

**Cornel West, "Lecture: Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism,"
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I'd like to begin with two epigraphs.

The first is from that famous essay by Paul Valéry ["The Crisis of the Mind"], written in 1919—you probably know the first sentence by heart: "We later civilizations ... we too now know that we are mortal." Valéry goes on to say: "The idea of culture, of intelligence, of great works, has for us a very ancient connection with the idea of Europe.... Other parts of the world have had admirable civilizations, poets of the first order, builders, and even scientists. But no part of the world has possessed this singular *physical* property: the most intense power of radiation combined with an equally intense power of assimilation." This is 1919, five years after August 1914. He goes on to say: "Everything came to Europe and everything came from it. Or almost everything." (That's the wit that Adorno liked, when he called Valéry the exemplary cultural critic, as it were.) But Valéry goes on to say: "Now the present day brings with us this important question: can Europe hold its preeminence in all fields? Will Europe become *what it is in reality*—that is, a little promontory on the continent of Asia—or will it remain *what it seems*, that is, the elect portion of the terrestrial globe, the pearl of the sphere of the brain of a vast body?"¹

The second epigraph is from Frantz Fanon, a young man, thirty-five years old, who says, in *The Wretched of the Earth*: "European nations sprawl, ostentatiously opulent. This European opulence is literally scandalous, for it has been founded on slavery, it has been nourished with the blood of slaves; it comes directly from the soil and from the subsoil of that under-developed world.

¹ *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, e d. Jackson Mathews (New York, 1962), 10:23, 31.

The well-being and the progress of Europe have been built up with the sweat and the dead bodies of Negroes, Arabs, Indians and the yellow races." Fanon concludes: "The wealth of the imperial countries is our wealth too ... For in a very concrete way Europe has stuffed herself inordinately with the golden raw materials of the colonial countries: Latin America, China, and Africa. From all these continents under whose eyes Europe today raises up her tower of opulence, there has flowed out for centuries towards that same Europe, diamonds and oil, silk and cotton, wood and exotic products. Europe is literally the creation of the Third World. The wealth which smothers her is that which was stolen from the under-developed peoples."²

Two starting points, two half-truths, as it were, both engaging in an excessive and extravagant rhetoric, but both reflecting on the contributions of an age that lasted from 1492 to 1945—let us call it the Age of Europe. We now live forty-six years after the end of that Age of Europe, and we've yet to come to terms intellectually with the ramifications and repercussions of what it means to live in a world in which those nations between the Ural mountains and the Atlantic Ocean no longer sit at the center of the historical stage. The ambiguous legacy of that age confronts us, and, as T. S. Eliot [in "Tradition and the Individual Talent"] reminds us, we don't inherit it, we obtain it by hard labor, we recast it, we reinterpret it, we reevaluate it in light of our present. What are the contributions?

One is the European construction of distinctive forms of historical consciousness that highlight the operations of powers and especially human powers, the human making and remaking that provide the fundamental challenge not simply to our philosophical claims but to our conception

² Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961; reprint, New York, 1966), pp. 76, 80-81.

of ourselves. That is, we discover the radically contingent character of whatever claims we put forward as well as the capacity of human beings to make and remake themselves and thereby to make and remake history, and hence to project possibilities, both for the self and for society, for the individual, for individuality—all of these terms not to be confused by discourses on the subject. In many ways, the French have suffocated philosophical debate by thinking that when you talk about bodies and individuals you are somehow addressing a subject's inner discourse; there is a whole host of ways of talking about individuals and bodies without having to go the subject-object route. My favorite: *The Quest for Certainty* [New York, 1929], the Gifford lectures of 1929 by John Dewey, who, with no reference to subject-object dichotomies, still talks about individuality—unique, singular, irreducible bodies in search of the flourishing and flowering of their capacities and possibilities. This is inseparable from that new construction of historical consciousness that moves toward the center in nineteenth-century Europe and begins to engage in its own transgressive acts vis-à-vis authority, especially, of course, the authority of the Church and the authority of kings.

The second contribution, the center of this transgression, is the idea of democracy, the notion that these unique, singular, and irreducible bodies with these capacities and potentialities ought to—this is a normative claim—participate in decision-making processes and institutions that guide and regulate their lives. Here is a subversive idea. And a perennial one, with self-correction and self-critique at its center. In many ways, the pragmatist tradition has been the distinctive philosophical tradition to make democracy not just a mode of governance but a way of being in the world, the fundamental object of its investigation. That is why Walt Whitman means so much to

Dewey, you see. Not too many others, besides Dewey and (at moments) Du Bois, have understood democracy in this deep sense.

