislike the congestion of the mechanized traffic there, I know that this pest is just as bad in all the other great cities of the postwar world.

If I were to be hounded out of London by some (nonexistent) British counterpart of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, I expect I could make myself at home in Edinburgh or Melbourne or Rome or Hamburg or Boston, Mass. (my great-grandfather's farm was in sight of Boston Stump, the tapering tower of St. Botolph's Church in Boston, England). I should not feel at home as a permanent resident in New York or Chicago or Pittsburgh or Glasgow or Manchester or Milan. And I do not suppose that I could strike root in Kyoto or in Damascus or in Istanbul

or even in Athens, though I love and admire each of these beautiful non-Western cities.

IN ancient Greece, the navel of the earth was marked by a monolith at Delphi. The navel of my earth is not in Greece (though my heart and mind reside there). My world-navel is the Albert Memorial in Kensington Gardens. This British monument may be comically ugly but, to me, it is reassuringly familiar. I used to play around its steps when I was a tiny child. Its frieze taught me the names of the great poets, artists and thinkers of the past; the group of figures at the four corners put the four continents on the map for me.

Yes, one is a prisoner of one's time and place. I belong to the presyncopation age. Classical Western music is music for my ears. When I hear jazz, I become uneasy and turn hostile. I feel my traditional world being victoriously invaded by tropical Africa. Politically, I am on the side of Africa against the Western colonial powers, but when it comes to music, Africa's cultural colonialism makes me cherish the West's pre-African musical past.

To be the prisoner of one's time and place is one of our human limitations. A human being has roots, like a tree, and these roots tether him — though, unlike a tree's roots, they are emotional and intellectual roots. However, it is characteristic of our human nature that we rebel against our human limitations and try to transcend them. I myself, besides being human, happen to be a historian, and a historian's special form of human rebellion is to try to shake himself free of his own parochial blood and soil (to use Hitler's hateful but expressive words). A historian's *métier* is to move freely through time and space.

WHAT a bore one's own native civilization is. It is dull just because it is familiar. I had the good fortune to be educated in Greek and Latin. This education served me as a magic carpet on which I wafted myself from the 20th century of the Christian era to the third century B.C., and from the North Atlantic to the Eastern Mediterranean. I hated having to learn the names and dates of the Kings of England. The kings of Israel and Judah were almost as bad, since the Old Testament in the King James version has become virtually part of English literature. But I enjoyed finding my way among the Ptolemies and the Seleucuses. English constitutional history? One glance at the syllabus of the Oxford school of medieval and modern history was enough to put me off reading for that. But the

history of Islam, the history of Buddhism — these opened up fascinating new worlds.

Contemporary Western civilization annoys me, not because it is Western, but because it is mine and because I am a historian. If I had happened to be born in 1889 in China instead of England, no doubt I should be annoyed today with the China of Pu Yi and Chiang Kai-shek and Chou En-lai. But being, as I am, a Western historian, I am inevitably annoyed by the contemporary West. It holds me fast entangled in its coils. It prevents me from getting back behind the machine age and from getting out into Russia, Dar-el-Islam, the Hindu world, Eastern Asia. My inescapable Westernness makes it impossible for me to become culturally acclimatized in any of these other contemporary civilizations. This is a limitation on my human freedom that I resent.

HOWEVER, I have a more formidable reason for disliking the West than any that I have mentioned so far. Since I have been grown-up (I am now turned 75), the West has produced two world wars; it has produced Communism, Fascism and National Socialism; it has produced Mussolini and Hitler and McCarthy. These Western enormities make me, as a Westerner, feel insecure. Now that my German fellow-Westerners have murdered six million Jews, how can I be certain that my English fellow-countrymen might not do something equally criminal? We did murder some thousands of defenseless civilians at Port Said in 1956. What might we not go on to do after that? What might I not be capable of doing myself, if this contemporary Western criminal lunacy were to waylay me?

