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‘The West is Best’? The Role of Historians in Perpetuating a Problematic Term

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Abstract

“The West” is a commonplace in everyday speech, presuming a fixed set of values, often figured as inherently positive, applied to and seen as emanating from (a certain version of) Europe and also the United States, and imputing a model for the rest of the world to follow. Historians of these regions have played a critical role in naturalizing the term and advancing it as “scientifically” meaningful. But, in fact, the meanings associated with the term have been highly variable, usually relating to an historian’s own time period and values. Further, deployment of the term, disseminated across broad populations, has had deleterious effects, including reinforcement of binary images of the world, as divided e.g. between “advanced” and “backward” populations, and particular notions in turn of how the latter can “advance.” Even as prominent historians increasingly challenge salutary figurations of the term, moreover, its continued use altogether seems to validate politicians’ and public figures’ continued use of the concept, as uncomplicatedly affirmative as well as meaningful; this is especially problematic concerning any concept of “Western values.”

Key words: The West; Western values; Western civilization; the East; Americanization; Cold War; historiography; developed world; progress; empire

In 1986, as travel across the “Iron Curtain” became increasingly commonplace, West cigarettes launched a cheeky advertising campaign across the Cold War Western Bloc, urging consumers to “Test the West.” To the great good fortune of Reemtsma Cigarettes, a company arising during the Third Reich and at this point a subsidiary of British Imperial Brands, the fall of the Wall in November 1989 opened entire new markets for the brand, and the advertising campaign took on new meaning, celebrating the triumph of “West” over “East” in the Cold War.[1] The ad, now ubiquitous across much of the Eastern Bloc, served to invite those previously deprived of the joys of consumer culture to find their own place in that culture, while signaling to those lucky enough to have lived in “the West” all along another opportunity to celebrate their

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place on the "right side" of History. Sixteen years later, prominent historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler published the fifth and final volume of his widely read *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte* [AHistory of German Society]. The volume, treating East and West Germany (1949-89), beat an exultant tattoo concerning the Federal Republic's early turn to "the West," a morally and civilizationally correct decision, as evidenced not least by the country's generally buoyant economy.[2] The study reinforced the presumed tight linkage of capitalism and democracy, in explicit contrast with the German Democratic Republic, which Wehler dismissed as a "Soviet satrap," as its position in the "East" explained.[3] What do a tongue-in-cheek cigarette ad, and the scholarship of a highly respected historian have in common?

The common denominator is celebration of "The West," one among a number of associated relational terms, one side of a binary couplet, commonplace in the *historiography* of Europe, in forms imputing values. These values, for much of "the West's" history presented as unqualifiedly positive, were at the same time highly variable and even contradictory. It is worth focusing in this context specifically on historians' practice, though the latter is often conceived as remote from mainstream discourse, residing in dusty corners. For "the West" is fundamentally an historical concept, even when offered as a kind of foundational mythology, and/or as simply a given. In turn, historians have been major contributors to and even creators of the concept and of the arguably deleterious visions of the world it has nourished. I am not suggesting there could be or should be means of writing history without "values": indeed, a piece of the present critique is to challenge the sense of an objective, essential, and positive notion of the West that still obtains, especially in official rhetoric. The concept builds on a trajectory of presumed more or less consistent values from ancient times to the present, across a particular (if shifting) geographical region. Historians' use of the term, in publications, classroom lectures, and beyond, serves at the same time to reinforce such mythologies, giving them scholarly, "scientific" legitimacy, a credibility arguably ill-deserved, even as many scholars have by now long challenged at least the positive nature of "the West." The power of the term is visible in its ubiquity in political and public discourse, as the term is used to denote "Europe" (or Europe and the U.S.), and even specifically the European Union, relating these to particular values, those the EU seeks to uphold in the face of perceived assaults from the *non*-"Western" world. Yet, paradoxically, it is a highly ahistorical term, encompassing values that have radically changed over time, even as, within any self-defined "West," they continue to be asserted overwhelmingly as positive in the public sphere.[4]

