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## THE POPULISM ISSUE



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# IS EUROPE SPLITTING IN TWO?

## THE GROWING CULTURAL GAP BETWEEN WEST AND EAST EUROPE

Christopher Coker

IS EUROPE a Judeo-Christian construction, or is it Greek or Roman, or a product of Latin Christendom? Or, for that matter, is it more Jewish than Christian, asks the twentieth-century Czech writer Bohumil Hrabal in one of the stories from a posthumous collection of his writings, *Mr. Kafka and Other Tales from the Time of the Cult* (2015):

“Things are getting much better, Doctor,” said Barta, the loader.

“Christian Europe is consolidating.”

“What Europe?” asked the doctor of philosophy, derisively. “And what do you mean Christian? It’s more Jewish than ever before.”

“It’s Christian,” said the merchant.

“That’s crap,” said the doctor of philosophy, raising his hand. “At one end of the spectrum you’ve got one brilliant Jew, Christ, and at the other end you’ve got another genius, Marx. Two specialists in

macro-cosmics, in the big picture. All the rest is Mother Goose territory.”

Hrabal is largely unknown in West Europe, but the fictional conversation he presents his readers raises some interesting questions today. For Europe is far less Christian than it once was. In the Czech Republic, Hrabal’s own country, a small majority of its citizens even declare themselves to be atheists.

Indeed, one might ask whether Christians now are an embattled minority. An Iranian asylum seeker was refused entry into the UK a few months ago because the Home Office considered his religion too violent. The man was a Christian convert from Islam. The Home Office wrote to him that the Bible was filled with “imagery of revenge, destruction, death and violence,” and it added a few pages from

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*Middle Eastern migrants praying in a camp near Bosnia’s border with Croatia*

Photo: Guiver Image/Getty Images

the New Testament’s *Book of Revelation* for good measure. Never mind the fact that the British constitution and culture is still largely Christian, and never mind the fact that in Iran apostasy is a capital crime.

But then again, Christians are on the defensive throughout Europe. In a British survey, 61 percent of respondents said they *had* religion, but only 29 percent of them said they *were* religious. Presumably they meant they belonged to a religious group like the Catholic Church, but were not particularly zealous about the fact—e.g. they did not go to confession very often or attend mass

too regularly. As a wit once remarked, it is when religion interferes with your everyday life that it is time to give it up.

### RELIGION & CULTURE

However that may be, at a time when Europe is tearing itself apart over questions of national identity, nativism, and immigration, perhaps it is time to interrogate the place of Christianity in European life, notwithstanding the fact that Christian humanism still remains the foundation of Western liberalism.

It should be noted that in most other parts of the world, quite the

opposite is occurring. Not only has religion taken hold in the Global South, as a general rule it is also more socially conservative than in the West. Its future is increasingly global and non-European, as West Europe's church leaders well know.

Back in 1989, the East Europeans, of course, believed they were joining a Christian club. As Czech President Vaclav Havel reminded Western politicians at the time, those in the East wanted to join Europe because “we are concerned about the destiny of values and principles that communism denies [...]: the traditional values of Western civilization.”

Christianity was seen as part of the package of joining the West because it had been part of the resistance to communism. Much of the pushback had come from the churches—the Lutheran ones in East Germany and the Catholic Church in Poland. It is unimaginable that any Polish government would accept the findings of the British government-sponsored study *Living with Difference: Community, Diversity and the Common Good* (2015), which had concluded that Britain was no longer Christian,

and that anyone who objected to the conclusion should for all intents and purposes “get over it.”

Religion is just one indicator of the growing rift between West and East Europe. This has been obscured by focusing only on what we all dislike—the aggressive assertion of national

identity and a strand of populism that has echoes of the politics of the 1930s. Its quintessential representative is deemed to be Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban (successfully playing catch-up is British prime minister Boris Johnson).

Orban has come quite a long way from 30 years ago when he joined a group of peo-

ple gathered in Heroes Square to place flowers on the coffin of Imre Nagy, the liberalizing communist-era prime minister whose 1956 overthrow had prompted the uprising against Soviet dominance. In a 1989 speech, the 26 year-old leader insisted that the Soviet Union had forced Hungary into a “dead-end Asian street,” going on to argue that communism and democracy were incompatible. Yet when Russia's president Vladimir Putin paid a state visit to Hungary in 2017, Orban was there to welcome him “home.”

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What home, one might ask? I believe there are fundamental incompatibilities between Russia and the West that are cultural in nature; indeed, they have nothing to do with politics.

