

Rolf Petri

A Short History of Western Ideology: A Critical Account

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1 *A Short History of Western Ideology* by Rolf Petri is a book that, in the words of the author himself, “aims to clarify the core elements of western ideology” (1). However, what becomes clearer and clearer from the reading of the book is that it also aims to dismantle the presuppositions of western ideology in itself. This point is linked to the “critical account” that forms the subtitle of the book and that sustains its historiographical thread with a strong conceptual structure that owes much, in my opinion, to the philosophical space opened by Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (a work surprisingly never quoted by Petri). The book is divided in six parts: four chapters, an introduction and a very short afterword.

2 The book begins with a focus on the concepts of “Europe” and “history” as the two keywords that underpin the identity of western ideology. Historically, the definition of these two concepts emerged during the Renaissance and reached its meaningful expression in the Enlightenment. The Renaissance is a fundamental age because, on the one hand, after the fall of Byzantium and the consequent end of a polycentric Christianity, it constituted the political identity of the west, identifying it with Europe and with Christianity, and, on the other, after the discovery of the New World, it promulgated the idea of a global political scenario, in which western civilisation accepted the responsibility and the burden of spreading its founding values. According to Petri, these principles found their best incarnation in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophies of history, whose kernel is a notion of history systematically grounded on Eurocentrism, anthropocentrism and transcendent teleology. In these pages, the author elaborates a convincing general sketch that, in opposition to Koselleck’s thesis of the immanence of the modern conception of history, aims to unveil the theological background of every philosophy of history (even of the most atheist one). In agreement with the criticism expressed by Karl Löwith in *Meaning in History*, Petri remarks that the whole of modernity never stops ascribing a necessary *telos* (the latest outcome of premodern theological, messianic and transcendent conceptions) to history. The historical prime mover of this *Weltgeschichte* obviously consists in the enlightenment myth of progress. In this theoretical framework, Petri outlines the progressive formation of those keywords – civilisation, progress, meaning of history – that represent the *geschichtsphilosophisch* backbone of authors such as Ferguson, Condorcet, Rousseau, Kant, Herder, Hegel, etc. As far as it concerns *Universalhistorie*, it appears to be nothing else than a secularised theodicy concerning the dialectics between good and evil, which plays its game on a global stage. Thus, the main characteristic of these philosophies of history consists in the faith of a final reconciliation between human and divine free will. Thus, despite the rational self-representation that western modernity gives of itself, Petri suggests that modern western ideology is based on irrational aspects (such as faith, hope, myth) that also evoke, among other things, a new “grammar” of emotions, whose most meaningful expression can be identified in the rhetoric of nostalgia and utopia spread between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

3 The *geschichtsphilosophisch* progressive mechanism correlates with another aspect essential to modern ideology: the analogy between the laws of nature and the laws of society. As a matter of fact, modernity is the age of *jus naturalist* thought, whose main feature consists in the naturalisation of human rights starting from the most basic one, the right to property. Property is the origin of every right and lays the conditions of possibility to build a

society in which the reason and free will of western man can be fully satisfied in their positive relation to political institutions. Such an horizon enables Petri to highlight the fundamental contradictory polarities of liberal thought: individual free will vs. coercive institutions, people's sovereignty vs. elitist expression of power, universalism of human rights vs. the particular privileged status of western civilisation. While the first two points represent an ever-unresolved problem within modern and contemporary political thought, the latter constitutes the background of that missionary spirit that animated the bloodthirsty colonial missions of westerners against nonwestern communities and societies. In this perspective, liberal humanism cannot be separated from the most barbaric and ferocious warfare. As Petri clearly shows, the slaughter of the Amerindians represented the tragic background of the liberal myth of the frontier (a founding element of so-called American freedom) in the nineteenth-century United States.

Since it is repeatedly marked by the negative, the self-representation of western ideology is deeply problematic and contradictory: in such a dialectic, there is no inclusion without exclusion, no universality without any negative determination of the particularity. This dialectic, which derives its strength from the vagueness of concepts such as freedom, good, natural rights, etc., has been the theological core of western politics, even since the beginning of the contemporary age. Following Novalis' *Christianity or Europe*, Petri discovers in the French Revolution the fundamental event that restored the old theological system, secularising it in the political cult of people and nation. From this perspective, it is possible to understand why politics can be considered the modern religion *par excellence*, be it represented by the nineteenth-century plebiscitarian ritual of elections or by our democracies, whose real basis consists in a schism between a *demos* of electors governed by a privileged elite and an *ethnos* that wants to preserve its arbitrary racial and cultural identity. Such a contradictory (and tragic) reality is what surrounds us even now, as we witness the return of patriotism and nationalism, of censorship and violent repression of people's dissent (often through the violation of some fundamental liberal principles, such as *habeas corpus*) and of western arrogance that stands behind neocolonial wars.