It may seem a given that, as cultural theorist Stuart Hall writes, "'the West' is a *historical*, not a geographical, construct."[5] Indeed, historiography has been at the center of that construction. Yet the concept is deeply problematic for writing the past—and, in turn, for thinking the present and the future. Inconsistently as the term is even used, it continues to imply,

especially to those who consider themselves part of the category, what is "good": cultural superiority—and, thereby, a right to reward or punish other regions of the world, not least through military force, all aside from rapacious associated social, economic, and environmental practices. Use of the term is especially concerning as it is deployed in textbooks, means by which the greatest number of people are exposed to such world views, including those not always accustomed to thinking about them critically. Like the term "modern," used to describe both particular characteristics and a particular era (applying, indeed, at least to "the West"), simultaneous reference to that "West" as related both to a certain (shifting) set of values and a particular (shifting) region of the world is thereby *inter alia* an arguably ahistorical notion. In turn, the relation between any set of presumed Western values and the actual practices of states and societies associated with the "West" demonstrates a consistently problematic mismatch. It is fine for a particular set of values to be aspirational, but to make uncomplicated claims about their applicability to the history of certain regions can only mislead and/or engender hostile response from those outside of this category.

Historians of Europe, as of other regions, are increasingly aware of the insalubrious implications of the concept, as they are of closely related terms such as "advanced" v. "backward," and the "developed" versus the "un-" or "underdeveloped" world. Yet, even insofar as they have problematized the term, many continue to actively deploy it as a presumed meaningful shorthand. Historiography matters, as the way of telling the stories of the past, through schools and beyond, contributes to broader societal structures of thought, even validating mythologies historians themselves may seek to challenge.[6] It is, in turn, historians among others who can challenge the effective sleight of hand that the term projects.

1) The Rise of "the West" in Historiography

The term "the West" was value-laden from the earliest period—whether positively or otherwise. Writing himself in 1963, historian William McNeill surmised that earliest conceptual use of the term by millenia was Egyptian, referring to a paradisiac afterlife, as contrasted with the tribulations of terrestrial life.[7] MacNeill follows with note of subsequent Chinese usage, where it took on a more negative valuation. The professional discipline of history was a nineteenth-century construct, as were most academic fields. But this did not mean that histories did not exist until that point, in forms from story-telling about the past passed down orally, to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century history-travelogues, often penned by women, all aside from the texts of philosopher-, scientist-, and politician-historians throughout the intervening period.[8] Writing already in the fifth century BCE, Herodotus is among the first historians known to have made mention of "the West." His *histories,* focusing especially on the Greco-Persian wars,

featured discussion of the West in terms that slipped between relative location and concept, specifically a positive concept. He identified himself with this West: a "civilization" that contrasted with the "barbarism" of others.[9]

The term's association with what was "good" set a powerful example that later historians enthusiastically followed. From the thirteenth century, Humanists in the field drew on the ancients to resume use of the term, picking up on and doubling down on the positive valuations, to describe themselves, and to narrate specifically a legacy of reason, enacted by an educated citizenry. In this context, Humanists drew too on Aristotelian concepts—concepts they first discovered via thinkers who wrote in Arabic over the previous centuries, although this portion of the story was largely lost in translation, so to speak.[10] Notions of the West as center of culture and other positive values was greatly reinforced with the 1453 fall of Constantinople, the "Eastern Empire," its demise understood as redounding to the superiority of the empire to the West. In 1531, historian-philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli thus traced a "Western tradition," in his own view specifically concerning effective proto-republican forms.[11] Although this was well before late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century notions of "historical law," this notion of tradition and trajectory suggested a natural path of historical greatness, associated increasingly with a particular view of (especially southern) Europe.

Increasingly in this period, a conceptual East/West axis began to supersede the contemporarily more commonplace North/South binary, via which the primitive northern Europe lay well behind the civilized south (as in the lands of the southern Renaissance). It may be little surprise, then, that thinkers in the geographical north embraced this new (literal!) orientation. Sixteenth-century historian-theologian Caspar Hedio adopted this increasingly dominant conceptual "geography," offering his own view of the long, salutary past of the Occident (*Okzident*), a term which in his characterization also included the German lands. Hedio referenced in this context a direct link with Christianity—non-Orthodox Christianity—as the dominant characteristic of the Occident. The latter was contrasted explicitly with the Orient, valuation of which would become only increasingly negative in the coming centuries, even as what constituted "the East" became increasingly amorphous and variable. Was this East, then, the realm of Orthodox Christianity? Of Islam and Judaism? Of China, which, at least until the eighteenth century, Europeans broadly admired for its "civilization"? All were invoked simultaneously, further evidence of the questionable use of both terms, East and West. Moreover, even as the directional conceptual axis shifted, over the centuries, counterpart to the West was, in historians' characterizations, frequently some new version of "the South," now imbued with highly negative qualities: both a global South, and a southern (including a geographically westernmost) Europe that was falling "behind."[12]