Across the centuries Russians have had a radically different moral framework and understanding of the relationship between the individual and the state. Russian culture—represented by institutions like its Orthodox Church and thinkers like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Fyodor Dostoevsky—has been inherently antagonistic to all things Western, starting from the time of Peter the Great. The circumstances may have changed but the themes of anti-Western sentiment have remained extraordinarily consistent.

We should not look back with nostalgia to the era of the 1990s when it seemed that Russia might join the West: its pro-Western policies, such as they were, were a function of the country's internal crises and diminished capability, and did not represent any significant change in elite thinking.

Equally concerning of course are other East European politicians like Liviu Dragnea, who served as Speaker of the Romanian parliament until a few months ago when he was convicted of corruption. His influence

and capacity to manipulate the country behind the scenes, however, remains largely undiminished.

And then we have the Western Balkans, which by and large is characterized by the rule of authoritarian leaders whose personalities and way of ruling resemble a combination of the “best practices” of authoritarianism: an admixture of Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orban, and Recep Tayyip Erdogan. A stand-out example is Serbia's

president Aleksandar Vučić who began his career as Slobodan Milošević's propaganda minister in the 1990s as a loyal follower of ultranationalist (and convicted war criminal) Vojislav Šešelj, only to have a sudden (and opportunistic) change of heart in the early years of the present decade, which transformed him into a pro-EU (and pro-Russia, and pro-China) politician. The state capture of the country's institutions (the lack of media freedom and rule of law

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immediately come to mind) has gotten progressively worse, which makes winning elections a piece of cake. No wonder Freedom House has downgraded Serbia's rating to "partially free." Vučić's continued embrace by key actors in the West is largely understood to be due to his expressed willingness to make radical concessions on issues involving the recognition of Kosovo's independence and Bosnia's future institutional arrangements.

In both Hungary and Romania (as well as in countries like Serbia), politicians are treating democracy as a means rather than an end; they are cynically using democracy's majoritarian features to both consolidate and legitimize their personal hold on power.

### PROFOUND CLASH

But the growing rift between West and East Europe should be seen for what it is—something much more profound: a clash not of values, but norms.

With regards to the latter, one could look to Germany and the increasingly popular Alternative for Germany (AfG)—an opposition party whose increasing success in the polls is far more dangerous than anything we are seeing in Poland or Hungary.

As German-American writer Hannah Arendt put it in a famous phrase, only within the bounds of citizenship do people have "the right to have rights." In other words, for Arendt, freedom is contingent on the citizenship of a given state and the fight for freedom is framed within, and by, the state.

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And yet, France's Declaration of the Rights of Man—whose full title of course is the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen—is of very little comfort to immigrants who have often been seen as outsiders in the social contract theory that underpins Western liberalism. After all, their ancestors did not sign it. Invoking a language that has not been heard in political life since the 1930s, the AfG likes to refer to German culture as an *einheimische Kultur*—a native culture—and goes so far as to describe the German nation itself as a "cultural unit." For the AfG, Germany is not a cosmopolitan community so much as an ontological reality: a *Blut-gemeinschaft*, a community of blood.

Even if every Muslim were to be a good secularist and be willing to abide by what we can colloquially call the tribal conventions, he or she could never be truly German (according to the above narrative); at best, he or she

would be considered merely a visitor under sufferance.

The point is that what is unfolding is not a divergence between West and East European values, but one between different norms. Let me set out my argument very simply.

Values, one is told by West Europeans, are universal. It is better perhaps to regard them as timeless whilst acknowledging that norms are time-specific. And that is the paradox about anything that is timeless: anything timeless is, actually, delineated by time. It is timely or untimely; it rides the *zeitgeist* or does not; and, above all, it is always shape-shifting or continually changing form.

Let us go back to the question of whether Europe is Christian or not to illustrate the point, and let me take my own country, the UK, as the example. Recall that back in 1948, T.S. Eliot famously claimed that Christianity was the bedrock of Western civilization. Even if one were to accept that fact—which is questionable, for it only goes back 2,000 years—one might need to ask what Christianity has meant to the faithful in the last 900 years.

Consider the following thought experiment. Imagine standing before the great door of York Minster—without question one of the most beautiful cathedrals in West Europe, a moving

testament to the monumental faith of its builders. Sitting as it does hydraulically afloat on a bed of oil, which protects its structure from the vibrations of traffic, it is also highly indebted to modern technology.

