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Searching for “the West” in the History of Education

Since the beginning of Russia’s extended war against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, geopolitics has shifted once again. More than thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, we – especially those of us located in the northern hemisphere – are now witnessing a revival of “the West.” Even though – or rather because – its meaning is still ambiguous and seems to be more uncertain than ever before, “the West” is not by chance omnipresent in politics and media, and open to manifold interpretations and ascriptions of belonging and exclusion: Who is part of “the West”? When and where is or was it located? How did its meaning change over space and time? Who are the mediators of “the West” and what is their stake in culture and education? What does the concept mean epistemologically, historically, educationally – and which utopia, dreams, promises, or fears are triggered?

For most people today, “the West” is basically a community of shared (idealistic) values such as freedom, human rights, democracy, and solidarity. In political terms, some would probably consider the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO), with its far-reaching political-military commitments, as representative of “Western” ideals that guarantee security for its members and allies. Others point, with a rather more geographical emphasis, to the history of closely intertwined transatlantic relations between Europe and North America, where “the West” could most easily be located. For others, “the West” is best reflected in material terms regarding the consumer and everyday culture, especially brands and goods, including food, clothing, and products of the entertainment industries. The fact that all these ambiguous ideas of “the West” can exist side by side, yet still show some overlaps, creates a complex field of investigation. From the “outside” it may evoke rather colonial, suppressive, or hegemonic sentiments through the abstruse, self-destructive, subversive tendencies of “the West.” However, since the historic fall of the Iron Curtain and the European integration of the former Eastern bloc states, the simple demarcation and differentiation between “the East” and “the West” no longer works. The recent revival of “the West” in the context of the Ukraine War shows that “the West” is not only historically significant but lives on as a multifaceted and powerful concept that helps many people gain orientation in the world and overcome crises and situations of fragility. In this respect, “the West” still contributes to many people’s cognitive and mental maps and manages certain contingencies as it evokes painful memories, anxieties, and resistance against any revival.

In line with this everyday understanding in public discourse, “the West” – along with analogous ideas and interpretations of “Western” belonging and distinction – is often used without any critical questioning in history of education research, particularly regarding transnational and transatlantic issues. Here, “the West” appears as a kind of “container term” or “fuzzy” concept that can refer to manifold entanglements and cultural transfers in different historical contexts. Following poststructuralist and postcolonial perspectives, “the West” must be understood and analyzed as the result of a discourse that emerged without the critical reflection or participation of “the others,” “the East,” or “the rest” of the world, from which “the West” – usually more implicitly than explicitly – seeks to distinguish itself. Since ideas of “the West” reproduce problematic “Western” views, these asymmetries of power must be revealed, deconstructed, and made the subject of critical historical analyses that expose conflicts, injustices, and ideas of order.¹

In history of education research, there is an urgent need for a self-reflective reappraisal of “Western” concepts and views on education, operating in pedagogical practice, reflections, and research alike and consequently guides educative processes anew. This is not only relevant for scholars with a particular interest in inter-/transnational, non-European, or global histories of education, but for everyone who sees the need for a critical questioning of ideological bias that helps to decolonize the history and theory of education on this matter. These postcolonial perspectives on education have become more important in educational science in the last ten to fifteen years, for instance with regard to “global citizenship education.”² More recently, scholars of educational theory have again emphasized the “necessity and possibility, the prospects and pitfalls of decolonizing and provincializing ‘Western Education’ in a globalized world.”³ They have also shown the complexity, depth, and far-reaching implications for educational research – without,

1 See Riccardo Bavaj, “The West’: A Conceptual Exploration,” in *European History Online* (EGO), published by the Institute of European History (IEG), November 21, 2011. Accessed 18 January 2024, <http://ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/crossroads/political-spaces/riccardo-bavaj-the-west-a-conceptual-exploration>; Jasper M. Trautsch, “The Invention of the ‘West’,” *Bulletin of the GHI Washington* 53 (2013): 89–104; Jasper M. Trautsch, “Der Westen’: Theoretisch-methodische Überlegungen zu einer Begriffsgeschichte,” in *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 60–61 (2018–19): 409–440.

2 Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti and Lynn Mario T. M. de Souza, eds., *Postcolonial Perspectives on Global Citizenship Education* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

3 Sharon Stein et al., “Provincializing ‘Western Education’: Editorial,” in *On Education: Journal for Research and Debate* 3 (2020): 2.

however, taking a closer look at the history of education.⁴ In this regard, this book aims to stimulate a critical reflection and debate on “Western” ideas in the history of education, especially as “Western” historians of education have hardly paid attention to this issue yet.

