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Between Evolutionary and Container Concept: Western Self-Assertions, German Westernizers, and the Spatialization of Political Thought

For several years now, commentators have been pondering “the end of Western hegemonies.”¹ It is a hallmark of the discourse on “the West,” however, that the concept proves useful even, and perhaps especially, when commentators lament its decline. As Oswald Spengler’s 1918 bestseller *The Decline of the West* indicates, the history of “the West” has always also been the story of a never-ending end.²

Books abound that see a “post-Western world” on the horizon, the “end of American world order,” and a global future that is Asian rather than “Western.”³ There has, moreover, been abundant commentary on the rise of an “America First” mantra that questions the role of NATO, and that pits America against the notion of a “Western value community.” Commentators describe a rise of populism and US unilateralism, and see the post-1945 settlement of the transatlantic order severely undermined.⁴ When turning to Russia, one is bound to encounter Alexander Dugin’s geopolitical vision of Neo-Eurasianism, squarely directed against Anglo-America’s “thalassocratic” (maritime) sphere and its “liquid” civilization. “The collective

1 “The End of Western Hegemonies?” The 2nd International Conference by The West Network, June 5–7, 2019, University of Jyväskylä. Accessed November 19, 2024. <https://thewestnetwork.wordpress.com/2019-conference/>; see also Marie-Josée Lavallée, ed., *The End of Western Hegemonies* (Wilmington, 2022).

2 It should be noted, however, that the conceptual nuances of the German work (*Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, 1918–1922) are lost in the English translation: Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 2 vols. (New York, 1926–1928). As the title indicates, it employs the more open, multifaceted expression “the West,” rather than “Occident,” for the term *Abendland*.

3 Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 2018; first published 2014); Parag Khanna, *The Future is Asian: Global Order in the Twenty-First Century* (London, 2019); Charles A. Kupchan, *No One’s World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn* (Oxford, 2012); Oliver Stuenkel, *Post-Western World: How Emerging Powers Are Remaking Global Order* (Cambridge, 2016); Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World and the Rise of the Rest*, rev. ed. (London, 2011; first published 2008).

4 The literature on this is vast. See, *pars pro toto*, Marko Lehti, Henna-Riikka Pennanen, and Jukka Jouhki, eds., *Contestations of Liberal Order: The West in Crisis?* (Cham, 2020); see also Jean-François Drolet and Michael C. Williams, “America First: Paleoconservatism and the Ideological Struggle for the American Right,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 25 (2020), 28–50.

West,” meanwhile, has been identified as Russia’s main enemy by Vladimir Putin’s increasingly dictatorial regime.⁵ At the same time, it is worth recalling the rather close ties between the Russian government and the Donald Trump campaign in the context of the 2016 US election. In his gloomy analysis *The Road to Unfreedom*, historian of East-Central Europe Timothy Snyder quotes a Russian politician hoping that “Trump can lead the Western locomotive right off the rails” – a telling statement that also reveals the intimate connection between the idea of the West, notions of progress, and philosophies of history. Snyder, of course, sees Putinesque demons rather than a Hegelian world spirit wandering from east to west.⁶

Under the subsequent US administration, to be sure, Putin’s rallying cry against “the collective West” was answered in no uncertain terms by Joe Biden’s memorable outburst: “For God’s sake, this man cannot remain in power.” As he made clear in his Warsaw speech of March 26, 2022, Biden viewed the Russo-Ukrainian war as a “battle between democracy and autocracy. Between liberty and repression. Between a rules-based order and one governed by brute force.” Putin was depicted as “taking Russia back to the 19th century” (another characteristic historical-philosophical trope), and “rather than driving NATO apart,” Biden declared, “the West is now stronger and more united than it has ever been.”⁷ In fact, there is little doubt that NATO has found itself revived by the war in Ukraine, and that it has been given a new lease of life. While the implications for the alliance of Trump’s return to the White House are still unclear at the time of writing, its eastern flank has been reinforced by new members Finland and