Yet between a monumental faith and modern technology, what scenes has it witnessed of the devout living out the Christian message?

Some of the answers may come as a surprise. It saw, for example, one of the earliest pogroms of Jews in Britain, carried out, in fact, by the very people who built it. Then came a frenzy of witch-burning in the sixteenth century, followed a century later by the solemn trial and execution of a cat for the crime of catching a mouse on the Sabbath and thus breaking the Christian day of rest.

But when the cathedral was struck by lightning in the 1980s and a large part of it was gutted by fire, the Archbishop of York was quick to reassure the faithful that it had not fallen victim to an "Act of God" (except in the insurance industry sense of the term for which, alas, the cathedral could not be insured).

Well, quite obviously, Christianity has come a long way from the witchcraft burnings of the Early Modern Era, and the archbishop's relaxed attitude can be attributed to the fact that a premodern way of life has given way

to a postmodern one. Or, to put it more bluntly, the technology that shields York Minster from traffic is quite likely more awe-inspiring in the minds of many contemporary Christians than the religious beliefs they ought to espouse as believers.

What this history lesson illustrates is that whilst faith has remained the same, the normative practice of Christianity has changed over time. Such changes are often unarticulated; they tend to creep up on a society largely unannounced and often untheorized, as well. And a change of norms is usually very painful in the early days, at least.

#### WESTERN SHARIA

Let us move beyond the traditional Christian world to the Islamic one, from which an increasing number of immigrants to Europe come. Recently, the Sultan of Brunei introduced Sharia law into the kingdom, which now prescribes stoning for the crime of adultery. Why is this of concern? Because there are Muslim communities in Europe that advocate the introduction of Sharia law where Muslims constitute a majority. A previous Archbishop of Canterbury supported such a demand, for which he was rightly much criticized at the time.

Adultery is not a value, but a practice common to humanity. And it plays an important part in every civilization's

social imaginary. In the case of the West, think of the Greek gods and their marital infidelities; or Western novels like Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*; or, these days, TV soaps which have adultery as the main theme.

But the punishments for adultery have changed a lot over the time. Social ostracism is no longer a punishment. And while adultery used to be a ticket out politics, it is no longer—think of Germany's Gerhard Schröder, who served as the country's Chancellor from 1998 to 2005, and his four wives. It is only punished now in some of our militaries, as the first female pilot of a B-52 unhappily discovered; and it is punished in the armed forces for one simple reason: adultery is considered normatively dangerous for a senior officer to be sleeping with the wife or husband of a fellow officer, especially when the country he or she serves is in a state of war.

The punishments meted out in the Muslim world are no different. But let us go back to Sharia, which is an excellent example of a norm—that is to say, of an interpretation of the Qur'an with regards to how a believer must behave in order to be considered as living an upright Muslim life.

First to the historical context: in the days of Mohammed there were no prisons, so stoning was one option of dealing

with a transgression. Stoning as a form of punishment is found in the Bible as well as the Qur'an for the same reason. (A digression: this reminds me of the CNN journalist who during the period of Taliban rule in Afghanistan asked a mullah why it was necessary to use the only football stadium in Kabul for the execution of adulterers. Mistaking a normative question for a practical one, he replied that it would be good of the international community to build another stadium in the capital, which could be used exclusively for football matches).

Secondly, Sharia (it so happen that the word appears only once in the Qur'an) is entirely man-made: it offers a form of jurisprudence based on time-specific social norms. And we should note that blasphemy, apostasy, and drunkenness are not considered crimes in the Qur'an, only in Arab society. And if one looks at the norms of the longest lasting (and most recent) Islamic empire—namely the Ottoman Empire—one finds that norms adapt to the political realities of the time. Centuries ago women were stoned to death in the empire. But when the penal code was reformed in 1858, a conviction for adultery resulted in three months of prison time, not stoning.

#### THREE GS

Let me offer another example of the difference between values and norms: the often-lacerating debate between Europeans and Americans in the

run up to (and aftermath of) the second Iraq War (more commonly referred to as the 2003 Iraq War).

One of the most common claims heard at the time was that the Western Alliance was breaking apart because of different value systems. What divided them, however, were not values *per se* but the ways in which these were instrumentalized or normatized.

