

Is Western Civilization 'Superior'?

In [many posts](#), we at Intellectual Takeout have argued that people in the West should know the Western tradition.

We say this not only because we believe that Western civilization has made many great contributions to the world that should be appreciated, but also because we believe a knowledge of one's past is crucial to understanding one's present world and to maturely engaging with others in it.

However, it's become more controversial for Westerners to take this a step further: to argue that Western civilization is *superior* to all other civilizations, both past and present.

In a rather tactless way, Rep. Steve King (R-Iowa) made this claim on an MSNBC panel at the Republican National Convention [last night](#). His following statement—in response to a description of the crowd at the convention as “dissatisfied white people”—is generating a ton of controversy:

Rep. King: “This whole white people business, though, does get a little tired. ... I'd ask you to go back through history and figure out where are these contributions that have been made by these other categories of people that you are talking about. Where did any other subgroup of people contribute more to civilization?”

Fellow panelist Chris Hayes: “Than white people?”

Rep. King: “Than Western civilization itself, that's rooted in Western Europe, Eastern Europe, and the United States of America, and every place where the foothold of Christianity settled the world.”

In [an interview with ABC last night](#), Rep. King didn't back down a whole lot, reiterating that "The Western civilization and the American civilization are a superior culture."

My thoughts on the matter...

First of all, I think we can admit that Rep. King made a blunder in solely identifying Western civilization with "white people" and contrasting it with "other subgroup(s)." A huge blunder. From what I've seen, he hasn't made the same identification in clarifying comments, so let's hope he's not actually a "white supremacist," as some media outlets are saying.

Next, in regard to those who are also criticizing Rep. King for saying that Western civilization is "superior," I feel he is a bit of a victim of modern hypocrisy.? Today, we tend not to bat an eyelash if a non-Western person claims that their civilization is superior. We expect them to, and congratulate them for having cultural pride when they do so. Yet, Westerners who make the same claim are often vilified by their own for hubris—presumably because Western civilization is viewed as a historical oppressor.

On the other hand, applying that adjective of “superior” is kind of tricky when it comes to something such as Western civilization. For one, it’s not a monolithic reality. As Rémi Brague has argued in *Eccentric Culture*, what we know as “Western civilization” is really an amalgamation of several different civilizations. The West has always been a great borrower. ?

Secondly, it raises questions about how one would even go about judging a civilization as superior to another. Can you take a civilization as a whole and make such a blanket determination? Or if you were to parse out a particular area of civilization such as a literature, for instance, what categories would you use to arrive at a judgment about the superiority of one civilization’s literary tradition over another’s? Would it even be fair to judge them based on the same categories?

I know, I know... these questions are very postmodern of me. But don’t worry: they also work against those who too hastily claim that all cultures and civilizations are “equal.”

What do you say? Is it legitimate and/or understandable for Westerners to claim that Western civilization is superior to others?