I shiver and shake. Oldfashioned Christian humility, please come to my rescue. Please save me from contemporary post-Christian Western self-complacent sinfulness. I should feel my spirits rise if, instead of being Hitler's fellow-Westerner — as I am — I could be Gandhi's fellow-Hindu. Yes, I believe I could even stomach Benares as the price of being liberated from Hitler's company. But I cannot escape Hitler. This fellow-Westerner of mine (of the same age to within a week) is going to haunt me for the rest of my West-bound life.

Apart from contemporary Western crimes, there are other blemishes on contemporary Western life that I find repulsive. Though I dislike the former enslavement of the individual to the community in Japan. I also dislike, and this perhaps even more, the lengths to which contemporary Western individualism

has gone. The contemporary West is callous toward the aged. This is, I believe, the first civilization, so far, in which the aged have not had a place, as a matter of course, in their adult children's homes. Looking at this Western callousness with deWesternized eyes, I find it shocking.

I ALSO dislike the contemporary Western advertising business. It has made a fine art out of taking advantage of human silliness. It rams unwanted material goods down surfeited throats when two-thirds of all human beings now alive are in desperate need of the bare necessities of life. This is an ugly aspect of the affluent society; and, if I am told that advertising is the price of affluence, I reply, without hesitation, that affluence has been bought too dear. Another item in the price of affluence is the standardization of mass-produced goods and services. This is, in itself, a deplorable impoverishment of the material side of human culture, and it brings spiritual standardization with it, which is still worse.

Looking back into the past history of the West — a past which was still present when I was a child — I admire the 19th-century West's success in postponing the age of sexual awakening, sexual experience and sexual infatuation far beyond the age of physical puberty. You may tell me that this was against nature; but to be human consists precisely in transcending nature — in overcoming the biological limitations that we have inherited from our prehuman ancestors.

ALL human societies overcome death by creating and maintaining, institutions that are handed on from one generation to another. Sex is a still more awkward feature of our biological inheritance than death, and our 19th-century Western society handled sex with relative success. By postponing the age of sexual awakening, it prolonged the length of the period of education. It is this, together with the 17th-century Western achievement of learning to think for oneself instead of taking tradition on trust, that accounts for the West's preeminence in the world during the last few centuries.

Nineteenth-century Westerners condemned with justice the Hindu institution of child-marriage, and they deplored, also with justice, the spectacle of an intellectually promising Moslem boy being allowed to commit intellectual suicide by sexual indulgence at the age of puberty. The 20th-century West is now imitating the non-Western habitsthat the 19th-century West rightly—though perhaps selfrighteously—condemned.

Our irrational contemporary Western impatience and our blind adulation of speed for speed's sake are making havoc, today, of the education of our children. We force their growth as if they were chicks in a pullet factory. We drive them into a premature awareness of sex even before physical puberty has overtaken them. In fact, we deprive our children of the human right of having a childhood. This forcing of sex-consciousness started in the United States; it has spread to Britain, who knows how many other Western countries this perverse system of miseducation is going to invade and demoralize?

OUR whole present policy in the upbringing of the young is paradoxical. While we are lowering the age of sexual awareness — and frequently the age of sexual experience, too — to a veritably Hindu degree, we are at the same time prolonging the length of education. We force our boys and girls to become sex-conscious at 12 or 13, and then we ask them to prolong their postgraduate studies till they are nearly 30. How are they to be expected to give their minds to education during those last 16 or 17 sex-haunted years?

We are proud of ourselves for providing secondary education, college education, postgraduate education for everybody. But we shall be plowing the sands if we do not simultaneously revert to our grandparents' practice of prolonging the age of sexual innocence. If we persist, in this vital matter, on our present Hindu course, our brand new would be institutions for higher education will become, in practice, little more than social clubs for sexual mating.

THIS relapse into precocious sexuality is one of the moral blemishes of the contemporary Western civilization. One of its intellectual blemishes is its insistence on splitting up the universe into smaller and smaller splinters. It has split up the human race into a host of sovereign independent national states. It has split up knowledge and understanding into a host of separate watertight "disciplines." I dislike nationalism and I dislike specialization, and both are characteristically Western aberrations.