5 Irina Kotkina, “Geopolitical Imagination and Popular Geopolitics between the Eurasian Union and *Russkii Mir*,” in Mark Bassin and Gonzalo Pozo, eds., *The Politics of Eurasianism: Identity, Popular Culture and Russia’s Foreign Policy* (London, 2017), 59–78, here especially 66; Marlene Laruelle, “Alexander Dugin and Eurasianism,” in Mark Sedgwick, ed., *Key Thinkers of the Radical Right: Behind the New Threat to Liberal Democracy* (Oxford, 2019), 155–169, here 160; on the Russian concept “the collective West” see the media analysis by Ekaterina Chimiris, “The Collective West Concept and Selected Western Actors (Germany, Norway, Estonia, NATO) in the Russian Media: Post-Crimea Dynamics,” *Global Journal of Human-Social Science: (F) Political Science* 22/1 (2022).

6 Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (London, 2018), 11, 218. Of course, the report by Robert Mueller, appointed as special counsel for the US Justice Department, did not conclusively establish “that the Campaign coordinated or conspired with the Russian government in its election-interference activities.” *Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election* (Washington D.C., 2019), 173. Accessed November 19, 2024. <https://www.justice.gov/storage/report.pdf>.

7 “Remarks by President Biden on the United Efforts of the Free World to Support the People of Ukraine,” Warsaw, March 26, 2022. Accessed November 19, 2024. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/03/26/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-united-efforts-of-the-free-world-to-support-the-people-of-ukraine/>.

Sweden, the latter's accession (initially opposed by Turkey) ending a 200-year period of neutrality. Judging by the political discourse and media commentary since the start of Putin's invasion of Ukraine, "the West" seems very much alive. It figures as a distinct geopolitical entity that, however amorphous its borders, thinks and acts. It is said to impose sanctions and deliver arms. Commentators may debate the degree to which it stands strong and united – but that "it" not only exists but also matters as a key actor in current world affairs is rarely questioned.⁸

The editors of this volume, too, point to the renewed urgency of the idea of the West in current areas of debate. They also, however, stress the need to create a distance from current tropes to facilitate critical reflection. As we are surrounded by "West"-centered rhetoric, and find ourselves subjected to it almost on a daily basis, this is no easy task. Given the all too familiar, casual, and ubiquitous references to "the West," an additional effort of defamiliarization is required to gain sufficient distance from patterns of interpretation that dominate public discourse. As the title of this chapter suggests, the strategy of defamiliarization adopted here is primarily informed by the history of concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*). Typically, this examines the shifting meanings of concepts over time, both as a mirror and driver of social change.⁹

From the perspective of the history of concepts, the renewed prominence of "the West" as a socio-political concept is closely intertwined with the self-assertion of anti-Western alterities, that is the prominence and distinctiveness of "the Other." This "Other" may come in various shapes and forms. In the twenty-first century, anti-Western alterities have emerged in the form of militant Islamism, Russian imperialism, and China as an emerging dictatorial superpower. In a post-Cold War environment where the former antonym, Soviet Communism, is gone, these alterities have proven robust enough to keep "the West" alive. With the war in Ukraine, this is felt particularly strongly.

Indeed, the greatest threat to "the West" as a socio-political concept is the lack of any threat. It does tend to be in fashion when confronted with "internal" or "ex-

8 For a rare exception in political commentary, see Christoph Heusgen, *Führung und Verantwortung: Angela Merkels Außenpolitik und Deutschlands künftige Rolle in der Welt* (Munich, 2023), 216–217; see also the interview with Christoph Heusgen in *Der Spiegel*, 38/2021, September 17, 2021: "I have actually struck the concept of 'the West' from my vocabulary."

