

## Book Review

### *The Europeanization of the World* by John M. Headley

William Edward Wilson

As leaders across the Western world try their best to steer civilisation onto the rocks of mediocrity, perhaps bold and persuasive reaffirmations of the past are necessary to find the right course. If this is the case, then John M. Headley's *The Europeanization of the World* offers, as only a historian could do, examples of a collective heritage as the guiding light for the future. In particular he has chosen three specific ideas, both physical and philosophical, that led to the development of a European culture which was able to eventually transcend any geographical conceptions that previously existed. The first, leveraging his work as a Renaissance scholar, especially focused on cartography, at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, is obvious once explained through scholarly expertise; the hegemonic expansion of European political principles across the globe could not have happened without the map-making and exploration that preceded it. Cartographic efforts essentially defined the engagement of Europe with the rest of the world, heralding a global era. The true power of Headley's book, however, only manifests itself when he begins to discuss the philosophical development of Europe. Thus, the second key idea is that of a common conception of humanity, made all the more special by his lucid and innovative extension of the narrative to an earlier European Christendom, seemingly the antithesis of its final product. Finally, he argues that European political culture has, since the time of Martin Luther, had an ingrained tendency towards dissent, manifesting itself ultimately in the Anglo-American system of political parties and opposition. All important in their own right, when taken together in a valuable piece of

literature, Headley's thoughts present many challenges to how academia should view the  
© 2015 *The Middle Ground Journal* Number 10, Spring 2015 <http://TheMiddleGroundJournal.org>  
See Submission Guidelines page for the journal's not-for-profit educational open-access policy

legacy of early modern European history, which will be the primary focus of this review.

Before delving deeper into the content of the book, it seems pertinent to discuss from what perspective Headley is really writing, especially since this concurrently answers why he wrote it, and who might agree with him. William Keylor, in his own review of the book, sees Headley as a spirited defender “of certain aspects of the political and economic traditions of the West,”<sup>1</sup> which are broadly in line with politicians, both American and otherwise, who espouse views of Western exceptionalism. Nevertheless, it seems odd that Keylor chooses to cast a UNC Renaissance scholar, with no partisan writing in his previous publications, as some kind of ‘conservative’ agitator along the lines of Irving Kristol, or even Dinesh D’Souza of *2016: Obama’s America*<sup>2</sup> infamy. For a start, Headley, whilst discussing at length the importance of Christianity in the early development of both his key philosophical ideas, categorically dismisses anyone who suggests that theology is still valid as a defender of them: “with the express reintroduction of religion into politics in an extreme ideological and most ignorant form, five hundred years or more of tenuous progress have been reversed and thrown into question.”<sup>3</sup> It hardly helps attempts at characterisation that he also is unafraid to admit that European ideals, such as Marxism, present coherent alternatives to the ones he is a proponent of. Placement in a certain intellectual camp against the writer’s own wishes is reminiscent of those who were used as the academic foundation for neoconservatism, such as Francis Fukuyama and Allan Bloom, rather than considering them in the light of a much longer tradition of Whig liberalism.

---

<sup>1</sup> William Keylor, "Review of *The Europeanization of the World*." *New Global Studies* 2, no. 3 (2008): 3.

<sup>2</sup> Dinesh D'Souza, *2016: Obama's America*, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> John M. Headley, *The Europeanization of the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 216.

The similarities between Bloom and Headley in disposition, if not subject matter, are hard to miss. Though Headley does not go as far as to categorically argue that “I am not a conservative - neo or paleo,”<sup>4</sup> as Bloom once did, he does seem to be much more naturally aligned with liberalism, rather than with only purely reactionary thought. At any rate, it would be impossible for Headley to be reacting against the very same thing that he essentially feels has become, positively, the hegemonic global political ideology. As with Bloom, this is of course not entirely in line with the modern interpretation of liberalism found in the U.S., but rather draws on older individualistic concepts of universal toleration, most powerfully elaborated in the Declaration of Independence’s proclamation that “all men are created free and equal.”<sup>5</sup> Wider influences have not been ignored either; Headley chooses to celebrate liberalism’s ideals by retelling, in his opinion, how they progressively developed. In this sense, history in the book can almost be seen as part of a broad, partially deterministic, arc, reminiscent of the Hegelian explanation that “the History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom.”<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, this arc does need to be pushed along every now and then by reminding everyone why its existence is so important, and thus Headley feels as though “[t]he uniqueness of the Western tradition in the creation of a common humanity needs to be reaffirmed.”<sup>7</sup> He is not the only one to have spoken about such a reaffirmation of the Whig tradition of late; indeed it has even gained credence within political strategist circles. British Prime Minister David Cameron has put forward what he describes as ‘muscular liberalism,’ that is, the refutation of illiberalism in British society, by making it very clear that democracy and universal

---

<sup>4</sup> Jim Sleeper, "Allan Bloom, 20 years later," *The Guardian*, September 17, 2007, accessed April 18, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/sep/17/allanbloom20yearslater>.

