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Book Reviews

**Andrew Targowski, *Western Civilization in the 21st Century*
(Focus on Civilizations and Cultures Series)
New York: Nova Publishers, 2015**

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Once again polymath, informatics scientist, and humanist, Andrew Targowski has shown us how well he has mastered the two cultures, scientific and humanist, the respective adepts of which, as C. P. Snow lamented in his 1959 essay, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, were, at that time, woefully ignorant of each other's specialisms. For Snow, such mutual ignorance among the elites of his era was potentially dangerous for society.

Targowski began a career in informatics in Poland, obtaining a doctorate from the Warsaw Polytechnic Institute in 1969 and devoting a major part of his career to informatics and information science first in his homeland and then, after 1980, in the United States. At some point he began to think very seriously about the effects, good and bad, that the informatics-based communications revolution, to which he was an active contributor, was having on society. His reflections that began as he increasingly challenged aspects of the communist regime in Poland pushed him into mastery of the social sciences and the humanities, as is well demonstrated in the book under review, his latest. It certainly reflects his mastery of C. P. Snow's two cultures as well as Law II of four universal laws of information that Targowski himself formulated in 2009: "Information generates consequences which it cannot foresee" (<https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrew-Targowski>, accessed 17 January 2015).

Targowski loves Western civilization and is particularly attracted to its many manifestations in all disciplines and its many accomplishments: philosophy, Catholic and Protestant Christianity, Judaism, literature, art, music, modern science, democracy, and the list could go on. According to him, Western civilization, as distinct from its predecessors in the ancient Near East, Greece and Rome, started with the coronation of Charlemagne as the first Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III on Christmas Day AD 800, and has been evolving and expanding from inside its core area that he places in what he calls "old Europe," particularly western Germany. Its center following World War II became the United States of America.

But for Targowski, Western civilization, particularly the United States, is in decline, threatened on one hand by resource depletion and on the other hand by excessive profit-driven and information technology-assisted global business "which works for global corporations but not for citizens of developed nations whose jobs are being exported to countries with low costs of labor." (p. 83) But this decline, he argues, is also the result of the transformation of Western civilization into global and virtual civilizations, both owing

their possibilities to increasingly powerful computerization—particularly the virtual ones. Targowski has grave doubts about both of these transformations.

Globalization, particularly the outsourcing of manufacturing to low labor-cost countries like China and Vietnam, and of information services to countries like India or the Philippines, is destroying the middle classes in the United States and Western Europe and stimulating a decline in culture and power. Several times in his book, Targowski cites the case of Detroit, Michigan, once an industrial powerhouse of the United States, “which is regressing from an industrial to an agricultural town” (p. 255), its deindustrialization having left 36 percent of its population in poverty. (p. 136)

In addition to isolating human beings from one another in terms of true human contact, virtualization linked to the profit-driven communication and information organizations leads to the vulgarization of culture, from music to speech. Digital tourists “collect a lot of data...but their reasoning is pseudo-reasoning.” (p. 220) Young people in America who may text hundreds of messages a day with their smart phones rarely read books. Then there is the question of video games: do they stimulate violence? (p. 164)

Targowski seems particularly concerned about the possibility that robots might replace 50 percent of workers in the United States by 2050 and that non-biological intelligence will surpass human intelligence. “Should we not apply Isaac Asimov’s Three Laws of Robotics” (p. 217) that place restrictions on what robots may be permitted to do? But these laws were formulated in 1950. In 2011, Targowski along with Vladimir Modrák offered similar restrictions regarding automated service systems: “Law I. Do not implement high automation technology if you are unsure whether the same goal can be achieved by other means. Law II. Do not implement automation technology with the aim of totally eliminating human presence in the manufacturing process. Law III. Do not develop automation which harms society or endangers the human race.” (p. 206) But will big business follow these laws? How applicable are they to robotics?

In short, much of this book illustrates the bad effects nationally and globally of the world of informatics, particularly virtualization. Yet, the author has made significant contributions to the virtual world—possibly prior to his formulation of his Second Universal Law of Information: “Information generates consequences which it cannot foresee.” (*Ibid*)

More than anything else, this book displays Professor Targowski’s attachment to the traditional conceptions of Western civilization—its cultural and scientific achievements, its great thinkers, and its influence over the whole world. At the same time he is worried about its economic sustainability and the threats that it is facing from outside and inside. From the outside he identifies radical Islam, and the Chinese economy (to which both the United States and the EU are in debt). From the inside, he cites the neo-liberal threat to the middle class, particularly in the United States, as well as political correctness in the universities as

an outcome of Western popular culture in the twenty-first century, and the control of Western mass culture by big business and big media.

The book is divided into two parts: “Civilizing and Globalizing Society” (five chapters) and “Globalizing and Virtualizing Culture and Infrastructure” (four chapters). These chapters are laced with numerous charts and figures portraying such matters as “The Key Legacies of the Age of the Enlightenment” (Table 4.1, p. 106) and images of such persons as Nicolaus Copernicus and Giordano Bruno and many other contributors to Western civilization as well as some of its would-be destroyers like Hitler and Stalin.

While Targowski recognizes that the increasing scarcity of crucial natural resources threatens the way of life of Western civilization, he considers that its greatest immediate threats come from within: deteriorating intellectual standards owing to the clash between high culture and mass and pop culture; human fragmentation owing to too much internetization, particularly among young people; and especially in western Europe, difficulties in assimilating minorities. To remedy the latter requires the development of hybrid culture which in turn requires the development of what he calls the “COMPLETE MIND composed of the BASIC, WHOLE, GLOBAL, and UNIVERSAL minds.” (p. 254) But is this mental development possible given the underfunding of public education?

In short, “Western Civilization, as a declining civilization, is at the same time transforming [itself] into Global and Virtual civilizations whose *modus operandi* is just in *statu nascendi*.” (p. 83) In other words, Targowski cannot really determine what global and virtual civilization will be. So, perhaps there are grounds for optimism. However, Targowski, who is an admirer of liberal democracy, asks the question: “Can Western civilization re-engineer its own culture all by itself?” His answer is that “The scope of deterioration and the democratic culture will not allow for any top-down social engineering today.”

Is the glass half empty or half full?