**Conflict: the seed of modern civilization**

*The West and the World[[1]](#footnote-2).* Such is the label we give to this frenetic run-through of history. More appropriately, it should be labeled *Europe and the World*, since almost all of modern history revolved around the various revolutions and reformations that marred Europe for centuries, to this day. Notice I used the words *revolutions* and *reformations*, in place of the more proper names that we call them today. These apparent ‘misnomers’ are in fact, intentional and justified, as what we would call the Renaissance period or the Enlightenment period *are* revolutions, though not in the conventional sense of the word. Why would I relegate these fruitful periods of history to such a vehement phrase you ask?

Because they[[2]](#footnote-3), like the French revolution or the Protestant reformation, changed the world through *conflict* and *strife.* It is in fact, because of conflict, both past and present, that western civilization has evolved and matured to the modernized marvel it is today, particularly in the fields of politics, science and art.

Politics has long been regarded as an area that is inherently filled with strife and conflict[[3]](#footnote-4), as the great political philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli states in his controversial work, *The Prince*. When Machiavelli wrote this in 1513, the conflicting city-states of Florence was highly unstable and dysfunctional, and therefore causing Machiavelli to assert such blatant disregard between politics and ethics. Louis XIV, the archetypal absolutist monarch, represented the next step in political ethos; the ascertaining of power upon a single individual. While divine absolutism became a subject of contemptuous pride following Louis’s downfall, it paved the way for enlightened despotism; arguably setting a paradigm of ideals that would eventually end with the formation of the modern constitutional monarchy. Conflict is again seen as the prevailing factor in this gradual transformation; the paragons of despotism, Frederick II and Napoleon I, had both been military rulers prior to their ascension, which led to the eventual abolishment of serfdom and the *ancien* *regime*. In fact, it could be argued that it was solely because of conflict, that great political leaders were so highly revered and worshipped. Would George Washington be the first president of the US had he not been a military leader in the revolution? Would Abraham Lincoln be as celebrated as he is today without his contributions to the civil war? And where would Hitler or Stalin be without the contingency of war to fuel their reputations? The probable answer is that without conflict or war, there would not be opportunity for betterment or improvement for politics or centralization of power as a whole.

We have witnessed the bifurcated existence of politics and war, but the iconography of conflict stretches farther than that of physical strife; it is also evident in the areas of science and technology. Whereas the single-mindedness of Aristotelian thought had prevailed before, the scientific revolution, by means of great deliberation and debate, had replaced the conservative ideals of old with newfound knowledge: mathematical, mechanical and empirical by nature. This progression was entirely reactionary; had Copernicus never published his heliocentric theories, Galileo would never had had expanded his astronomical and mechanical mindset, and Newton would not have invented calculus[[4]](#footnote-5) or postulated his theory of gravitation. Thus, the ubiquitous ‘*intervention*’ of either reactionary or self-induced strife had unintentionally been the sole catalyst in carrying out the thoughts and ideals of the scientific revolution well into the age of Enlightenment and beyond. Technology suffered the similar fate; because of war and out of necessity, inventions and machinations previously thought implausible had been made possible, or at the very least, feasible for development. Thus, we admit here that necessity is yet another form of conflict; the steam engine was conceived as a more efficient method of transportation, the spinning jenny as a means of increasing production, and the cotton gin to mechanize cotton fiber. Whatever the cause, the increasing prominence of conflict and change was - and still is - a crucial ingredient in the formulation of scientific theories and development of industrialized machinery.

It is increasingly evident now that conflict has played a major role in the development and growth of western civilization, but perhaps its most lavish manifestation seems to be in that of art. How does conflict affect the writing of literature, or the painting of portraits you ask? Well, is art not the expression of emotions, or the portrayal of events? Warfare and dissension are perhaps the greatest sources of inspiration for literature, rhetoric or visual splendor. The Renaissance is the most reiterated source of past and contemporary art, manifested[[5]](#footnote-6) under the labels of neoclassicism and romanticism. But it is important to note that the Renaissance was a direct reaction to the classical antiquity of ancient Greek and Rome. Thus art, like politics and science, could be considered reactionary, and fueled by emerging conflicts, especially by the dissension of Roman Catholicism and the spread of Reformation at the time. Hence, the cultural movements of the Baroque, Rococo, Neoclassic, and subsequent styles were built on direct contrast to each other; conflict evokes change and change evokes further conflict, as that is how history seems to progress. Thus, artistic and cultural movements were built upon reactionary and contrasting movements which eventually propagated to the form we see today.

The words *revolution* and *conflict* represent two distinctive sets of entities now; the portrayal of bloodshed and warfare so often associated with them, and the evolution of political, scientific and artistic progress which it represented unerringly throughout the course of modern history. Without it, civilization would have been peaceful and harmonious, but nonetheless, unproductive. We see that history is almost entirely reactionary[[6]](#footnote-7), based upon contrasts with the past and present and fraught with differing ideals and conceptual beliefs. Political leaders need conflict to maintain presence and popularity, Scientists are reliant on the ideas and influences of their contemporaries and literary and artistic thinkers are constantly expressing their ever-shifting sentiments in their art. Thus, the entirety of western civilization has been characterized by conflict and change; there would be no Beethoven without the influence of Bach, no communist movement without the justification of social-Darwinism, and no theory of relativity without the classical mechanisms of Newton. Thus, it is vitally important to us to preserve our past, as that is the essential creed of history, as what we accomplish today might be the seeds of what others endeavor to do tomorrow.

1. The title of the course, though one must be forgiven for thinking that it refers to the growth of North and Latin America. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Referring to the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and other such periods of *productivity*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. True nowadays too, as political propaganda and accusations occur in the wake of a new election. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. It is interesting to note that Calculus was invented simultaneously, attributed to both Newton and Leibniz. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. The context here is that, the works of the Renaissance were highly regarded and imitated. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. One must wonder if the human race is becoming increasingly more intellectual, and less and less instinctual, as we gain more and more newfound knowledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)