Liberal debates tend to hold these contributions, tend to hold transgressive democracy, at arm's length, because historically "democracy" has depended on imperial conditions, not idealized forms. What are the conditions—the historical conditions—under which these liberal societies could emerge? Certain economic surpluses have been requisite for the social stability that has expanded liberal rights. That's why we need a theory-laden historiography. We know democracy is a good thing, we invoke it, and yet we need to envisage what Fanon saw, what my grandfather saw: a patriarchal "democracy" on the ground, with institutionalized terrorism and the strange fruit that Southern trees bear, the strange fruit Billie Holiday sings about. "Liberal society." From what vantage point? For whom? Those questions do not undermine the principles, but they perform a critique of the practices.

Reflections on the end of the Age of Europe that prompt these two questions can help us move beyond the very, very limited and truncated debate about multiculturalism and Eurocentrism as it has been raging lately in *Newsweek* and the *New Republic*. The response from the Left must itself be self-critical, which means locating the larger layers of context in which this debate takes place, demystifying some of the categories that circumscribe the debate, then moving in a different direction—a direction that will confront the issues that this debate is symptomatic of. With a nuanced historical sense, which evaluates the relation between the past and present, we can recognize ambiguous legacies, hybrid cultures, and heterogeneous populations across the board. Valéry put

forward a half-truth, and Fanon put forward a half-truth. Half-truths are dangerous; they mystify, they conceal, but they say enough about the real to seduce us.

We have to talk about the present as history. We have to begin by situating our debate, which takes place at a moment—within our history as a country, nation, and empire—of economic decline and cultural decay. The current sense of urgency about issues of education and what academics these days call "cultural production" has much to do with the economic decline and cultural decay that none of us can deny: the debt, the stubborn incapacity of the nation to mobilize resources requisite to provide necessary and basic social goods, the short-term profiteering, the inability to provide education for a labor force, the inability to produce products of quality and quantity to compete with other countries, and most of all the cultural decay. The debate is about how we distribute social and cultural benefits, which is one of the functions of the university, of course. How are you going to distribute cultural/social benefits? Who gets in? Who teaches? Who has what status, prestige, what access to income?

We face the decomposition of civil society. We face shattered families, neighborhoods, civic associations—a shattering that is the distinctive feature of an empire in decline, as William MacNeill [author of *The Rise of the West* (Chicago, 1963)] has pointed out. We face the social breakdown of nurturing systems for children (not just their bodies but their souls), and hence deracinated individuals, rootless individuals, denuded individuals, culturally naked individuals who have lost their existential moorings, who become easily caught within a subculture of violence.

This is one national, one social, context in which the debate emerges. And then, what [Dinesh] D'Souza and others are responding to is the impact of the new social history that enables us

to see the relation between this present and the past.³ The new social historians, even given their own silences and blindnesses, are winning the day; they are thoroughly influential in terms of how humanists think about the past and present, how literary critics think about the past and present, even how philosophers think. Slices of humanity, subaltern and subjugated peoples, had been erased by intellectual elites who were hegemonic within the historical profession and who could only focus on the agency of certain kinds of human beings: military elites, political elites, well-to-do men. This revolution in historiography, especially given the historical turn in humanistic studies and in philosophy, has put the intellectual Right on the spot. It's not a matter of the New Left, or the ex-New Left, running the universities, as the *Commentary* crowd would have us think. It's a matter of history and the fear of a history that can no longer be ignored: women's history, Afro- American history. If you're still talking about American culture and not talking about ways in which the institution of slavery was constitutive of the empire, then you're writing history the way they wrote it in the 1940s and the 1950s. The relevance of slavery does not reduce simply to pigmentation of skin—it has to do with the historical weight and gravity of particular persons who performed particular roles that allowed for the possibility of the emergence of the major empire in the middle part of the twentieth century: the American Empire.

³ Dinesh D'Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York, 1991). The debate over "Eurocentrism" and "multiculturalism," now designated the "culture war," has provoked an extensive literature. For a brief introduction, see Daryl L. Gless and Barbara Herrnstein Smith, eds., *The Politics of Liberal Education* (Durham, N.C., 1992); John Searle, "The Storm over the University," *New York Review of Books* (December 6, 1990); John Guillory, "Canon, Syllabus, List: A Note on the Pedagogic Imaginary," *Transition* 52 (1991): 18-34; and Chicago Cultural Studies Group, "Critical Multiculturalism," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1992): 530-55. For Cornel West's previous remarks about the debate, see his "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson et al. (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), pp. 19-36.