As a powerful figure of asymmetry and a concept of conflict and confrontation, “the West” essentially reproduces ideas of one’s own superiority over the inferiority of “the others” or “the rest.” Following Reinhart Koselleck’s theory of historical-political semantics, many of those “counter-concepts” can be identified in historical narratives that are intended “to exclude mutual recognition.”⁵ The rise of “the West” as an idea of belonging and exclusion emerged at a time when European borders were being crossed and as such it is closely linked with the formation of the modern world. In other words, “the West”, as Jürgen Osterhammel argues, “presupposes the expansion of Europe, the founding of new European communities overseas.”⁶ Even if “the West” as a concept was not yet common at that time, the idea was emerging. Here, Michel Foucault would speak of “discursive formations”⁷ that structure knowledge of the world on a prelingual and preconceptual level in a limited communication space.⁸ This resulted from the perception of “the own” through the experiences of “the foreign” in the Age of European expansion, starting in the late eighteenth century, and formed the basis of a self-referential community of communication, in which the boundaries of belonging, the degree of its ambiguity, tolerance, and the potential for integration had to be confirmed or renegotiated from time to time. This process and practice of (re-)negotiation did not take place in a self-reflective dialogue with “the others” but was limited to the respective “Western” space and community of communication. That is why Osterhammel considers “the West” as a “concept of arrogance”⁹ after all.

4 See also Phillip D. Th. Knobloch and Johannes Drerup, eds., *Bildung in postkolonialen Konstellationen. Erziehungswissenschaftliche Analysen und pädagogische Perspektiven* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2022).

5 Reinhart Koselleck, “Zur historisch-politischen Semantik asymmetrischer Gegenbegriffe [1975],” in *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, ed. Reinhart Koselleck (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), 213.

6 Jürgen Osterhammel, “Was war und ist ‘der Westen’?,” in *Die Flughöhe der Adler. Historische Essays zur globalen Gegenwart*, ed. Jürgen Osterhammel (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2017), 104; see also Jürgen Osterhammel, *Europe, the “West” and the Civilizing Mission*, Annual Lecture, 2005 (London: German Historical Institute, 2006).

7 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 35–42.

8 See also Peter Meusbürger et al., eds., *Geographies of Knowledge and Power* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015).

9 Osterhammel, “Was war und ist der ‘Westen’?,” 104.

Other scholars would probably define “the West” with a less critical vigor as a geographical imagination, maintained by culturally and historically pre-structured discourses that influence people’s mental maps in past and present. This issue is still prevalent – to the present day and also in this volume – to which extent an inner-Western discourse remains exaggerating, hegemonic, illusory and hardly connectable to non-Western approaches?¹⁰

The most cited and, therefore, probably the best account of the formation of “the West” as a figure of asymmetry and power was elaborated by the Palestinian-American academic and literary critic Edward Said, professor of literature at Columbia University and one of the founders of postcolonial studies. In his book *Orientalism*, published in 1978, Said establishes the concept of “the Orient” as an invention of “the West.”¹¹ For Said, the term “Orientalism” describes how “the West” perceives and interprets “the Orient” as a foreign, unknown, strange and inferior culture somewhere in the “Middle” or “Far East.” Central to the construction of this “otherness” is an asymmetry of power. The image of “the Orient” is contrasted with “the West” as a positive counter-image, wherein “only the dominant group is in a position to impose the value of its particularity (its identity) and to devalue the particularity of others (their otherness) while imposing corresponding discriminatory measures”, as Jean-François Staszak has stressed.¹² “Occident” and “Orient” therefore represent an asymmetrical pair of concepts that Koselleck would also call counter-concepts. A rigid imagined border was drawn here, which, according to Said, still characterizes the image of “the Orient” and the relationship between “the West” and “the East” today.¹³

Another prominent example is the imagination and attribution of “the West” in North America as the “Old West” or “Wild West” since the long nineteenth century. Here, the founding states of the United States, located at the Atlantic coast with their economically and culturally important bridgeheads to Europe, represented the enlightened, cultured, and civilized world, whereas the middle and far west of the continent was considered unknown and unpredictable, a dark, backward, and uncivilized area beyond the frontier of European settlement. The painting *American Progress* (1876) by John Gast (1842–1896) clearly demonstrates

10 Felwine Sarr, *Afrotopia*, trans. M. Henninger (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2019). However, “Western” education, for example, still remains a central point of change – see, e.g., 38–41 and 99–108; but also 117.