<sup>5</sup> "The Declaration of Independence: A Transcription," National Archives and Records Administration. accessed May 10, 2014, [http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration\\_transcript.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html).

<sup>6</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 400.

<sup>7</sup> Headley, *The Europeanization of the World*, 217.

human rights are “what defines us as a society. To belong here is to believe these things.”<sup>8</sup>

This poses the question, then, what exactly is the point of this reaffirmation of liberal, European ideals?

Once again, despite not explicitly saying it, it seems pretty clear that Headley is writing this book not only for those who already agree with him, but also as an attack against those that do not. Who are the intellectual enemies of Headley? Though certainly a pretty broad term, they could be described collectively as those who subscribe to ideas of cultural relativism, which generally, though not always, is thinly veiled criticism of Western civilisation in its totality. A prime example is the argument of Edward Said, and specifically his deconstructionist work *Orientalism*, that “neither the term Orient, nor the concept of the West has any ontological stability.”<sup>9</sup> The fallacy, as Headley would see it here, is that just because European culture created a misleading and mischievous concept of the ‘Orient,’ this must surely mean that everything about that culture is bad and should be thrown aside, by, in this case, questioning its very existence. Allan Bloom’s seminal publication *The Closing of the American Mind* pairs rather well with Headley’s work, since both are at their core pushing against the perceived notions that Western liberalism is only one of many different cultural and intellectual traditions, all of which should be considered equal, or perhaps even superior to liberal ideas. In it, he notes that courses with cultural relativism at their core have been created at schools and universities in order to “force students to recognize that there are other ways of thinking and that Western ways are not better.”<sup>10</sup> Yet the supreme irony of this is the realisation that, when students read between the lines, it becomes obvious that “every one of these cultures is ethnocentric,” whilst only

---

<sup>8</sup> “State multiculturalism has failed, says David Cameron,” *BBC News*, February 5, 2011, accessed March 24, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-12371994>.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 17.

<sup>10</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 36.

in Western academic culture “is there some willingness to doubt the identification of the good with one’s own way.”<sup>11</sup> In the act of teaching about other cultures, particularly why they are special over and above Western enlightenment ideals, “what they [the Western intelligentsia] actually do is to assert unawares the superiority of their scientific understanding and the inferiority of the other cultures which do not recognize it at the same time that they reject all such claims to superiority.”<sup>12</sup> By simply recalling the history of Western intellectual development, Headley strikes at the heart of anti-Western cultural relativism.

It would be easy, then, to accuse Headley of cultural chauvinism, or indeed something even darker. Intriguingly this is exactly what William Keylor chooses to do in his review of the book, going as far as to make the ridiculous assertion that, since Headley only briefly discusses the industrial revolution, which could not have come about without the earlier eighteenth-century ideas that he champions, that he is essentially admitting by omission that Europe was bound to follow a path of “Social Darwinism, eugenics, anti-Semitism and other ideologies that emphasize the distinctions between peoples.”<sup>13</sup> In his review in the *American Historical Review*, Gerard Delanty admits that there will be those like Keylor who attempt to reduce European heritage “to one that culminated in the death camps of the Nazis.”<sup>14</sup> Yet it is also pretty clear to him, and to any reader who takes the time to properly examine what Headley is trying to say, that by at least attempting to maintain objectivity in his writing, he is able to check these accusations by “those who would reduce the universalistic impulse to colonialism and racism.”<sup>15</sup> Simply because he feels that there is a

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Keylor, "Review," 5.

<sup>14</sup> Gerard Delanty, "The Europeanization of the World: On the Origins of Human Rights and Democracy," *The American Historical Review* 115, no. 1 (2010): 277.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

certain timelessness to European liberal values, does not mean that he has to approve of everything the West has ever done.