Given these breakthroughs in historiography, we have a *Kulturkampf* within the academy. But we need to keep in mind that this involves only a slice of the professional, managerial strata in American capitalist society; it's not the center of the universe. And this *Kulturkampf* is being shaped by the very process of rationalization Max Weber talked about long ago,⁴ a process recast under new conditions, a new logic of professionalization, a reward structure geared toward research (and away from teaching), a highly bureaucratized space—namely, universities. Struggles over turf, slots, curriculum, and debates over multiculturalism have been reduced to the either/or option of the bureaucratic squabble. I'm suspicious of the framework, and I do not begin with the categories trotted out in *Newsweek*, *New Republic*, and other middle-brow journals, nor with the categories trotted out by ex-Reagan technocrats such as D'Souza.

So, the first question I raise is: Where does the term 'Eurocentrism' come from? And where does 'multiculturalism' come from? Is Eurocentrism synonymous with the Age of Europe? The very idea of Europe itself demands interrogation. It's too often unquestioned. We need to tell a story about ways in which "Eurocentrism" as a category is hiding and obscuring something, obfuscating a debate, prepackaging a debate that thereby never really takes place and becomes, instead, this battle between bureaucrats over slots and curriculum. You notice nobody's really raising issues of what it means to read a text critically; instead the issue is what text will "make it in." There are ways of reading Shakespeare and Dante that can be quite illuminating and profound, and ways of reading Toni Morrison that are flat. I want to know how people are reading these texts and what kind of historical sense they have. Are the readings just occasions for cathartic expressions of identity? Just

⁴ See *Max Weber on Capitalism, Bureaucracy, and Religion*, ed. and trans. Stanislaw Andreski (London, 1983).

moments for building up a self-confidence that has been undermined by palpable white supremacist and male supremacist forces? This may be morally justifiable, but it is not intellectually justifiable. It's intellectually debilitating. That's why I began with Valéry, because the only way to get beyond a paralyzing either/or perspective is to take a look at this idea of Europe, the very idea of Europe as an ideological construct. We need to look at Denis Hay's book—*Europe: The Emergence of an Idea* [Edinburgh, 1957]—and Henri Perenne's point [in *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (New York, 1955)] that Charlemagne is inconceivable without Mohammed, that Europe as a noun is called forth by the caliphs, the Arab caliphs. For what? Imposed unity. The first time 'Europe' was used denotatively occurs in 1458, by Pius II, five years after the Turkish takeover of Constantinople. As a long story, this can begin to demystify "Europe."

Then, we need to tell the story of how literary figures—especially Matthew Arnold, emulating his hero, Goethe—try to constitute a federation of European unity in the world of letters *because* it has never existed on the ground. Ironically, the right wing trots out Thomas Stearns Eliot as the exemplary Eurocentric critic, which he is; but *The Waste Land* is one of the most powerful critiques of the very notion of Europe at the center of the world, juxtaposed with vegetation rites and Buddhism and Hinduism. Europe is always already multicultural; after Napoleon, multinational; after August 1914, involved in a series of "civil wars," nationalist clashes. Fifty million dead in 1945, all the while that this idea of Europe was demonizing Jews—part of a history of demonization that serves to protect this idea, this fragile construction. The Enlightenment bandwagon promoted a notion of universalism and internationalism that never was, and that is, more than ever, over—in

light of the decolonization of the Third World which has unleashed new conceptions of identity that should make us suspicious of any notion of universality.

There is no way back to those Enlightenment conceptions of universality and cosmopolitanism. Now, of course, I want to hold onto universality, I want to hold onto international perspective, but I know it must now be immanent, it's got to go down—very, very deep down—far enough that it makes human connection. If it makes no human connection, there will be parochialism, provincialism, narrow particularism, all linked of course to jingoism and xenophobia. It is no accident that our moment is a tribalistic moment, a xenophobic moment, not just in Eastern Europe, but in Chicago, in New York, parts of the Third World, the Middle East. The quest for identity is fundamental. The quest for community is basic. For what? Protection, meaning, value, the means with which human beings are willing to face their extinction and sustain a sense of significance. If the Left cannot address issues of identity and community in a way that provides human connection, then there will be no Left in the older sense of that term, in terms of coalition and alliance, because I don't consider identity politics *ipso facto* "left" at all; those politics amount primarily to a mode of middle-class entrée.