11 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

12 Jean-François Staszak, “Other/Otherness,” in *Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, ed. Rob Kitchin and Nigel Thrift (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2009), 43.

13 For Edward Said’s “imaginative geography” see also Susanne Rau, *Räume. Konzepte, Wahrnehmungen, Nutzungen* (Frankfurt and New York: Campus, 2013), 87–89.

these contrasting images, showing the westward movement of the European settlers, guided by Columbia, bringing modern technology, education, and civilization to the western parts of North America. For the viewer today, this scene clearly points to the asymmetries of power and highly problematic aspects of (im-)migration and settlement history that can be roughly sketched with a few key words: the conquest and destruction of nature, big-game hunting, land grab, oppression and expulsion of indigenous peoples, religious conversion, slavery. The “civilizedness” that many settlers attributed to themselves, provided them with a sufficient basis of legitimacy and obligation – sometimes also incorporating religious obligation – to conquer the “wilderness” and rule the indigenous people. In this respect, the difference of “civilized” and “wild” also has pedagogical consequences, as the evolutionary pedagogue Alfred K. Tremml has emphasized.¹⁴ As is still reflected in literature and film today, the mutual learning between “wild” and “civilized” people is rarely addressed, while the imperialistic motif of cultural superiority often prevails, even in recent years, when viewed with a critical eye. The pedagogical moment here is the instruction, the religious conversion, and the civilization of those who were considered “wild” according to “Western” ideals. Sometimes, however, there are also depictions of “noble savages” who teach the settlers a responsible life in nature and model virtuous behavior.¹⁵ The difference between “civilized” and “wild” still exists here but also embraces open and trustful dealings as well as a certain critical stance on the part of the settlers vis-à-vis their own “civilizedness.” Regardless of how these inequalities and asymmetries of power are dealt with and which pedagogies can be addressed here, “the West” does not lose its significance as a concept that promises progress, prosperity, and personal freedom for “the one” – but not equally for “the others.” *Go West, young man, and grow up with the country* – a phrase often attributed to Horace Greeley (1811–1872), became a famous slogan of the westward movement that expresses this naively rationalist faith in progress and social renewal, and for a long time was closely related to the idea of Manifest Destiny.

A rather similar image of “the West” was sung about a hundred years later, when this slogan enjoyed an unexpected revival in pop culture by the Village People. The disco anthem “Go West” was created as a studio project by Jacques Morali

14 Alfred K. Tremml, “Die Pädagogisierung des ‘Wilden’ oder: Die Verbesserung des Menschen durch Erziehung,” in *Ethnopädagogik – Sozialisation und Erziehung in traditionellen Gesellschaften. Eine Einführung*, ed. Klaus E. Müller and Alfred K. Tremml (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1996), 221–239.

15 See also Frank Usbeck, “Kampf der Kulturen? ‘Edle Wilde’ in Deutschland und Amerika / Clash of Cultures? ‘Noble Savages’ in Germany and America,” in *Tecumseh, Keokuk, Black Hawk: Portrayals of Native Americans in Times of Treaties and Removal*, ed. Iris Edenheiser and Astrid Nielsen (Stuttgart and Dresden: Arnoldsche, 2013), 177–184.

(1947–1991) and Henri Belolo (1936–2019), referring to the homophile culture of New York City’s neighborhood Greenwich Village, also known simply as “The Village.” Again, “the West” is the promised land of milk and honey, where a better and more carefree life is supposed to be possible. For queers of every sex and gender, particularly in the early years of Gay Liberation in the 1970s, San Francisco was seen as the place to be, triggering a veritable migration to the west coast of the United States. The song calls on us to leave everything behind and to face an unknown future in “the West” with confidence and critical distance from narrow-minded social conventions and conservatism:

(Together) We will go our way
 (Together) We will leave someday
 (Together) Your hand in my hand
 (Together) We will make our plans
 (Together) We will fly so high
 (Together) Tell all our friends good-bye
 (Together) We will start life new
 (Together) This is what we’ll do

 (Go West) Life is peaceful there
 (Go West) In the open air
 (Go West) Where the skies are blue
 (Go West) This is what we’re gonna do
 (Go West, this is what we’re gonna do, Go West)