Take the fact that the Three Gs—God, Gays, and Guns—are widely credited with helping U.S. President George W. Bush secure his re-election for a second and final term in 2004. Notwithstanding the fact that even in the United States church attendance is on a downward trajectory, America still perceives itself as a Christian country. For instance, it would never occur to Americans to propose building a multi-faith center on the ruins of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York should it burn down—such proposals we put forward in all seriousness with regards to the rebuilding of Notre-Dame—any more than in Saudi Arabia or India would anyone consider for a moment rebuilding the Grand Mosque or the Golden Temple to accommodate different faiths.

West Europe, however, is now definitively post-Christian. The churches stand empty. Organized religion is in decline. Only 4 percent of people in

the UK attend church on Sundays. Christians in West Europe are now a group whose status as a religious community is protected not by custom but by law. European social life is no longer explicitly Christian, even if it is still profoundly shaped by its Christian heritage.

Not so in the United States, with its deep-seated religiosity, and its faith-based hospitals, schools, and charities. America's belief in "God and Country" remains a cornerstone of the identity of a critical mass of its citizens.

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Which brings us to the matter of homosexuality. The gay marriage debate lost Rocco Buttiglione his European Commission job when the issue was debated in the European Parliament in 2004.

If self-identifying Republicans in the United States were lukewarm at that time about gay marriage, that issue is less of a problem for the American Muslim community than it is for the European one. A 2017 poll showed that acceptance of gay marriage in the United States is stronger among Muslims than Christian Evangelicals. As Canadian philosophy professor Charles Taylor reminds us, the same actually happened to the American Catholic and Jewish communities in the course

of the nineteenth century. The Irish and Jewish immigrants came from highly conservative backgrounds, from reactionary churches back at home. But once within the fold of American Catholic and Jewish life they tended to embrace more liberal values. The point is that their new religious affiliation helped to sanction more liberal social views by situating them inside the faith.

As a matter of fact, this is an excellent example of Nietzsche's concept of the "transvaluation of values." Values are not discarded but revalued by creating new institutions, or in this case new churches: in expressing this principle Nietzsche considered that he was responding to a historical demand: to increase the vitality of social life.

Or consider the heated debate about guns. Both America and Europe are deeply committed to the principles of liberty, but in America, the defense of liberty is grounded in the right to bear arms. It is not a value, it is a norm. Nor is it—whatever Leftist American filmmaker Michael Moore would have us believe—a conspiracy led by the National Rifle Association (NRA), a powerful pro-guns lobbying organization.

The right to bear arms was normalized in the U.S. War of Independence,

and institutionalized by a society with a highly entrenched frontier mentality. The founding (and re-founding) myths of the American Republic have allowed it to marry two visions of Western life which have been in conflict in Europe for years: the celebration of democracy and the right to bear arms. Instead of seeing these as irreconcilable, many Americans to see them as inseparable.

None of this is to suggest that there is a consensus on norms in the United States—there is not. In the time ahead, I have no doubt that one will

see an increasing heated debate in America about abortion rights—to name but one polarizing issue—just as one sees such a debate in today's Poland. But in my country, such a debate would be totally out of place. Even majority-Catholic Ireland now follows the liberal trend.

As one Polish social psychologist writes, what we are witnessing in Poland too is a fierce debate between two different tribes, or two different "cultures"—both adhering to the same value-system. The difference is that one is conservative, Catholic, and nationalistic, whereas the other is cosmopolitan and West European.

**UNHELPFUL BRUSSELS**

But if one were to want to make life find few better allies than the EU: the truth is, Brussels is doing a fine job. The European Commission in particular can be accused of ignoring historical differences.

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I give three examples. First, the role of the Holocaust, the memory of which was deemed to be a ticket of admission into the Western community of liberal democracies. Quite apart from the concern increasingly raised about condemning an entire generation

of young Germans to living forever in the shadow of a past for which they have no responsibility, the memory of the Holocaust differs in East Europe. In the memory of a growing number of East Europeans *they* too were the innocent victims of the "double occupation" of Hitler and Stalin, while the not-so-innocent Jews had been the accomplices and beneficiaries of communist rule.

To suggest that the East Europeans had been complicit in the tragic fate of the Jews is increasingly seen as national defamation in countries like Poland, Hungary, Romania, and the Baltic states. Just witness the explosive impact in Poland of Jan Gross's

book *Neighbors* (2000), which documented the participation of Polish villagers in the massacre of Jews in Jedwabne; the bitter public debate and discomfiting historical research by younger Polish scholars that followed; and the notorious 2018 law banning the attribution of Nazi crimes to the Polish nation.

