REFLEXIONS ON THE WESTERN TRADITION: WHAT IS IT AND DOES IT MATTER?

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THE CURRENT CRISIS OF THE WEST

- The war in Ukraine
- The end of democracy?
- Economic decline
- Inequality between and within nation states
- Climate catastrophe
A CRISIS ALSO BROUGHT TO THE FORE BY:

- Postcolonialism and the decolonial critique of the West
- Black Lives Matter
- Activism about memorials
‘Mr Gandhi, what do you think of western civilization?’

‘I think it would be a good idea’
**WHAT IS THE WESTERN (NORTHERN?) TRADITION?**  VIEW (1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competitive</th>
<th>Rational</th>
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<td>Exploitative</td>
<td>Linear</td>
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<td>Violent</td>
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<td>Elitist</td>
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<td>Materialistic</td>
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‘The survival of the West depends on Americans reaffirming their Western identity and Westerners accepting their civilization as unique not universal and uniting to renew and preserve it against challenges from non-Western societies.’ (Huntington, 1997: 20-21)
WHAT/WHERE IS THE WEST?

wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/37/Western_world_Samuel_P_Huntington.svg
DEFINING THE WEST

- A contested concept
- Home of modernity?
- Historically, defined by a largely Christian heritage
- Separation of church and state
THE WEST: ATTRIBUTED FEATURES

- Social pluralism
- Representative government
- Democracy
- Rule of law
- Individualism
A LOT TO ANSWER FOR (1)

- Imperialism and colonialism
- Slavery
- Marginalization of indigenous people, plunder of resources and land, genocide, impoverishment
A LOT TO ANSWER FOR (2)

- Role of western science and technology in environmental destruction
- Violence of two world wars
- Threat of nuclear annihilation
THE IDEA OF THE WEST: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

- A useful concept
- A diverse history
- Addressing colonial legacy
- Getting universality right
DEFENDING THE WESTERN TRADITION

- Features worth defending but not exclusive to the West:
  - Reason
  - The individual
  - Freedom and equality
  - Democracy
  - Human rights
Historically, Christianity has been dominant, yet it

- is neither Western in origin,
- nor internally homogeneous,
- nor the only influential major religion,
- nor a monopoly of the West.
THE WEST WAS NEVER ONE (2)

- An increasingly diverse West
- The West is not a unified agent with a collective purpose
THE WEST WAS NEVER ONE (3)

- Not all Western countries were colonial powers
- Not all imperial powers are western
- An increasingly hybrid West
Colonialism has been critiqued from a range of western theoretical traditions, including postmodernism, postcolonialism, critical theory, feminism, Marxism...
THE POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE

- Analyzes ‘the experience of foreign political, cultural, and economic domination as a salient issue and draws attention to the legacies of this history in the present.’ (Kohn, 2010: 203, emphasis added)
The West can and should retrieve and defend the best of its traditions, rejecting a hypocritical universalism and acknowledging its failings within and without.
THE WAY FORWARD

- Addressing colonialism and neo-colonialism
- Resisting neo-liberalism
- Defending democracy
IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

- Countering monetization, marketization
- Defending education as a public good
- Decolonizing curricula
- Critical autonomy as an aim of education
- Global justice
REFERENCES