



## From Plato To NATO: The Idea of the West and Its Opponents

By David Gress

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**From Plato To NATO: The Idea of the West and Its Opponents** By David Gress

An in-depth intellectual history of the Western idea and a passionate defense of its importance to America's future, "From Plato to NATO" is the first book to make sense of the legacy of the West at a time when it is facing its greatest challenges. Readers of Francis Fukuyama, John Gray, Samuel Huntington, and other analysts of the dilemmas of Western nations in the twenty-first century will find in David Gress's original account a fuller description of what the West really is and how, with the best of intentions, it has been misrepresented. Most important, they will encounter a new vision of Western identity and how it can be recovered.

Early in the twentieth century, American educators put together a story of Western civilization, its origins, history, and promise that for the subsequent fifty years remained at the heart of American college education. The story they told was of a Western civilization that began with the Greeks and continued through 2,500 years of great books and great ideas, culminating in twentieth-century progressive liberal democracy, science, and capitalist prosperity.

In the 1960s, this Grand Narrative of the West came under attack. Over the next thirty years, the critics turned this old story into its opposite: a series of anti-narratives about the evils, the failures, and the betrayals of justice that, so they said, constituted Western history.

The victory of Western values at the end of the cold war, the spread of democracy and capitalism, and the worldwide impact of American popular culture have not revived the Grand Narrative in the European and American heartlands of the West. David Gress explains this paradox, arguing that the Grand Narrative of the West was flawed from the beginning: that the West did not begin in Greece and that, in morality and religion, the Greeks were an alien civilization whose contribution was mediated through Rome and Christianity. Furthermore, in assuming a continuity from the Greeks to modern liberalism, we have mistakenly downplayed or rejected everything in between, focusing on the great ideas and the great books rather than on real history with all its ambiguities, conflicts, and contradictions.

The heart of Gress's case for the future of the West is that the New must remember its roots in the Old and seek a synthesis. For as the attacks have demonstrated, the New West cannot stand alone. Its very virtues -- liberty, reason, progress -- grew out of the Old West and cannot flourish when removed from that rich soil.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

In *From Plato to NATO*, political historian David Gress takes a wide-ranging look at the development of Western Europe and its colonial outposts. Gress views Europe not just as a geographic entity, but as a complex of conflicting ideas such as social good and individual rights, control and freedom. Those ideas come from many traditions, and they have blended to make the region politically and economically unlike any other in the world. Gress's viewpoint is conservative, but the author also calls himself a "skeptical liberal." Readers of all political stripes will find much food for thought in these pages.

#### From Publishers Weekly

Conventional historians, asserts Gress in this original, sweeping study, see Western civilization as a progressive, linear sequence "from Plato to NATO," meaning that our modern ideals of freedom and democracy flowed directly from classical Greece. To the contrary, argues Gress, the notion of modern political liberty—a set of practices and institutions—took shape between the fifth and eighth centuries in a synthesis of classical, Christian and Germanic cultures. Gress's thesis that the Germanic tribes who invaded the former Roman Empire infused new energy and an ethos of heroic, aristocratic freedom was popular in the U.S. until the early 20th century, but, as he notes, it fell out of favor after two world wars and the experience of Nazism. The real strength of his scholarly inquiry lies in its fertile dialogue with Gibbon, Tocqueville, Goethe, Nietzsche, Marx, Montesquieu, T.S. Eliot, Joseph Campbell and numerous others as he wrestles with Western survival and the concept of Western identity. Arguing that the U.S. remains the bulwark and heartland of democratic liberal Western values, Gress mounts a withering attack on those he considers motley critics of modern capitalism and the West, including Sartre's slavish Stalinism, Toynbee's anti-Americanism, postmodernist nihilists (Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard), multiculturalists who assume that no single culture is preferable to any other and "Singapore school" economists who divorce economic development from political liberty. Gress, a historian, is a fellow at the Danish Institute of International Affairs.

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#### From Library Journal

This is a must read for every serious student of Western civilization, not only for its argument that Western civilization does not begin with the Greeks but because it invites us to appreciate anew the West's historical faith in reason, democracy, science, capitalism, and the possibility of human progress. (LJ 6/15/98)

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