When I was about 16 years old, I stayed with an uncle who was a specialist on Dante, while his wife was a specialist on Horace Walpole. Their library was less specialized than they themselves were, and I browsed in it with excitement and delight. When I was due to leave, my uncle said to me: "Arnold, your aunt and I think you are allowing your interest to be too general. You ought to specialize." I

said nothing, but I was instantaneously certain that I was not going to follow this advice; and, in fact, I have consistently done the opposite throughout the 60 years that have passed since then.

What a world to find oneself born into. Since as early as I first became conscious of my native Western environment, Western technology has been inventing new and ever more complicated machines. I did learn to ride a bicycle. How can one be expleted, in just one lifetime, to go on to learn to ride a motorcycle or to drive a car? I started shaving in the age of the cutthroat razor, and Mr. Gillette's invention came as a great relief to me. But how can I be expected to go on to use an electric razor? How could I know about volts and ohms and transformers? An American friend did give me an electric razor. This lies safely tucked away in a drawer, and whenever I unearth it, it alarms me.

I DO now travel about the world in ears and airplanes. The better these get at covering the distance, the worse they get at allowing an inquisitive passenger to see the view. I did my first traveling in Greece in 1911–12. I did it on foot with a rucksack on my back. I was as free as a bird. I could go where even mules could not go. I could see the world as I pleased. I have never traveled so satisfactorily as that since then.

The other day, I had a three-hour mule ride from an airstrip to the rock-cut churches at Lalibela in Ethiopia. Once again I was seeing the real world, the unmechanized pre-Western world in which I feel truly at home. Machinery perplexes and dismays me, and I have been born into the Western machine age. Why was I not born in third-century-B.C. Syria or seventh-century-A.D. China? I should not then have been harassed by machinery as I am in the contemporary West. I heartily dislike this side of contemporary Western life, and, in the eyes of the rest of the world, mechanization is what the contemporary West stands for.

WELL, these are some of the reasons why I dislike the contemporary Western civilization. But, as I have said at the beginning of this article, my dislike is not undiluted. My grandchildren, after all, are Westerners, and I certainly like them. Moreover, I want them, in their turn, to have grandchildren who will have grandchildren. I should be desolated if I believed that Western man was going to commit. mass suicide by engaging in a third world war that, this time, would be fought with atomic weapons.

To discover the existence of the atom and to go on to discover how to split it has been the chef d'oeuvre of Western science and technology. I do not love Western science for having made these deadly inventions; but I have just enough faith in Western man's political commonsense to expect that he will not liquidate himself. So perhaps, after all, I do not rate my native Western civilization so low as I fancy that I do in my moments of acute exasperation at the West's more uncongenial vagaries.

Biography of Arnold J. Toynbee

Arnold Joseph Toynbee, (born April 14, 1889, London, England—died October 22, 1975, York, North Yorkshire). Toynbee was a nephew of the 19th-century economist Arnold Toynbee. He was educated at Balliol College, Oxford (classics, 1911), and studied briefly at the British School at Athens, an experience that influenced the genesis of his philosophy about the decline of civilizations.

In 1912 he became a tutor and fellow in ancient history at Balliol College, and in 1915 he began working for the intelligence department of the British Foreign Office. After serving as a delegate to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 he served as professor of Byzantine and modern Greek studies at the University of London. It was here that Toynbee was appointed to the Koraes Chair of Modern Greek and Byzantine History, Language and Literature at King's College, although he would ultimately resign following a controversial academic dispute with the professoriate of the College.[10][11] In 1921 and 1922 he was the Manchester Guardian correspondent during the Greco-Turkish War, an experience that resulted in the publication of *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey*. In 1925 he became research professor of international history at the London School of Economics and director of studies at the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy (FBA), the United Kingdoms national academy for the humanities and social sciences, in 1937.[13] He was elected an International Member of the American Philosophical Society in 1941 and an International Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Toynbee served as a research professor of international history at the London School of Economics and King's College London. From 1918 to 1950, Toynbee was considered a leading specialist on international affairs. From 1924 to 1954, Toynbee served as the Director of Studies at Chatham House, in which position he also produced 34 volumes of the *Survey of International Affairs*, a "bible" for international specialists in Britain. He is best known for his 12-volume *A Study of History* (1934–1961).