It was from the eighteenth century that contemporary historians in parts of the geographical West of Europe likewise cemented emphasis on a "West" and "East" within some version of Europe, creating a gradient of values: a European East that stood between Occident and Orient—or, alternately, that somehow had no proper place at all in history, living outside its bounds.[13] Though a self-avowed counter-revolutionary, French politician-historian Louis de Bonald still scorned Russian refusal to pursue "all real progress," announcing his own vision that Russia was "neither of the West nor of the East," but was rather condemned by the Great Schism to "Byzantine stagnation," existing in a "narrow present," with no identity, tradition—or history.[14] Russians lived "outside of time," untouched by ideas of "justice, right, and order" that their "Western brethren" had achieved. (Conversely, as Czar Peter I of Russia signaled in the early eighteenth century his own admiration for "German" manufacturing and commercial practices, later historians came to translate "German" as "Western," presuming this as Peter's intended meaning.)

Bonard constitutes one example of the contemporary ways in which Christian theology was now linked through conceptions of the West with deist and secular thought, in this iteration in turn adopting notions of "progress." However skeptically Bonald regarded the "modernity" boasted by contemporary revolutionaries, his own thought was clearly structured in terms of contemporary theodicean notions of progress, a new characteristic he matched with "the West," creating in turn categories of "advanced" and "backward" peoples, whether those associated with the latter character could eventually "catch up" or were rather destined to remain "without history" altogether.[15] Bonald's emphasis on progress, on human perfectibility and a linear path to that perfection that at least some could achieve, is foremost in the work of his contemporary, philosopher-politician-historian Nicolas de Condorcet's *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*. In this 1795 volume, Condorcet, though likewise constituted an enemy of the revolution, forcefully builds on this notion of the West specifically as the land of progress. He outlines ten stages of human advancement (moral and scientific), developed through reason, via which it was possible to narrate the past—and even thereby to foretell the future.

Contemporaneous development of "universal history" represented an effort to apply this thought to a wider world. Edward Gibbons's 1776 *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* was seminal in modifying straightforward visions of historical progress, via new understanding of "historical law," creating an image of rises and falls within a secular trend "forward," in the Roman Empire as elsewhere.[16] Yet such universal histories frequently doubled down in practice on notions of the Other as inferior, still far behind on the path to perfection. Certainly, it reinforced the terms of "us" and "them," a scourge of the modern period—"modern" itself yet another vexed term, applying to some persons and regions but not others. It is little surprise,

then, that such historians' work became critical in turn in inspiring and legitimating imperial conquest, not simply as desire for territory and economic resources, human and otherwise, but rather as necessary for "Western"—and even "Eastern"—advancement, per the widely disseminated, six-volume 1770 study by Guillaume Reynal, *The Philosophical and Political History of the Institutions and Commerce of the Europeans in the Two Indies*.[17] It was in this period too that the emerging field of archeology followed that of history, positing that ancient ruins of Western culture in the East, such as in the Ottoman Empire, belonged in safe, Western hands: both because they "naturally" belonged to the contemporary West, which drew on this illustrious past, and because Westerners were thereby the only ones fit to recognize and preserve these treasures.[18]