In the third chapter, entitled "Hierarchy among equals", Petri shows that the foundational (and yet contradictory) polarities of western ideology have extended their influence all over the world and set the conditions for the redefinition of global geopolitical and cultural dynamics. He presents a manifold genealogy that, starting from the principles of the Enlightenment, comes to define that Eurocentric, universalistic and missionary spirit that inspires widespread praxis (like the wars to export the principles of western democracy and human rights) and institutions (such as NGOs, whose activity, according to Petri, is perfectly embedded in western imperialistic tendencies).

A very interesting part of this chapter is dedicated to racism. According to the author, it is historically wrong to identify racism only with nineteenth-century positivist biological determinism; rather, the racist theoretical framework spreads itself through slavery and colonialism and is especially defined by the idea of a spiritual superiority of western man over the rest of humanity. This is the real, historical background of biological racism. And even if talking explicitly about human races became impossible after Auschwitz, following Petri we can see that the fundamental elements of racism persists in the apparently politically correct anthropological and ethnological theories that map human geographies, referring to human cultures and ethnicities and reproducing a Eurocentric theoretical apparatus.

After the Second World War, the notion of ethnicity became historically significant in order to define the privileged status of westerners. While from 1945 to 1980 it was used to describe nonwestern communities, since the 1980s, in the globalised and neoliberal world characterised by strong migration towards western countries, "ethnicity" has been employed by westerners to define their own spiritual, cultural and ethnic identity: an identity to preserve and defend from the attacks of the threatening alien forces, of course.

It is now clear enough that, as Petri states, “the West is not merely an idea, it is a factual reality” (149). Its ideology is not only generated and imposed from “above” (as some conspiracy theories would say) but is often supported and regenerated from “below”. It justifies every political, economic, cultural action that aims at diffusing the “great” western values. Naturally, western self-confidence, once transposed to the political sphere, leads to the phenomenon of imperialism.

In defining imperialist dynamics, cynical power politics and the ethically driven interventions cannot be separated. In fact, the rhetoric of western duty to the principle of responsibility can be traced in the political speeches given by many important and influential figures of the last century (from the Republican Theodore Roosevelt to the Democrat Barack Obama) and has been employed to justify military missions or the constitution of important institutional apparatuses (Nato, for example), whose humanitarian purposes are strictly interconnected with the cynical tendencies that underpin the geopolitical and economic global order. An ever-increasing mystification has gripped common sense and transformed brutal wars into humanitarian missions against evil. In this state of warfare, every means is justified, even kidnapping and torture: in this way, the good western missionaries infringe on those same principles they want to export.

In spite of its self-confidence, western ideology has been frequently concerned about its crisis. In Petri’s view, this sense of crisis has its origin in another traditional myth of the west, that is, alienation, the radical sense of loss of the original human essence. Founded on the reconciliation between man and nature and on the restoration of a pre- (or post-) historical condition, the myth of alienation (common to Marxism and also the far right) is another expression of western anthropocentrism. Perfect examples of this return to the origin are both ecology and apocalypse. This is because western man cannot imagine a) nature as a *physis*, without any purpose, and b) a history without an end. Following this conceptual thread (that finds its keynote figure in Martin Heidegger), Petri points out the centrality acquired by the notions of nothingness, homelessness and purposelessness in the last 50 years. Even postmodernism, with its idea of living in a postsystematic, postapocalyptic but not postalienated world, cannot free itself from that theological element well expressed in Derrida’s concept of a “messianism without Messiah”: Judgement day, thus, is still a motif that, although disguised, persists in a world that creates its own identity on a sense of loss and on the risk of a final (maybe nuclear) apocalypse. This is the appalling conclusion of Petri’s book: western man cannot live without a Eurocentric, anthropocentric and transcendent idea of history. He cannot live without its arbitrary ideology.

In conclusion, this book presents a convincing counterhistory of western modernity. Petri exposes his theses in a clear way, with references to an extensive collection of historical data and a solid philosophical-conceptual apparatus. This is a stimulating book mostly because, beyond its *pars destruens*, it raises significant questions concerning the positive role that such a “critical account” can play nowadays. In this perspective, I would like to highlight two questions: First, while I completely agree with the critique of the anthropocentric myth of western man as the subject that makes history, does this mean that we should imagine history as a process without a subject? I don’t think so. I believe there is a subject and that it is identifiable with those impersonal, political-economic relations of power that constitute the structural core of global capitalism and also explain many of those distinguished features of western ideology that Petri outlines.

Second, western ideology represents a concrete reality. Criticising it also means negating it. But is this an absolute negation or a determinate negation? I think that in the first case we run the risk of falling into a nostalgic cult of some sort of mythical past or into postmodernism, that is, into another mythical *Weltanschauung* based on fragmentation and flexibility (not by chance two values promulgated by neoliberalism). That’s why I believe that a critique of modernity cannot help being a systematic self-critique aimed at abolishing the mystifying and transcendent necessities implicit in western ideological self-representation.