We should not be surprised about the role of nationalism in East Europe. After all, the 1989 revolutions were cast in the language of nationalism against Sovietism. They were absorbed into specific national teleologies that gave people a renewed pride in the histories of their respective countries—memories of which had often been repressed or reinterpreted under communist rule.

Intellectuals like Havel in what was then Czechoslovakia might have been thinking and talking about Europe as a single entity, but most of the people who came onto the streets in 1989 wanted to be put back in touch with their particular national identity.

That being said, one must not forget that we are all struggling with Antisemitism in our different ways; ask the

French or the British Labour Party. We are all having to contend with different national narratives with regards to Antisemitism.

The second example is immigration. I could quote the late Zygmunt Bauman, who received an honorary doctorate from Charles University in Prague and requested that the European anthem be played at the ceremony and not, as convention dictated, the national anthem of the recipient.

His reason for departing from tradition was deeply moving—due to his long-held faith in

Europe he wrote that its great attraction is that it is “an unfinished adventure.” In a book which has this phrase as its subtitle, he writes: “this civilization [...] was and remains a mode of life that is allergic to borders—indeed to all fixity and finitude.”

But Bauman was speaking not so much as a Pole but as a Briton who had emigrated back in 1968 and who took immigration for granted. East Europeans have had no experience of multiculturalism: people left communist countries, if they could; they did not emigrate to them.

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And, unlike Great Britain and France, they have had no experience of mass migration from former colonies. And unlike say West Germany, they never experienced an influx of Turkish “guest workers” who were lured into the country in the 1960s by the German economic miracle.

The third example is the role of religion. In 2018, a Pew Research Centre poll of 50,000 Central and East Europeans showed that they have a different perspective on life from West

Europeans. They are more religious, more suspicious of non-Christian faiths, and have more traditional family values in relation to same-sex marriages, for example. These norms are not racist, or xenophobic—they were central in my own country 50 years ago. They were thoroughly European attitudes.

And here is another difference. The same Pew Foundation survey found that Eastern Orthodox Christians’ self-identification has been rising in East Europe, along with nationalism—confounding the post-1989 expectations of Brussels. And the reason is that the relationship between religious and political affiliations is different in Europe at large.

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It is true that religion still dictates some West European political views—for instance, the French who identify as Catholic and go to mass regularly are significantly more right-wing than the rest of the country’s citizenry. Nevertheless, politics is usually determined by secular convictions, or a very watered-down version of Christian humanism.

Not so in East Europe.

**PATERNALISM**

Unfortunately, all of this counts for very little in Brussels, which can also be accused of two other sins:

paternalism and bullying. West Europeans, to be sure, have always tended to be dismissive of East Europe. We can go back to the days of Hegel who dismissed the East Europeans as “a people without history.” In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (1837) Hegel added that the Poles for one had played a historical role in helping raise the Turkish siege of Vienna in 1683, but that had been the last time they had been “drawn into the sphere of Occidental Reason”—the last time they had appeared as an “independent element in the series of phases that Reason had assumed in the world.”

The East Europeans had experienced neither the Enlightenment nor the commercial revolution that had led countries



like Britain on their role of colonial expansion which in turn had dispossessed non-Europeans of any future role in history. As one of the characters in Hungarian writer Zsigmond Moricz's novel *Be Faithful Unto Death* (1921) laments, his people had always suffered the fate of being sidelined by history. Isn't it terrible, he remarks, that "we are here in the middle of Europe [...] and that there isn't a single other nation [...] that understands our language. We are condemned to be on our own."

But the paternalism of West Europe is deeper than that. Another Hungarian—critic Istvan Bibo suspected—writing in 1946, expressed his suspicion that West Europeans were inclined to dismiss their neighbors to the east as being defined by an "innate barbarism"—peoples that were as much a danger to West Europe as they were to themselves.

This skepticism was expressed perhaps most poignantly during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. In November of that fateful year, the director of Hungary's news agency dispatched a telex to the world alerting it to a Soviet invasion. The dispatch ended on a ringing note: "We're going to die for Hungary and Europe." In reality, wrote Milan Kundera 30 years later, the silent acceptance of that invasion by West Europe and its refusal to come to Hungary's aid revealed that for many West Europeans, Hungarians were not part of their civilization.

And yet, in 1937 Thomas Mann was welcomed in Budapest by Hungary's national poet Attila Josef not as a German, but a "European." A year later, Edmund Husserl, one of Europe's greatest twentieth-century philosophers, chose to give his lectures on the fate of European values not in Berlin, but in Prague.