2) The Invention of Western Superiority

This takes us squarely into the nineteenth century—and to the invention of the modern discipline of history and its practitioners, those presumed Western white men of reason and freedom, avatars of the most "advanced" culture.[19] New historical practices grew hand in hand with concerted creation of the nation state, practices of empire-building, the development of industrial capitalism, and the ideologies that emerged around all three, intimating yet a new (and newly contradictory) set of associations with the West.[20] It was in this context that the school of Whig history developed, associated particularly with the UK, connected with the idea of a linear path forward. The leading exponent of this historical practice was Thomas Babbington Macaulay, whose multi-volume *History of England* (1848-61) posited England as standing at the pinnacle of advanced nations, because of its "history of physical, of moral, and of intellectual improvement," a product of the "freedoms" associated not least with English Protestantism.[21] While Macauley himself never explicitly employs the term "the West" in his massive study (except in reference to Rome's "Western Empire," referring to the British Isles), it seems to lay just under the surface in his descriptions of progress, intimating in this context a kind of leading edge *within* an advanced West, commensurate with England's near-westernmost position within Europe (insofar as it was part of Europe). England's "improvements" were both effect and cause of the country's fabulous wealth, in turn validation of the exploitations of industrial capitalism, contradictory and illusory notions of a "free market," and, especially, imperialism, all markers of the country's advancement. While often philosophically—and politically—pit against Whig history, Continental "historicists" likewise imagined the West in terms of particular advancement, in this case specifically with regard to freedom, here returning to both Classical and Christian traditions.[22] Once more, what was the West was defined largely by the characteristics that self-defined Western historians found most positive, however consistently

such characteristics aligned with either past associations, what other "Westerners" posited, and who counted as Western in the first place. The professionalization of historical writing only reinforced the legitimacy and prominence of such depictions, at least within this self-defined West.

The West thus figured more and less explicitly into historical narrative, as the discipline was professionalized within Europe, the work of "experts," who in turn exercised all the more influence on contemporary world views. Historians have thus been relatedly complicit in notions of the West versus the rest concerning imperialism and the Global South as well as East, central in discussions of whether the latter was simply much less further along the path of progress and required "civilizing missions," Christian or secular, or whether rather this South contained peoples who could only ever be ruled by more advanced peoples. A century after Reynal's *Philosophical and Political History*, bestselling historian John Seeley's 1883 *Expansion of England* justified the imperialism of the West as the best plan for benighted peoples, exemplified by British full occupation of India in 1857. The superior deadliness of weapons in metropolitan armies was yet another sign of perceived more generalized superiority, including cultural, and moral.[23] This contributed heavily to a very negative and no less powerful notion of the West from those outside its imagined borders, a West defined by its destructive arrogance and attendant *immoral* nature: still a concept without clear and circumscribed characteristics.[24]

The late nineteenth century also saw incorporation of erstwhile settler colony America into these historical narratives, such as via the work of Britisher J. W. Draper, concerning "scientific" laws of history.[25] The notion of a succession of Western empires played a powerful role in this work, including in the immediate past those of Spain, Britain, the Netherlands, France, and, now, the U.S. The unusual inclusion of Spain (if not Portugal) in this conceptualization signified a kind of doubling down on a "natural" geographic significance of the West, toward what William McNeill later called the Atlantic littoral and its centrality in defining the West; it reinforced in turn how limitedly far *eastward* "the West" traveled. It also, finally, buttressing the "civilizing mission" as a defining element of the West.

The fabulous wealth that this (variously) self-defined West accumulated through these means only reinforced in turn the emphasis of historians writing on Europe—and, now, also the US—on the exemplary role of that West into the twentieth century. Economic historians, in ascendancy after World War I, fortified positive ideas of capitalism's role alongside imperialism in defining the West as an exemplary paradigm, for instance, in the work of David K. Fieldhouse.[26] Coterminous with the new emphasis on the U.S., moreover, was the challenge of the "Atlantic littoral" to some of whether Germany—and the new Soviet Union—could be constituted as part of the West. This came even as some German historians continued to emphasize the superiority of German culture, in opposition to Western (or specifically French)

"civilization," and as Soviets now proclaimed themselves as adopting the mantle of an exemplary modernity.[27] At the same time, German historians like Heinrich Ritter von Srbik, an early fan of National Socialism**,** enthusiastically claimed, to the ambivalent response of his compatriots, that Germany, as spearhead of the West, would protect the latter from "Asianist 'barbarism'"—a barbarism manifested in this period not least by the Soviet rejection of capitalism. Srbik thus also continued to play up the ongoing interplay of geographic and conceptual understanding of the West, related to the notion of how national wealth, as well as superior weaponry, served as evidence of an "advanced" nature.