9 The classic reference is Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main, 1979); as well as Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck, eds., *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, 8 vols. (Stuttgart, 1972–2004). Parts of this chapter are based on research conducted with Martina Steber. See Riccardo Bavaj and Martina Steber, eds., *Germany and "the West": The History of a Modern Concept* (New York and Oxford, 2015); Riccardo Bavaj and Martina Steber, eds., *Zivilisatorische Verortungen: Der "Westen" an der Jahrhundertwende (1880–1930)* (Berlin and Boston, 2018).

ternal” threats that are framed or at least perceived as anti-“Western.” The concept is most commonly evoked in situations of international conflicts, crises, and wars: especially when arguments can be made about the inner political cohesion of foreign policy alliances – along the lines of, for instance, “liberal democracies” fighting autocratic regimes. This has been the case since the early nineteenth century when the directional concept “the west” (with a small letter) transformed into a socio-political concept (with a capital letter), and when a geographical direction became temporalized space: moving westward came to mean moving forward – historically, politically, socially. There has been a particularly long tradition of a “West” versus Russia discourse: from Petr Chaadaev’s Russian oppositional critique that Nicholas I’s crushing of the Decembrists’ uprising of 1825 was “setting us back half a century” (Biden’s Warsaw speech offers an interesting parallel here), to the Polish November Uprising of 1830–1831 and the Crimean War of 1853–1856, to today’s war in Ukraine.¹⁰ There clearly have been phases of more or less active talk about “the West,” which mark its changing fortunes, and the ups and downs of a “career,” in *Begriffsgeschichte* terms. On the whole, however, “the West” has continued to be a prominent point of reference and effective framing device in contemporary political debate and the wider public sphere.

Things have been slightly different in the *academic* sphere. For a number of years, scholars have questioned the intellectual validity of “the West” – as an analytical concept that refers to a group of countries, or a civilization, and that conveys social norms, political beliefs, civilizational identities, and a way of life. “The West” as an “intelligible unit of historical study” (to use Arnold Toynbee’s famous expression) has been losing intellectual purchase.¹¹ There has been a growing uncertainty about its political contours, cultural identity, and epistemological status: Is there actually such a thing as “the West”, or is it nothing but a mirage? The reasons for this are manifold, but among them the end of the Cold War looms large. This is because it gave rise to a renewed sense of geo-historical contingency. It resensitized scholars to the historical conditionality of geopolitical constellations. Of course, interrogating and thinking beyond Cold War bipolarity had been possible before the wall came down in 1989. Nonetheless, what human geographer Derek Gregory has called the “disclosure of [...] taken-for-granted geographical imagina-

10 Petr Iakovlevich Chaadaev, “First [Philosophical] Letter” (1 December 1829), in *Russian Intellectual History: An Anthology*, with an Introduction by Isaiah Berlin, ed. Marc Raeff (New York, 1966), 167; for a more sustained analysis see Riccardo Bavaj, “The West’: A Conceptual Exploration,” *Europäische Geschichte Online*, November 21, 2011. Accessed November 19, 2024. <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/bavajr-2011-en>.

11 Arnold J. Toynbee, “The Unit of Historical Study” (1934), in Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, ed. David C. Somervell (Oxford, 1946), 1–11.

ries” certainly became easier without the discursive straitjackets of the Cold War.¹² To be sure, one of Gregory’s intellectual mentors, the literary critic Edward Said, had already engaged with “imaginative geographies” as early as the 1970s, in his studies on “Orientalism.”¹³ Both postcolonialism and postmodernism, alongside other strands of the “cultural turn,” had begun to undermine the appeal of formerly unquestioned assumptions about “the West” before the Iron Curtain was torn apart. And yet, it was not until the 1990s that a critical mass of scholars, hailing from various disciplines, turned their eyes to spatial imaginaries such as “the West,” “Eastern Europe,” and “the Third World.”¹⁴ The West became a “West” in quotation marks. Rather than a category of analysis, it became an object of enquiry – to be interrogated and historicized.