In 1993, the openly gay duo Pet Shop Boys, Neil Tennant and Chris Lowe, released a cover version of “Go West” on their album *Very*, in which they transferred the song from its originally all-American setting to the post-Soviet context.¹⁶ After the collapse of the Iron Curtain, the entire free world – “the West” – is the place of longing that promises maximum prosperity and progress in economic, political, and cultural terms. “Go West” is reimagined as the anthem of Americanization and Westernization, as the Pet Shop Boys’ music video, directed by Howard Greenhalgh, makes clear: from Lenin on Red Square in Moscow to the Statue of Liberty in New York. This setting is made completely ironic with the help of an all-male chorus repeatedly shouting “Go West!”, whereby the choir takes up the

16 P. J. Smith, “‘Go West’: The Pet Shop Boys’ Allegories and Anthems of Postimperiality,” *Genre* 34 (2001): 307–338.

“Soviet fetishization of perfectly muscular male physique,”¹⁷ as Gilad Padva points out:

Whereas the Soviet Union’s revolutionary art idealized and idolized these muscles as the working class’ victory, “Go West” decontextualizes the male physique by queering the solidarity and brotherhood of gay men of different colors marching together in an explicitly homoerotic display of male beauty and pride. In this respect, both Soviet images of semi-naked male workers [...] and the Pet Shop Boy’s exposure of eroticized male bodies *are* ideological: the male physique was celebrated by the Soviets as socialist objects, whereas the invested bodies in “Go West” symbolize gay emancipation.¹⁸

In summary, it can be said that anyone who wants to question the concept of “the West” must expect to enter stirring terrain. If the closely intertwined concepts of Westernization and Americanization are to be avoided and replaced by new, supposedly less problematic concepts – liberalization, Europeanization, globalization – further obstacles and potential pitfalls may arise.¹⁹ Since concepts tend to reduce complexity and language always reflects power, identity, and worldviews, unbiased interpretations are probably impossible. This is, of course, also the case with historical perspectives and historiographies as immanent educative endeavors providing interpretations of who and how “the West” embraces in “the world.” For this very reason it is crucial, however, that “the West” must be the subject of critical analyses from history of education perspectives that uncover and explain its hidden injustices and ideas of order.

The bulk of the articles assembled here were initially drafted as papers delivered in the winter semester of 2022/23 at the University of Münster, Germany. The original talks – which have now been revised for publication – were designed as contributions to the lecture series “‘Go West!’ Conceptual Explorations of ‘the

17 Gilad Padva, “The Counterculture Industry. Queering the Totalitarian Male Physique in the Pet Shop Boys’ ‘Go West’ and Lady Gaga’s ‘Alejandro,’” in *Handbuch Kritische Theorie*, ed. Uwe Bittlingmayer, Alex Demirovic, and Tatjana Freytag (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2019), 1291.

18 Padva, 1292.

19 For these concepts see the review article by Holger Nehring, “‘Westernization’: A New Paradigm for Interpreting West European History in a Cold War Context,” *Cold War History* 4 (2004): 175–191; Anselm Doering-Manteuffel, “Westernisierung. Politisch-ideeller und gesellschaftlicher Wandel in der Bundesrepublik bis zum Ende der 60er Jahre,” in *Dynamische Zeiten. Die sechziger Jahre in beiden deutschen Gesellschaften*, ed. Axel Schildt, Detlef Siegfried and Karl Christian Lammers (Hamburg: Christians, 2000), 357–391; Eckart Conze, “Wege in die Atlantische Gemeinschaft. Amerikanisierung und Westernisierung in Westeuropa nach 1945,” in *Nationale Identität und transnationale Einflüsse. Amerikanisierung, Europäisierung und Globalisierung in Frankreich nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg*, ed. Reiner Marcowitz (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 2007), 72–86.

West’ in the History of Education,” organized by the editors of this book – Andreas Oberdorf, lecturer for theory and history of education and deputy head of the Center for German-American Educational History at the University of Münster, Germany; and Bernhard Hemetsberger, postdoctoral researcher for the history and theory of education and schooling at the University of Klagenfurt, Austria, and adjunct professor for history of education at the University of Münster in the winter term 2023/24.

Conceptual Attempts on/from “the West”

Riccardo *Bavaj* looks at conceptual explorations of the “the West” that are primarily informed by the history of concepts, taking as his example the historical-political thoughts of Heinrich August Winkler, one of the most influential supporters of the concept of “the West” in contemporary Germany. Bavaj argues that Winkler’s thoughts on “the West” can be linked to the German *rémigré* Richard Löwenthal, who tied social change with perceptions of cultural crises.