The two world wars in turn both played an important role in reworking concepts of the West, in forms that closely followed a "victor's history" (*Siegergeschichte*) or, the notion that the militarily victorious (appropriately) held the role of narrating history.[28] Following WWII, dominant British historians from Alfred Toynbee to J. H. Plumb again celebrated the victory of the West over the forces of barbarism (*within* Europe).[29] They moved quickly, in turn, to transfer this opposition to recent military ally the Soviet Union, thereby providing critical scholarly validity to the emerging Cold War. This version of the West drew together presumed connected characteristics, such as freedom, Christianity, and capitalism. American historian R. R. Palmer's celebration of an eighteenth-century *Age of the Democratic Revolution,* published in 1959, wittingly or otherwise reinforced the Atlantic emphasis of the West and, with it, contributed to building notions that the US (if now more ambivalently France), by virtue of its role in modern, Western democracy, appropriately adopted the role as the world's policeman and arbiter of positive values.[30] In turn, in the name of the tutelage of wayward Europeans in the proper Western values to which they were naturally heir, the US began an unprecedented peacetime weapons build-up, bolstered by claims of contemporary historians that U.S. successes were proof of the "rightness" of the West.

3) Westernization and Americanization after 1945

As the Cold War heated up, historians came to exercise still greater influence. The 1950s corresponded to the development of curricula especially in the United States emphasizing "Western Civilization," a course or series of courses across American universities, universities that, in the postwar era, served an ever greater number of students. American students were encouraged or even required to take at least one of these courses. In turn, the number of textbooks and textbook series on the topic grew precipitously, creating entire new and remarkably lucrative markets. Whether or not such works included reference to U.S. history explicitly, they universally intimated that the United States was the result of (as well as, increasingly, a significant contributor to) the West.[31] As in Europe, the literature promoted a

vision of the conceptual entity of the West as white, by implication overwhelmingly dismissing broader histories and any value they might have. Such a literature played a powerful role too within Europe, as new generations of U.S. diplomats, military officers, and others in positions of influence in an American-dominated Cold War Western bloc reflected their own education in this model. It was, such officials asserted, America's role to turn European countries (at least those sufficiently far geographically west to be salvageable) from the wrong paths many had forged, into fascism—and, of course, communism. It was no small piece of these Cold War officials' efforts to explicitly frame understanding of history, and thereby of the present and future, around the very patterns, profound as they were contradictory, that led to notions of historical laws, correct paths, and superior cultures in the first place.

The end of the Cold War only further strengthened these ways of thinking, and, by extension, notions of a divided Europe: the Europe that "got" to be part of the West and one that did not. The triumphalism that followed the events in Europe of 1989-91 was not limited to political scientists like Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington, and philosophers like John Gray. Back in the 1970s and 1980s, leading West German historian Hans Ulrich Wehler had helped create a cottage industry in scholarship of the *Sonderweg*, or Germany's "special path" to Nazism, drawing on A.J.P. Taylor's idea of the turning points in historical law at which the country, though prospectively Western, had "failed to turn." Then, in 2006, volume five of Wehler's *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* argued for the ways that the Federal Republic of Germany had conversely demonstrated itself a shining example of the West: a return to the correct path.[32] While generally less uncritically exultant than Wehler's work, historiography in Germany in the period focused intensely on the question of "Westernization," more and less explicitly related to, even synonymous with, "modernization"—and, indeed, *Americanization*.[33]

In turn, the "fall of the Wall" was somehow occasion only to expand the North Atlantic Treaty organization, the largest and deadliest military alliance ever forged. Widely read histories like David Gress's 1998 *From Plato to NATO* reinforced this expansion, celebrating a "Western" military alliance that continued to mark off and vilify those who did not belong.[34] As Stalin had undertaken in the early 1950s, so in 1991 Boris Yeltsin again sought Russia's membership in NATO's mutual defense pact. Yet, for reasons ideologically defended, this was apparently an impossibility, upholding the sense of threat against the West that justified continued military build-up and expansion. One does not have to admire Russian President Vladimir Putin to trace the role of NATO weaponry development and expansion to a continued sense of siege among many in the new Russian Federation, as elsewhere in the world.[35] And, satisfyingly enough for some strategists close to the American government at the turn of the millennium, the events of 9/11, along with train bombings in Madrid and London, etc., offered up a new foe to shore up

positive visions of the West, even as the latter figured increasingly for many as inimical, a reversal of valuation within the same binary.

