

## **Western Supremacy: The Triumph of an Idea?**

*Sophie Bessis*

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This book traces the journey of western domination from the conquest of the Americas to the current forms and practices of globalization and development. Bessis contends that the West, unlike other empires of the past, is the only one to have produced a theoretical (philosophical, moral, and scientific) apparatus to legitimate its supremacy and hegemony around the world. While making her case, she explores what she terms as the ultimate paradox of the West: its ability to produce and even violently promote universals (e.g., democracy, justice, and human rights) and yet, at the same time, exert an inexhaustible capacity to self-justify its own violations of these very universals. It is precisely this capacity to disassociate what it says from what it does, the author asserts, that makes the West both unintelligent and illegitimate to the world. This book, divided into three parts with 12 chapters, provides the reader with an excellent introductory overview of the nature and extent of western domination, as well as the relationship it has fostered with the rest of the world.

Part 1, "The Formation of a Culture," sets out the West's historico-political formation, tracing its birth to the turn of the sixteenth century.

Chapters 1 through 5 offer a historical account, albeit in broad strokes, of how the West built its hegemony upon the twin processes of exclusion and appropriation. These chapters highlight how the West's exclusively Greco-Roman founding myth enabled it to erase non-Christian and oriental influences from western European civilization. Europe reinvented itself by excluding the historical, intellectual, cultural, and scientific contributions made to it by the Babylonian, Egyptian, Indian, and Islamic (Arab) civilizations, among others, in order to believe, and then persuade others to accept, that the West built itself and owes its greatness only to its own efforts. The forced expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain, for example, declared a new political territory of the West and was matched by the expulsion of Jewish-Muslim thought from Europe's intellectual territory.

The exclusion of "Others" was paralleled by the appropriation of their lands, which, as Bessis explains, led Europe to carry out the first large-scale genocide in history. She explores how the rapid depopulation of the Americas and the trans-Atlantic slave trade were rationalized by an ideology of domination that legitimated the idea of racial superiority and the West's self-election as the only full human beings. In addition, she explores how new myths appear and histories are rewritten to validate this history on the West's insistence that its expansion was necessary in order to introduce the world to freedom and liberty and to promote human rights.

In Part 2, "The Way of the World," chapters 6 through 9 move into a critical analysis of the development discourse and the world's partition into the Global South and the Global North. Overviewing the history of development and the West's modernization agenda, the author explains how the monolithic blueprint for the world to "catch up" to the minority-world was intrinsically set up for failure. As yet another example of the discrepancy between what the West proposes and what it does, Bessis insists that development ideology exhorted the world to embrace the universality and inevitability of modernity and progress – but only on the condition that their development and modernization do not interfere with the West's interests.

In this section, Bessis explores how the West manages and dominates the "post"-colonial era through a sequence of double standards and outright hypocrisy. She points out the underlying deception in development ideology, whereby a single path to growth is promoted ostensibly to mimic the West, even though it is, in fact, unattainable for the rest of the world because the same rules of appropriation and exploitation of lands, resources, and the

freedom to migrate no longer apply. In this sense, the South raced to reproduce the model, while the North fiercely opposed alternative models and devised new strategies to control and dominate so that it would eventually yield more of its power. Accounting for the disconnect between what the West states and what it does is made glaringly evident: Only the West has benefited, in terms of increased wealth and power, from the failure of the development decades from the 1960s onward.

Part 3, "Two Sides of the Mirror," explores the new face of the West's old civilizing mission: to promote and protect universal human rights. Here, again, the book's common thread is revisited as Bessis explains how the West, in its historical and current contexts, covers up its own violations as often as it appropriates to itself the right to be the sole protector and guarantor of democracy, modernity, and human rights. Once again, societies are forced to shape and mold themselves into the West's image, which is identified as the uncontested model of a "civilized" society that the rest must transform into but will never fully become.

Reforming and rescuing the "Other" to make it more closely resemble the West is the ultimate goal of the new forms of intervention and imperialism. According to the author, the West's inability to embrace pluralism and multivocality undermines its very strength and the rightful existence and legitimate place that non-western peoples have in the world. Bessis concludes by asking the poignant question of how do we collectively move from a unitary domination by the West to a body of ideas and a discourse in which all members of humanity can recognize themselves and share in its construction. In her final analyses, Bessis concedes that although the West does not want to admit or submit to this direction, it inevitably will be pushed, either willingly or unwillingly, to finally locate itself realistically in the world.

This rather passionate polemical critique leaves the reader with the impression that in the face of this totalizing entity described as the West, the rest of the world is rendered powerless and silenced into submission. The major shortcoming of this book is that it does not provide a warranted discussion of the diverse ways in which non-western people historically and presently seek to rupture, dismantle, resist, and recreate themselves and their societies in both the heartland and hinterlands of the West. The author also fails to explore how the West's intrusion has instigated diverse forms of resistance and transformations that are opening up the very alternative paradigms that she herself hints are needed urgently. Nevertheless, this book is an important introductory read that is well researched and passionately written. It offers a concise overview of western hegemony that is

appropriate and useful for undergraduate level courses in Third World studies, international development, and sociology.

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