This is unequivocally stated in what is surely the most important, though shortest, chapter of the book; 'Aftermath.' Building upon the historical developments of democracy and universal rights, Headley discusses their role in contemporary world affairs, and laments the West's own ignorance of its heritage in the past 200 years. Technological superiority, ever growing compared to all other cultures, gave the Europe of the nineteenth century "an energy and self-confidence"<sup>16</sup> that manifested itself in a transition from the Enlightenment's curiosity with the world to pseudo-scientific racism. Of course, this technology also created the physical capability for immense destruction, which was utilised in Europe's subjugation of colonised peoples, before finally in 1914-18 the colonial powers turned upon one another "in a first bout of suicide."<sup>17</sup> In essence, as Headley so beautifully puts it, "the civilizers had become the savages,"<sup>18</sup> and, as Keylor does, it is very easy to simply dismiss Europe as basically a spent entity after it began ripping itself apart. In refuting this notion, the apex of the book's argument finally manifests itself: 'European' culture no longer needs to be attached to the geographical or political entity of Europe. Rather, as Enoch Powell, in his typically eloquent style, once said, "values exist in a transcendental realm, beyond space and time. They can neither be fought for, nor destroyed."<sup>19</sup> Being an American, a part of the 'new world,' Headley points out that at least in some respects this transfer of culture has existed for centuries; however, it has only become truly global post-1945. He begins the chapter with a quote from Indian social democrat B. R. Ambedkar, in 1949, who demonstrates the influence of European liberalism in saying the "principles of liberty,

---

<sup>16</sup> Headley, *The Europeanization of the World*, 217.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> John Casey, "The revival of Tory philosophy," *The Spectator*, March 14, 2007, accessed March 25, 2014, <http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/28511/the-revival-of-tory-philosophy/>.

equality and fraternity are not to be treated as separate items in a trinity. They form a union of trinity in the sense that to divorce one from the other is to defeat the very purpose of democracy.”<sup>20</sup> In including this point, Headley demonstrates the continued vitality of these ideals in the face of the disastrous actions of Europeans, which surely attests to their longevity and power. Drawing on Edmund Burke’s assertion in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* that European culture is “our manners, our civilization, and all good things which are connected with manners and with civilization,”<sup>21</sup> Headley’s argument that it is acceptable to create an ideal, free from some aspects of reality, is a compelling one. Nevertheless, this also provides a clear, and exploitable, weakness in the book. Whilst he is happy to admit that the West fell into a period of industrial and colonial exploitation after the eighteenth century, his arguments can just as easily be used to denigrate the scientific enlightenment, which surely was the precursor to scientific racism anyway. Rather than addressing the transgressions of the nineteenth century, perhaps Headley’s writing could have been strengthened further by discarding this objectivity, though naturally this would then call into question its merit, if any, as academic history rather than just political prose.

From its title alone, it is clear Headley’s work is both global and transnational in its subject matter. Indeed, when examining Venetian concepts of the world’s “total habitability,”<sup>22</sup> which eschewed a primarily religious understanding for a combination of a spiritual, and empirical, conceptualisation of the entire world, it becomes clear that early modern Europeans were unique in their ability to see a global future. Map-making is a very physical accrual of knowledge, which depends entirely on exploration and a curiosity for the unknown, making Headley’s inclusion of this particular aspect of the Renaissance in the development of European ideals especially innovative. When his previous work on

---

<sup>20</sup> Headley, *The Europeanization of the World*, 196.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

Tommaso Campanella, an Italian astronomer and theologian of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, is considered, it comes as no surprise that his understanding of the scientific mind is so well articulated. His coining of the term ‘the global arena of humanity,’ constructed by European exploration, is worth mentioning as an exquisite piece of language, which would do well to see more usage by world historians. Furthermore he is able to explain the importance of cartography from a geopolitical perspective, arguing that it “afforded Europe the supreme advantage of defining the global arena.”<sup>23</sup>

Themes of transnationalism continue in Headley’s discussion of universal rights and political dissent. Tracing Christian universalism to the very beginnings of the Roman Catholic Church, he notes Augustine of Hippo’s ideal ‘heavenly city,’ which “calls citizens out of all nations, and gathers together a society of pilgrims of all languages.”<sup>24</sup> The history of Catholicism presents ample examples of a supranational spiritual community, of course ignoring Papal imperial ambitions in Italy. In it Headley can also see the roots of a common European identity forming, which would, through the pressures of the Reformation, eventually become separated from ideas of universal Christendom, instead emphasizing common bonds of culture, intellectual thought and trade. Similarly, this unique coming together of peoples, despite the near-continuous national conflicts, planted the ultimate seed of universal humanity, which provided a framework for how to view the ever expanding world outside Europe. Though eventually manifesting itself in the national politics of England and the United States, political dissent as a form of European culture was also a transnational construction, if Headley is to be believed. The Reformation, a movement for change throughout Western Europe, provided the impetus for a diversification of religious views, but really “Luther had created the critical and prophetic