Indeed, the early twenty-first century has occasioned a doubling down on use of the West, by its champions and critics alike. In 2010, prominent historian Niall Ferguson published *Civilization. The West and the Rest*, simultaneous with a televised version of the study.[36] It is not every historian who can claim such outsized reach; already in 2004, US weekly *Time* magazine had already named Ferguson one of the most influential figures in the world (though one wonders at how this "world" was defined). The book and television series both emphasized six "complexes," "killer apps" that brought the Western world to dominate and, paradoxically, thereby to set an example.[37] It was these "apps" that made the West both rich and "strong," values that now justified anew why schooling needed to return to an appropriately triumphal emphasis on Western Civilization.[38] Ferguson's purpose was to reanimate faith in the West, even as other, *competing* regions— "the East" and "the Rest"—grew in power based on these same "applications." He aimed not least to counter what he saw as other historians' growing tendencies toward skepticism of the West's unmitigated greatness, if not meaningful challenge to the term itself. For, by challenging this greatness, Ferguson fears that those in the West willingly yield their well-deserved dominance in the world. In other words, as the work acknowledges and even celebrates, being "Western" is in many respects a performative act: an act of confidently asserting dominance, now as in the past. *Civilization* received innumerable negative historical reviews in scholarly journals; yet politicians and other public figures in both the U.S. and Europe seem to have drawn enthusiastically on its lessons.

To be sure, this doubling down came in response to critical countervailing tendencies among historians and other scholars, tendencies issuing in a number of directions. One is a challenge to the positive nature of the West, in light of many of the same characteristics Ferguson emphasizes, including capitalist dominance and empire. From at least the 1978 publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, historians along with social scientists have challenged notions associated with those in the West, including reified conceptualizations of an "East" that have so easily justified Western subjugation.[39] Yet, even as works like the 2004 *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of its Enemies* usefully problematized the West, it still falls into the practice of ontologizing the category, further, even seeming to equate it with "humanity."[40] Perhaps just as important, textbook writers have continued to fall back on longstanding patterns, even as they attempt to challenge them, and to add critical elements, as in e.g. Joshua Cole's and Carol Symes's *Western Civilizations*, with an emphasis on the plural (resonating with the idea of "multiple modernities").

A second, highly salutary trend has been the rise of scholarship, textbooks, and courses on global and world history, central in "provincializing Europe" (and the US), providing broader

narratives of cultural, economic, and other forms of mutual influence and interactivity across the world.[41] Yet, here once more, the notion of the West still often remains in place, such as in Dennis Sherman's and Joyce Salisbury's textbook *The West in the World*. Europeanist historian Maria Todorova among others argues compellingly for challenging the uniqueness of "Western Europe" in exclusively exemplifying patterns such as nationalism (figured positively) and early creation of the nation-state. This is obviously worth recognizing.[42] Yet, by this emphasis, Todorova seems in numerous places to imply that the Balkan states were therefore as "advanced" as those to the geographic west—even as the Balkan wars of the 1990s represented one among many examples of the questionable good of nationalism. Among historians initially trained in areas outside of Europe, Dipesh Chakrabarty's 2000 *Provincializing Europe* opens with an epigraph questioning use of the West; yet he continues on to use the term himself as equivalent to Europe, at least a number of times in the study. Even William McNeill, author of the seminal 1963 *The Rise of the West,* has argued for this expanded focus and conceptualization.[43] Indeed, for better or worse, the 1963 study itself encompassed a "West" far beyond any customary geographical range. Yet this only further begs the question: should the term be used at all, in histories—and by EU politicians—beyond as it has been used by historical subjects of the past themselves?

