



## A Short History of Western Ideology: A Critical Account

by Rolf Petri, London, Bloomsbury, 2018, 243 + viii pp., £70.00 (hbk), ISBN 9781350026094; £22.99 (pbk), ISBN 9781350026100; £24.82 (ebook), ISBN 9781350026070

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## BOOK REVIEW

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Rolf Petri's *A Short History of Western Ideology* argues that the formation of the western worldview is closely linked to 'the very singular idea that history must have a purpose' (2). Through careful attention to the wider economic, technological and social contexts of its subject matter, the book seeks to clarify the core elements of what it calls 'western ideology', defined as a set of intertwined discourses, arguments and values associated with the construction of 'the West'. The study is expansive and wide-ranging, engaging with the works of major thinkers of the past, philosophical debates, and key concepts such as 'civilisation' and 'culture' in the internal semantic economy of western culture over the last four centuries.

As Petri admits, writing about western ideology in the singular requires a degree of oversimplification of complex intellectual, religious and political controversies. At the same time, he argues, most of these controversies "revolved around the question of *what* was the end or meaning of human history, and how its purpose can be deciphered' (11). In his view, the western tradition of thought is driven by a hegemonic 'eschatological and apocalyptic vision of history' (201), but a critique of this historical teleology has the potential to elucidate the dangers stemming from such 'self-righteousness over the meaning of history' (202). This is a fundamentally correct position which explains in large part the growing popularity of formerly marginalized critical perspectives in western academe in recent decades.

Chapter 1 commences with the history of the idea of Europe, focusing on the revitalization of the term during the Renaissance. Petri argues that the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453 and colonial expansion beyond the Atlantic were the two main catalytic developments behind the birth of modern Europe. Linked to the Christian mission to spread the word of God, this reinvented Europe became 'a symbol of missionary universalism' (19), which invested colonial conquest with the civilizing mission to bring progress to subject peoples and backward others.

Chapter 2 treats the idea of liberty in western political philosophy from the seventeenth century onwards with the aim of defining the nucleus of liberal thought and the variant forms of political liberalism. Looking at the work of prominent thinkers such as John Locke and Condorcet, the author asserts that 'for the philosophies of nature, history, and the social contract, only a minority part of humanity was defined as "freemen"' (57). This chapter also discusses the question of freedom in relation to the emergence of popular sovereignty and the discursive construction of the notion of 'the people'.

Chapter 3 highlights the paradoxical relationship between equality and hierarchy inherent in the western mindset. Beginning with the rise of the modern territorial state and the socioeconomic transformations that accompanied it, Petri focuses on the spatial and temporal disparities between the advanced and the backward which, he contends, lie at the heart of all 'western ideological partition practices' (102). Different geographical areas (e.g. the Balkans, the Levant) were classified along the mental axes of progress and civilization, and ideas of hierarchy were used to legitimize European colonial expansion. The emergence of theories of race and the mapping of human geography according to physical features became, similarly, an essential part of the western vision of humankind. The intricate links between western

universalism and imperialism are investigated in chapter 4, which emphasizes the ‘high degree of ideologization that distinguishes western foreign policy’ (151) in the twentieth century. Following Italian sociologist Giovanni Amadori Virgilj’s *The imperialist sentiment* (1906), Petri stresses the importance of the ‘apostolate of the west’ (163) as a crucial aspect of the western sense of history.

The final chapter examines how modern ecology and ecological thought can be understood in relation to the western discourse about origins, nature, essence and authenticity. It also reflects on a range of examples, from global warming to nuclear war, showing how apocalyptic thinking pervades contemporary life. In this regard, the book essentially positions itself as a critique of western ideology and philosophy of history from an ecological, anti-militaristic standpoint.

*A Short History of Western Ideology* provides an informative, historically grounded analysis of the modern Euro/West-centric worldview. One of the book’s clear merits is its ability to show how a comprehensive study of this worldview vitally concerns a number of interrelated key issues that encompass religion, imperialism, citizenship, class, race and gender. In addition, the book is based on extensive knowledge of current scholarly bibliography, even though certain parts would have benefitted from greater synthesis of the relevant literature. Equally, a reduction of the number of quotations would have enhanced the flow of the narrative.

Regardless of these shortcomings, Petri has developed a critical account of western ideology which deserves to be read not only by historians and students of political ideas, but also by anyone interested in understanding how the West has come to define itself and the world today.

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