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 72.

principle of Protestantism, derived and recovered from the Hebrew prophets, that nothing in this world can claim for itself an inherently divine sanction,"<sup>25</sup> which proved to naturally transfer from spirituality to parliamentary politics. Headley's coherent linking of so many European and global historical events and movements surely demonstrates his brilliance at parsing through evidence in the creation of big-picture history, and in doing so cements the book as an example of world history.

Speaking both academically and personally, Headley's work has had a profoundly positive impact upon me. As someone who frequently strays from what might be considered the political 'mainstream,' his words have reminded me that intellectual games are all well and good, but the most important thing is to never allow the basic fundamentals of our Western culture be refuted or destroyed. He puts it far better himself, in his final thoughts: "Since 1800 and the clear, public enunciation of principles promotive of human rights, each generation would need to reclaim the idea and ideal of equality in its own way, circumstances and space. For like freedom itself, the idea of equality, the bearer of natural human rights, howsoever fragile and debatable, would simply go away. The spur forged in earlier centuries by elements of European thought and experience must await the direction of a better-endowed rider and a more coherent public."<sup>26</sup> Depressingly, as alluded to in the beginning of this review, the present political situation in much of Europe has completely lost sight of these tremendously powerful fundamentals of civilisation. Seemingly gone are the days of great ideological battles on the very nature of freedom, as could be found in the Whig and Tory dichotomy of early-modern English parliamentary democracy, replaced with pathetic bickering over the scraps of an increasingly second-rate culture. Headley calls upon all thinking men and women to solve this crisis of leadership, and his book

---

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

provides an important reminder of what made European culture so successful and dominant in the first place.

As someone who was born in the United Kingdom, raised primarily in Australia and presently living in Hong Kong, I find it extremely important to create my own identity within a broader understanding of being part of Western society. My time in Hong Kong, most certainly a part of the West despite the protestations of its masters in Beijing, has taught me, more than anything, about the immense connection that all nations that respect universal rights and political dissent have with one another. My travelling around the world from a young age has, far from making me somehow respect all political and cultural systems, instead progressively hardened my belief that the European ideals Headley espouses are better than all feasible alternatives. It has been an overwhelmingly good thing that these values have spread so far and wide, and they remain immensely popular amongst those who cannot take them for granted. Even many of the most repulsive of authoritarian states at least pay some heed to the importance of parliamentary democracy, human rights and the law, because that is really what their citizens want. With Headley and others setting the intellectual cadence, it is time for Europe and its descendants to rise once again to the challenge of reaffirming these core values for the sake of fighting mediocrity, as well as illiberalism across the globe. Our remarkable civilisation, quite literally, depends on it.

## **Bibliography**

Dinesh D'Souza. *2016: Obama's America*. DVD. Santa Monica, Calif.: Distributed by Lionsgate, 2012.

Bloom, Allan. *The Closing of the American Mind*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.

Casey, John. "The revival of Tory philosophy." *The Spectator*, March 14, 2007. Accessed March 25, 2014. <http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/28511/the-revival-of-tory-philosophy/>.

Delanty, Gerard. "The Europeanization of the World: On the Origins of Human Rights and Democracy." *The American Historical Review* 115, no. 1 (2010): 276-277.

Headley, John M. *The Europeanization of the World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *The Philosophy of History*. New York: Dover Publications, 1956, 400.

Keylor, William. "Review of *The Europeanization of the World*." *New Global Studies* 2, no. 3 (2008): 1-5.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

Sleeper, Jim. "Allan Bloom, 20 years later." *The Guardian*, September 17, 2007. Accessed April 18, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/sep/17/allanbloom20yearslater>.

"State multiculturalism has failed, says David Cameron." *BBC News*,. February 5, 2011. Accessed March 24, 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-12371994>.

"The Declaration of Independence: A Transcription." *National Archives and Records Administration*. Accessed May 2014. [http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration\\_transcript.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html) .