Bernhard *Hemetsberger* questions the linkage of “the West,” public discourse during crises, and the notion that “Western” schooling as the provider of rational foundations for “all”. If “the West” is characterized by rationality, as Max Weber pointed out, schools should supply this rationality; perceptions of crises, meanwhile, are described as situations of fragmented and missing explanatory narratives that trouble this nexus. Hence, the question arises: if school crisis narratives renew through infinite regress, what is understood as “the West”?

Perspectives on “the West”

Frank *Jacob* sheds light on the early period of Japanese opening towards “the West,” starting in 1853. Numerous Japanese travelled the world to “modernize” their country and brought back “Western” educational ideas, among other perceptions. However, these were largely dependent on the “transmitting” person; the Japanese reception of prominent American educational ideas was amalgamated to Japanese needs under the assumption that this would contribute to “modernization.”

From postcolonial perspectives, Timm Gerd *Hellmanzik* analyzes the discursive portrayal of “Europe” in relation to the Ottoman Empire in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century school textbooks that he considers to be a conceptual precursor of what later was called “the West.” The chapter also shows how history textbooks

initially excluded the Ottoman Empire from what was considered “Europe,” but later partially included it within this conceptual framework.

Silke Mende explores “the West” in French discourses, particularly in the “francophonie républicaine.” She points out that the concept of “the West” is relatively absent here, while concepts as “modernity” and “civilization,” due to the French Enlightenment tradition, were essentially target concepts. The French language also plays a prominent role in this context as the most important agent of France’s “educational task” (*tâche éducatrice*), according to M. Edmond Besnard (1918).

The implementation of programmed instruction in the Soviet Union is portrayed by Viktoria Boretska as a history of obscurity. To optimize and progress educational thought during the Cold War, the behaviorist and American foundations of this teaching method were systematically blurred in the Soviet Union. Concurrently its “Western” foundational theories were reinterpreted as self-defense against an “imperialistic West” and the portrayal of a particular image of the United States.

Sergei I. Zhuk unravels various stages of “indigenization” of American influences into Soviet and Russian politics and culture from the Russian imperial period until today. With regard to the concepts of “Americanization” and “Westernization,” Zhuk argues that America and, by extension, “the West” became a “seductive adversary” for the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Despite political and ideological antagonisms, the American way of life was fascinating and highly attractive, especially for young “KGB people.” This chapter bases *en gros* on his recently published monograph *The KGB, Russian Academic Imperialism, Ukraine, and Western Academia, 1946–2024* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2024).

Documentary (re-)presentations are rare sources in History of Education research – a gap May Jehle is filling by analyzing two German documentary films about the expectations of East Germans about “the West” before 1989 and then after, when many East Germans experienced for themselves what “the West” could mean for and to them. On the one hand, biographical educative processes are shown and made visible in these films; on the other, historical lessons may be drawn as to how these (re-)presentations enable reenactment, understanding, and at best, learnings for viewers and analysts.

Along the history of the Swiss-located Leysin American School (LAS), founded in the early 1960s, Karen Lillie exemplifies how global elites educate their offspring exclusively and “Western” to gain and preserve advantages in globalized times. During a shaken history, several pedagogical transitions were necessary to keep their pupils on their way “westwards.”

Epistemological Endeavors on “the West”

Roberto Kulpa enters “the West” by rethinking it from the perspective of Central-Eastern Europe and attempting to steer it towards the non-occidental and decolonial epistemics in/of Queer Studies. Employing Walter Mignolo’s statement “I am where I think,” the readers are invited to join the author on a biographical, intellectual, and reflective journey in geopolitics and geo-temporalities.

Philipp Stelzel closes this book with reflections on the relation of West German historians and their American colleagues in the post-war period, where the national background of the participants in the transatlantic conversations were crucial. While this “Western” intellectual exchange has a different character today, the period under investigation unravels how “historical,” “political,” or “educational” backgrounds had influenced the exchange.

The editors would like to acknowledge the audience of the lecture series in the winter term of 2022/23 as well as all the presenters and the contributors to this anthology, who gave us the impression of a worthwhile publication and opened a continuing discussion on conceptual explorations of “the West” in the History of Education. This was enabled by financial support by the University of Klagenfurt, the resources of its Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Education as well as the Department of Education. Moreover, the University of Münster’s Institute for Educational Studies bore the costs of the lecture series and the publication, which we very much appreciate. Special thanks are addressed to Rabea Rittgerodt, De Gruyter, for her support and Alex Skinner as translator of Silke Mende’s chapter.

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