The year 2018 marked the fiftieth anniversary of another Soviet invasion: that of Czechoslovakia in 1968. By and large, it went unnoticed in West Europe. The attempt to build "socialism with a human face" clearly meant much less to European intellectuals than the *soi-disant* uprisings in Paris that had taken place the same year.

And there is a reason for that, too. East Europeans, because of their experience of communism, are much more virulently anti-communist. What would they make of the spectacle of Claude Juncker unveiling a gigantic statue of Karl Marx in Trier? Not so much the fact that Marx is not recognized as one of the great intellectual giants of the nineteenth century, but for the fact that the statue was paid for by the People's Republic of China. The five meter tall statue of the great atheist of the age now dominates the view from the convent of the Sisters of St. Joseph, an irony which seems to have escaped the city council.

As the director of the Institute for Advanced Study in Warsaw recently wrote, the political landscape of

East Europe is *vastly* different from that in the West. The Left is either very weak or completely absent. The political dividing line then is not between Left and Right, but right and wrong. As a result, politics tends to be more polarized—more prone to friend and foe—with each side conceiving of itself as the real representative of the nation.

If one were to think this is just an East European problem, one should think again. The rise of populism in West Europe and the Brexit debate in the UK shows how polarized politics is becoming across the Old Continent.

### BULLYING

And then there is European bullying. The obligation for former communist countries to imitate the West once they joined the EU was destined to excite not only liberal resentment, but aggravate the reassertion of nationalism.

Again, I refer back to the run-up to the second U.S.-led Iraqi war. Remember French President Jacques Chirac, in early 2003, telling the "new Europeans" that they were "childish," "dangerous," and "missing an opportunity to shut up"

by opposing those in West Europe who were opposing American plans to act militarily against Saddam Hussein?

Or French (again) President Emmanuel Macron telling East Europeans in June

2017 that Europe is not a supermarket? That countries that do not respect the rules must face the political consequences?

Isn't that a bit much coming from a country that had consistently ignored the rules of the euro in terms of public spending?

The time when West European politicians could engage in such humiliating banter is over. In the 1990s liberalism was riding high;

today, on the other hand, as the flood tide of Western power and influence ebbs, it risks being stranded. Those who believe in liberal values now have to fight their corner as they did in the 1930s when the threat came from West Europe, as it may well do again.

Behind much of the criticism of East Europe I find an Orientalist assumption: *they* will never be quite like *us*, although they deserve perhaps praise for trying. And I find it strange that much

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of it comes from countries that, like all the others of West Europe, find themselves battling back at home to shore up faith in Western values.

Think back once more to Havel’s inspiring speech: “we are concerned about the destiny of values and principles that communism denies [...]: the traditional values of Western civilization.”

But where is that civilization today, and who is defending it?

Back in West Europe respect for Western civilization and its values are being hollowed out by post-modernism and post-structuralism. Those values in the universities are frequently condemned as patriarchal, imperialist, and aggressively white. The new Artistic Director of the Royal Albert Hall in London thinks that “the white male titans” (e.g. Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven) are putting off the young from classical music—and this at a time when China has banned Western religious music, including *St. Matthew Passion*.

#### WESTERN CIVILIZATION

Many East Europeans must look in dismay by the language problem of their West European friends who like to toss around Greek words like homophobia, misogynistic, and transphobic in what American liberal critic Mark Lilla calls a “moral panic.” Not only does this thicket of abstract

words do little justice to the individuality of experience, it merely alienates many voters back home and gives rise to leaders like Donald Trump.

Words actually matter, and for Macron to dismiss nationalism as a “leprosy” is deeply foolish. The French head of state forgets that the nation-state is still the central reference point in most people’s lives. In the 2008 financial crisis its centrality was merely reaffirmed. Macron condemns nationalism in the name of European civilization, but he is on weak ground here too. For civilization is a concept rejected by many Western anthropologists.

It would appear that although West Europeans continue to believe, formally speaking, in such absolutes as freedom, democracy, and even (sometimes) God, these convictions have to survive in a culture of skepticism which gravely debilitates them and hollows them out. Perhaps it is time for the West Europeans to put their own house in order.

If they wish to be critical of Orban and his ilk—as indeed they should—they ought to recognize that Europe is a broad church; that history matters; that national identities are more important in some countries than others; that the perennial battle between values and norms is a theme of all social and political life; and that there actually *is* a Western civilization worth defending. ●