This is why, again, in looking at the debate over multiculturalism, I recognize the degree to which this is very much a middle-class affair—very much a scrabble and scramble over various kinds of resources within one particular slice of our society. I do not want to downplay it, I do not want to devalue it, but I think we have to situate this debate and see it for what it is. And I think relations of universalism and particularism, objectivism and relativism, don't provide us the tradition, or set of traditions, to see the debate for what it is. Feminism has begun to help, I think, and certain

intellectuals of color tried to help, but even our C. L. R. Jameses and even our Du Boises themselves are very much part of an older Enlightenment project, even though they were forced to deal with particularity, even though they have moments of profound insight. Referring to himself as a European black man, C. L. R. James recognized how thoroughly he had been assimilated into an Enlightenment tradition in which his own sense of identity was not at the very center.

The aim is—and this is what takes us back to Dewey again, you see—the aim is not giving up on universality, not giving up on threadbare notions of objectivity, not giving up on notions of balanced analysis, so that the debate does not reduce simply to partisanship or solely to power struggle. There is a space for critical exchange, but only if we acknowledge that truth has only a negative function—if we never reduce truth claims to certifiability claims, if we recognize that all truths have a small *t*, if we recognize that truth with a big *T* is always a fish that eludes your conceptual net. Pragmatists have taught us that if truth is a species of the good, and the good is defined in terms of temporal consequences, then the universe is unfinished, and history is incomplete, and given that temporal dimension of knowledge claims, you can never claim that Truth with a capital *T* has been arrived at. All you can say is small *t*—revisable, as Quine puts it [in *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960)], not immune to revision. Small *t*, provisional. This is true for knowledge claims across the board. And this is very important, it seems to me, because there is a danger in reducing the talk about knowledge solely to talk about power, just as there is a danger in talking about knowledge as if it were not linked to power.

To come to a conclusion here, let me say a word about politics because I actually believe, like Dewey, that democratic practices are themselves deeply rooted in the nuanced historical sense, the

subtle social analysis, and the self-correction and self-critical process of never blocking the road to inquiry. Democratic practices themselves are not just transgressive in an avant-gardist sense of shocking a bourgeois audience and so forth as Stravinsky and others did; they are transgressive in the sense of fundamentally getting at the redistribution of power and wealth.

Democracy is a difficult concept for Americans because we live in a very conservative society, which operates in part on economic growth by means of corporate priorities and the disproportionate influence of big business. Ours is also a chronically xenophobic society, whose very conception of itself as a nation, as having a national identity, is rooted in a discourse of negatively charged blackness and positively valued whiteness. That is our history. Now, we have had some great strugglers, John Brown and on and on and on. But our history means you can easily push that button to sustain the status, power, and privilege of particular outlooks and interests, especially the interests of big business. And that button is pushed over and over again: Willie Horton pushed it; Jesse Helms pushed it in North Carolina; I know it's been pushed many times in Chicago, and on and on and on. And there is more than one kind of xenophobia, encompassing the deeply patriarchal as well as the deeply homophobic. All societies and civilizations that we know have their own kind of xenophobia, and so it's not a matter of pointing the finger solely at the United States. But in the United States, because we think we enjoy democratic politics, this xenophobia makes it especially difficult for democratic politics to get off the ground. The best we do is to produce social movements.

But, then again, there cannot be significant social movements if there is no understanding of universalism, no understanding of an internationalism that digs deep, makes connections, makes

coalitions, and makes alliances. This is not an issue of 'the life of the mind'. The point is that if you view yourself as part of a tradition of freedom-fighting, and if you do view yourself as one of those whose backs are against the wall, and you are actually willing to live and die for that struggle, then forms of intellectual weaponry become crucial, and understanding what you are up against can become a question of life and death. Hence, Marx and Weber and Lukàcs and Simmel and Du Bois and Simone de Beauvoir help us to stay on a slippery tightrope. And thank God that this tradition has some salience. The real danger is that traditions of freedom-fighting will slowly but surely wane in our culture of consumption, and the very possibility of a different future, the very possibility of a sense of hope for a society that is better than the present will slowly but surely wane. In that kind of society, I am not willing to live.