Conclusion: Breaking the Binarism

I believe we should not, for the following reasons. Based on its history, "the West" always implies an "Other," those who simply do not belong, as current discussions of both NATO and EU expansion make clear, alongside questions of migration, and all aside from those thereby figured as natural enemies of the West, from Russia to Iran. The term invokes a presumed history of "progress," a grand narrative that sets other regions further down on the developmental ladder. Thus, ongoing arguments by leaders of China and India that those countries need their own turn to go through the steps of industrial development that the West deemed "necessary" doubles down on practices that continue to irreversibly destroy our climate and environment, even as President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen now "looks east," as alliances with the US fray.[44] The West is used even by the most judicious to describe patterns and populations that are highly variable, constituting poor history and poor politics. Certainly, there are clusters of characteristics that hang together to describe various historical patterns: for example, the rise of certain forms of science and technology, industrial capitalism, and the production of the world's deadliest weapons, alongside claims of an inherent moral and other superiority that justifies ongoing imperialist practices, tied to domination of other beings and extractive practices. The question remains whether "the West" remains a useful

term to describe these patterns, considering both all the other qualities that have accreted to the term over time and the ways that those considered outside that category have engaged in some of the same patterns.

Perhaps even more important, from both an historical and a political perspective, is the imputation of values, as the term is used. Politicians, diplomats, and pundits alike still deploy the term as a cudgel, assuming now, as earlier, that those in the self-defined West are rightfully in a position to claim the mantle of the exemplary, to make determinations for others in forms that divide the world, and that, unsurprisingly, continue to nourish antipathy from those outside this exclusive "club." The concept persists in inspiring a breathtaking lack of humility among political leaders, such as French president Emmanuel Macron, in his comments excoriating "Black Lives Matter" and in associated political practices. Societal leaders can aspire to and promote particular values without claiming them as specific to—or consistent with—the West, or as representing any actual, consistent history. The West's "universal values" ring hollow, all the more again recently as fascist thought (certainly inextricable from European history) has re-emerged so powerfully across Europe and the U.S. Scholars have a critical role to play in challenging these practices and in the vision of the world they sustain. Historians must be part of this. There are many destructive narratives that structure our understanding of our past, present, and future. As historian Donald Kelley tells us, "the requirements of the genre of Western historiography depend on particular points of view and coherent narrative, and so, like the nation-builders and inventors of old, we are forced to imagine and even to invent story lines and meanings which make sense from our current centrally located perspectives."[45] It is time to recognize that invention and to rethink it.

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Notes

[1] At least as popular in the former Eastern Bloc were ads depicting the Marlboro man, likewise celebrating "the West": in this case the "rugged freedom" specifically of the American West. Deep thanks to the editors for their comments. This article is dedicated to leading historian of historiography Donald R. Kelley.

[2] Wehler, *Bundesrepublik und DDR*; compare also his *Die Deutschen und der Kapitalismus*. By 1989, the FRG had significantly bounced back from the recession precipitated in 1973.

[3] Ibid, p. XV, 323.

[4] Compare e.g. contributions to *Osservatorio Globalizzazione* "Dibattato sull'Occidente," including Emanuel Pietrobon, "L'Occidente non esiste?"

[5] Hall, "The West and the Rest," in ibid., *Essential Essays*.

[6] See e.g. Grosfoguel, "Racismo/sexismoepistémico.

[7] McNeill, *The Rise of the West*.

[8] See Smith, *The Gender of History*.

[9] While later orator Cicero celebrated Herodotus as "the father of History," Herodotus's contemporary and fellow historian Thucydides found the former's accounts less impressive. Hereafter "the West" will be written without scare quotes.

[10] The concept continued during the medieval period, though was often associated with negative characteristics.

[11] Macchiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*. Compare Cochrane, *Historians and Historiography*.

[12] Compare Ranum, *Artisans of Glory*.

[13] Compare Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*.

[14] Cited in Bavaj, "'The West': A Conceptual Exploration."

[15] Compare Wolf, *Europe and the People without History*; anthropologist Wolf refers primarily to Europeans' views of those outside Eurasia, but contemporary historians like Bonald referenced likewise those in some parts of the continent.

[16] Compare philosophers of history from Giacomo Vico, to F. W. G. Hegel, to Karl Marx.

[17] Reynal, *Histoire philosophique*.

[18] Compare Marchand, *Down from Olympus*; also ibid., *German Orientalism*; and Delbourgo, *Collecting the World*.

[19] Compare Smith, *The Gender of History*.

[20] Colonialism—and chattel slavery—had existed for centuries at this point, but in this period took on overwhelming justification through terms of Western superiority.

