Did the West Define the Modern World?
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“You can’t be a real country unless you have beer and an airline. It helps if you have some kind of football team, or some nuclear weapons, but at the very least you need a beer.”
--Frank Zappa, an influential person of the “West,” defining the “Modern World” based on the western ideals of sports, military prowess, mobility, and beer (which the “West” has claimed as being of the “West.”)

“Did the West define the Modern World?” The question itself is more complicated than it looks, since the words “West,” “define,” and “Modern World” do not have absolute meanings. However, the answer is not ambiguous. In one meaning of “define,” the West, meaning Europe from 1500, and the United States from its founding to the present, has dominated the world’s nations in political influence, military might, monetary success and cultural dissemination, thereby setting the stage and dictating the terms for world relations. Beginning in the 1500s, conquistadors and missionaries imposed the Western world onto the vulnerable “New World” in a very concrete and physical way. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the West’s political grip of their colonized nations loosened, but its economic and cultural power over the world remained strong as ever (Bentley). Therefore, the West has created a standard against which the rest of the world must measure itself. With this authority and influence, the West has shaped the Modern World, but it has also quite literally defined the “Modern World.”

As every schoolchild learns, Christopher Columbus’s 1492 voyage uncovered a “New World” for Europeans to explore and exploit. A new era in weaponry and seafaring technology, including shipbuilding, navigation, and mapmaking allowed Europeans to dominate the seas, conquer new land, and subjugate indigenous people in ways never before imagined (Bentley). By 1850, European powers had conquered much of the globe, including North, South, and Middle Americas, South Africa, Australia and India (McNeill, 320). In all these places, the indigenous people were taught the superiority of the European, usually through physical force as in South America, but sometimes through legal trickery, causing people to give up land rights, as in Hawai‘i, or both, as in North America. Brutal physical subjugation or displacement went hand-in-hand with cultural obliteration: holocausts of indigenous literature, suppression of languages, rites and celebrations, and enforced change of dress. Conquistadors showed the non-European Western Hemisphere that their non-European ways must be inferior. Missionaries arrived behind them to show the savages how to live virtuously in European terms (Harris, 165-168).

From 1850 to the end of World War II, European and American colonialism peaked and declined. Many countries gained independence from the West in name; however, European and American imperialism’s economic hold on these countries was and is still tenacious. Financial institutions such as the World Bank encourage developing nations to open up their resources to the private sector, allowing large (usually American) corporations to poach them. The loss of their resources plunges these already struggling countries into crippling debt. The World Bank gives loans to these countries for large infrastructure projects or policy changes--loans which the country will never be able to pay. The World Bank “…can thus exert a tremendous amount of power over the policies of developing countries, such that major decisions about people’s lives are made not by their own governments but by an international financial institution that is accountable only to its wealthy patrons. In essence, the Bank institutionalizes a modern financial imperialism” (Parekh and Weinrib, 1). According to Parekh and Weinrib, the justification for supplying these loans is to help these nations “catch up to the West” (1). Therefore, the West defines the “modern world” by making the judgment: “you need to catch up,” deciding what improvements must be made and policies must be changed in order to “catch up,” and by maintaining the upper hand in the business sector.

This “financial imperialism” obviously doesn’t extend to the entire world, but to the rest of the world, the West provides a standard to compare against. As McNeill says,

… it remains true that, since the end of World War II, the scramble to imitate and appropriate science, technology, and other aspects of Western culture has accelerated enormously all round the world. Thus the dethronement of western Europe from its brief mastery of the globe coincided with (and was caused by) an unprecedented, rapid Westernization of all the peoples of the earth (320).

Postwar Japan is an often-cited example of the rapid Westernization of global society. Insert a lead in here (don’t want quotation to stand alone) “For example, the ideal of postwar Japanese home life flowed explicitly from the model of the ‘American way of life’ of the 1950s” (Shunya, 1). Countries and cultures that denounce Western culture, such as Cuba and North Korea, are ostracized from the global community.

The most lasting, pervasive, and literal way that the West has defined the modern world is in the way westerners--historians and laypeople--talk about the West and the “Other.” Terms like “first world” and “third world” contain judgments about what it means to be a part of modern society. Any third-grader knows (that is, is able to recall with complete certainty, whether or not that knowledge is absolute) that Columbus “discovered” the “New World,” but this phrasing implies not only a comparison between the “Old World” and
“New World,” but that it is the Europeans who have the authority to make this distinction. That he “discovered” it implies that indigenous knowledge is not worthy of the modern world. Furthermore, historians and scholars since the time of Columbus have written about the “Orient” as if there were no interplay between Eastern and Western cultures in the centuries before his voyages. Butterworth explains how Edward Said's famous work Orientalism deals with this problem: “he contends that orientalism must be understood as arising out of a particular [(Western)] culture, as being shaped by the presuppositions of that particular culture, and by shaping in its turn that particular culture as well” (Butterworth, 175). Writing about world history from a Eurocentric perspective, and studying “Orientalism” as though it were distinct and separate from “the West” defines, with scholarly authority, what it means to be a player in the “modern” world arena. In the media, countries that attempt to declare independence from the World Bank and the Washington Consensus, such as Venezuela under Hugo Chavez, are labeled as “communist” and “undemocratic” (Anderson, 1).

Since the time of the Spanish conquistadors, Europe has had the power and authority to define the Modern World. The method of defining it has changed over time. In the time of the conquistadors, Europe was still trying to gain political stability, and its power and influence was in flux. Their ability to explore the seas and conquer unsuspecting civilizations gave the Europeans the power to define modernity. The imbalance of economic power that endures today allows the Western world to decide how modern “developing” nations become. Through popular culture, missionary work, and the media, the West shows the rest of the world what modern values should be. But even if I have fallen into the trap of overemphasizing the influence of the Western world in this essay, it is precisely because of how the West’s influence is generally perceived and discussed, which shows that the West, in fact, defines the modern world.

Works Cited


