

The West's obsession with itself

White-washing the history of the West will not make the Western civilisation great again.

09 May 2017 11:05 GMT |



[Donald Earl Collins](#)

 [@decollins1969](#)

Donald Earl Collins is an Associate Professor of History with University of Maryland University College.

From the musings of New York Times columnist David Brooks to the ravings of Rep Steve King (R-IA), there is a growing sense among many that Western values, even Western civilisation, is in mortal danger. So-called radical Islamic terrorists are the ultimate threat.

But so too is an [education](#) in which any aspect of Western civilisation is treated as anything less than sacred. Arab Muslims, Latino immigrants, and African migrants have served as the straw persons for the economic uncertainties and racial anxieties stemming from globalisation and the 2008-09 financial crises. And those uncertainties explain much of the anxiety over the possible fall of Western civilisation to anti-Western teachings and demographic shifts in the [United States](#) and in [Europe](#).

This is all part of a larger theme, of the West's obsession with seeing itself as the pinnacle of everything humanity has achieved. But make no mistake. White and European populist nationalism has always been a part of modern Western political thought. With the United Kingdom's [Brexit](#) vote and [Donald Trump](#) winning the presidency in 2016, however, these fringe-group, master race proponents are now fully mainstream, like they were in the 1930s.

Civilisational concerns

Last month in his column "The Crisis of Western Civ," Brooks wrote, "Starting decades ago, many people, especially in the universities, lost faith in the Western civilization narrative ... Now many students, if they encounter it, are taught that Western civilization is a history of oppression."

King [tweeted](#) in March, "Wilders understands that culture and demographics are our destiny. We can't restore our civilisation with somebody else's babies." Brooks' column was a half-baked response to the rise of strongmen in geopolitical affairs, including President Donald Trump, [Vladimir Putin](#) in Russia and [Recep Erdogan](#) in Turkey, and the possibility for others like Marine Le Pen in [France](#).

King's nasty tweet was an indirect reply to Dutch right-wing politician Geert Wilders, who had repeatedly called for the "de-Islamification" of the [Netherlands](#), including an end to Muslim [immigration](#), the banning of the Quran, and the closing of all mosques. Both Brooks and King perceive the US and the West to be under siege from anti-Western values and demographic shifts that would reduce European - or really, White - dominance in the US and in Europe.

Americans, in particular, are obsessed with the US being #1 and with continued expressions of greatness and patriotism. But this is the opposite of what Brooks believes regarding the teaching of Western civilisation at the college and high school levels, that professors have de-emphasised Western greatness. If anything, many of these courses reinforce the stereotype of the West as fundamentally good for the globe.

The first time I taught a course in world history was at Carnegie Mellon University in 1994, and the professor for whom I taught was Peter Stearns. He, along with Jerry Bentley and Herbert Ziegler, brought world history as a course to many US high schools and colleges in the 1980s. For at least that long, the issue of a strong Western bias has remained a big [concern](#) among educators. In the sections of the course I taught, we spent a week on classical India and [China](#) (roughly the period between 500 BCE and 500 CE) discussing women's roles in patriarchal societies. After a discussion of Hindu poetry, one of my students wrote in an essay, "Chinese women resisted patriarchy, but Indian women were demure."

This was a typical example of what I have come to call "world stereotypes" - the quick, dirty, and Eurocentric ways in which high school teachers and college professors teach world history. It is the idea that Western civilisation is automatically better and that "non-Western others" can neatly fit pre-existing stereotypes. It means that courses like world history often serve as tools that reproduce a strong, pro-Western bias, and reinforce racial, ethnic, religious, and gender-based prejudices.

In the past few years, a number of school districts have resisted even minor changes in history curricula in which the idea of Western civilisation as something other than a positive force for the world was a consideration.

[OPINION: #FeesMustFall - Decolonising education](#)

This resistance has included Jefferson County, Colorado's school board, where one board member insisted that the new Advanced Placement curriculum for US History should only "present positive aspects of the United States and its heritage." The Texas state school board has also been in this mix. They proposed a Mexican American heritage textbook that [suggested](#) Mexican Americans had "adopted a revolutionary narrative that opposed Western civilization and wanted to destroy this society". In Tennessee, the state school board stirred controversy in September 2016 when it gutted Islamic history and culture from its seventh-grade social studies curriculum for fear of religious "indoctrination."

There is nothing wrong with teaching the history of Western civilisation. The problem is that millions want the world to see Western civilisation as sacrosanct. The problem is that Western

civilisation would not exist without the significant contributions of diverse peoples and other civilisations from all over the globe. The problem is that Western civilisation has also done much harm to the world. Slavery, global warfare, and [climate change](#) are as much the legacy of Western civilisation and the US as are industrialisation, feminism, and parliamentary democracies.

White Americans and Europeans should understand the full catalogue that is Western civilisation. A more white-washed history and more European babies will definitely not make America and the West great again.

Donald Earl Collins is an associate professor of history with University of Maryland University College. He is also the author of Fear of a "Black" America: Multiculturalism and the African American Experience (2004).

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial policy.

[US & Canada](#) [United States](#) [Europe](#) [Education](#)



[Tell us what you think](#)

[CONTINUE READING](#)