[21] Macaulay, *History of England*, vol. 1, p. 14. See also e.g. Stubbs, *The Constitutional History of England*; cf. Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*.

[22] Compare Liebel, "The Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism in Germany." There are different schools of historicism, to be sure, with varying views on the notion of "progress"; compare Kelley, *The Fortunes of History: Historical Inquiry from Herder to Huizinga*.

[23] As an early counter to this, compare Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Man;* to be sure, the study still accepts a clear definition of "the West."

[24] While countries associated with the West, from Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands to England and France were particularly associated with rapacious colonization, the region did not boast the sole global colonizers.

[25] Compare Draper, *History of the Conflict*; also ibid., *A History of the Intellectual Development*. Notably, Draper offered a positive estimation of the role of Muslim "civilization."

[26] Fieldhouse, "'Imperialism': An Historiographical Revision." This was consistent with Joseph Schumpeter's "reasoned history" (histoire raisonnée). Cf. economist John A. Hobson's more jaundiced characterization of imperialism.

[27] See e.g. Eckert, *Kultur, Zivilisation Und Gesellschaft.*

[28] Compare work of amateur historian Winston Churchill, *A History of the English Speaking Peoples*, which measures British greatness, as leader of "the Western States of Europe," through its imperial conquests, alongside other military successes. See generally Kelley, *The Frontiers of History*.

[29] Toynbee in turn trained his historical conceptualizations into policy decisions, as director of Chatham House.

[30] Compare too Perroy, *Il Medioevo*, tracing the role of medieval Spain in establishing a "West," in the face of "Eastern" expansion.

[31] Compare Allardyce, "The Rise and Fall of the Western Civilization Course." If fantasies of the *American* west marked nineteenth-century European thought, by the 1980s, political uses of an American cowboy (such as in the form of US

President Ronald Reagan) grew prominent in the form of the tough leader of the "Western world" that would countenance no rivals.

[32] Compare also variously in Germany Heinrich-August Winkler's multi-volume oeuvre *Geschichte des Westens*; also his recent *Werte und Mächte.* See too Bavaj and Steber, eds., *Germany and 'The West'*.

[33] See e.g. Doering-Manteuffel, *Wie westlich sind die Deutschen*; ibid, "Westernisierung."

[34] Cf. philosopher Richard Waswo's contemporaneous critical *The Founding Legend of Western Civilization*.

[35] Of course not all constituted as the West were consistently supportive of NATO, before or after 1989. Political scientists have, moreover, consistently advanced a view of NATO's only greater necessity after 1989, as Russian leaders sought to re-establish regional political hegemony.

[36] The television show, entitled *Civilization: Is the West History?*, aired first on the UK's Channel Four.; See too ibid., *Empire*.

[37] Ferguson, *Civilization*; compare e.g. textbooks such as Perry, et al., *Western Civilization Since 1400*.

[38] Compare work of the influential National Association of Scholars. Historians of the "non-Western" world have continued to claim that the American Historical Association and its prominent organ, the *American Historical Review*, overwhelmingly features "Western" history.

[39] Certainly critique of "the West" has existed at least since the rise of anti-colonial movements; the murderous nature of the two world wars further magnified that critique.

[40] Buruma and Margalit, *Occidentalism,* 12, 140, awkward responses to an epigraph by Osama bin Laden.

[41] In the last decades, obviously many historians, trained in "Western" history as well as others, have also attempted to grapple with these issues; see variously e.g. Goody, *The Theft of History*; Bagnó, *España y Rusia*; Mincer, ed., *Polska a świat zachodni*; Viola*, L'Europa moderna*; also historical economist De Soto, *The Mystery of Capital*; Pincine, "Jerry Bentley, World History"; compare public discussion such as "Kulturgeschichte von Orient und Okzident. Kreuzzug der Worte"; and „Das Abendland ist eine Fiktion."

[42] Geoff Eley has written absolutely compellingly regarding the flaws in comparison with which present-day historians have been infected by their nineteenth-century predecessors, regarding binaries, and the time-space gradient. Eley, *Forging*; also, together with David Blackbourn, *The Peculiarities of German History*.

[43] Compare e.g. McNeill, "The changing shape of world history."

[44] "Von der Leyen now looks east."

[45] Kelly, *Frontiers of History,* 129.