In this vein, the chapter proceeds as follows: It *first* highlights some of the key fault lines and issues at stake in more recent debates on “the West,” starting with a few examples of Western self-assertion and attempts to stabilize “Western identity,” which will then be contrasted with self-positionings “beyond the West” and attempts to dismantle the “Western paradigm.” *Second*, and more central to the chapter, it will outline an analytical framework that may help explore discourses on the West more systematically. For purposes of illustration, it will be drawing, by way of example, on the work of the most prominent intellectual advocate of “the West” in Germany, Heinrich August Winkler (b. 1938). *Third*, and finally, the chapter will move further back in time and investigate – again from the perspective of the history of concepts – the “Westernization” of the political thought of German *rémigré* intellectual Richard Löwenthal (1908–1991), who was to prove influential in the formation of Winkler’s historical and political thought.

12 Derek Gregory, “Geographical Imaginary,” in *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, ed. Derek Gregory et al., 5th ed. (Malden, 2009).

13 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, rev. ed. (London, 2003; first published 1978); Edward W. Said, “Orientalism,” *The Georgia Review* 31 (Spring 1977), 162–206 (part 1: “Imaginative Geography and Its Representations”).

14 See in particular Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, 1995); Christopher GoGwilt, *The Invention of the West: Joseph Conrad and the Double-Mapping of Europe and Empire* (Stanford, 1995); Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, 1994); see also Derek Gregory, “Imaginative Geographies,” *Progress in Human Geography* 19 (1995), 447–485.

Western Self-Assertions, and Self-Positionings “beyond the West”

There is an extensive literature that is committed to stabilizing “Western identity.” A few book titles may suffice to illustrate this, which all point in a similar direction – for instance *The Uniqueness of Western Civilization*, *Rebooting the West*, *How the West Won*, or *The Fate of the West: The Battle to Save the World’s Most Successful Political Idea*. And we also have Joseph Henrich’s recent account of “how the West became psychologically peculiar and particularly prosperous,” which at the very least may win the prize for a catchy acronym: “WEIRD” – meaning here “Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic.” All these books seek to boost “Western” confidence and self-assurance at a time when, for one reason or another, “the West” is seen under threat.¹⁵

One of the most vocal supporters of the project to “reboot” the West is the British-American historian, political adviser, and media star Niall Ferguson. Ferguson laments what he calls the “pusillanimity” of “Westerners.” They are, he says, beset by nagging self-doubts and a value-relativism instilled by a postmodern, postcolonial questioning of “Western paradigms,” and are, therefore, unfit for the political and economic challenges of the day. Ferguson is a master of knowledge transfer, keen to reach a younger audience, and in his 2011 book *Civilization* he outlines “six killer apps of Western power.” These killer apps, he claims, were instrumental in “the West’s” rise to world dominance. At a time when “Resterners” have downloaded most of “the West’s” killer apps, heralding the end of the Western era, Ferguson’s message to “Westerners” places great emphasis on reactivating killer app number six, the Weberian work ethic, which provides the “moral framework” for “Western civilization.” In a nutshell, “Westerners” should pray more and work harder.¹⁶

15 Joseph Henrich, *The WEIRD People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous* (London, 2020); Ricardo Duchesne, *The Uniqueness of Western Civilization* (Leiden, 2011); Christopher Coker, *Rebooting the West: The US, Europe and the Future of the Western Alliance* (Abingdon, 2009); Rodney Stark, *How the West Won: The Neglected Story of the Triumph of Modernity* (Wilmington, 2014); Bill Emmott, *The Fate of the West: The Battle to Save the World’s Most Successful Political Idea* (London, 2017).

16 Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The Six Killer Apps of Western Power*, rev. ed. (London, 2012; first published as *The West and the Rest*, 2011), 13, 256–294; see also the “documentary” *The Fight of Our Lives: Defeating the Ideological War Against the West* (2019), which features Niall Ferguson and others.

At the same time, cosmopolitan self-positionings “beyond the West” cast doubt on “the West’s” status as a historical-cultural entity. The West, it is posited, has lost much of its intellectual plausibility. In his 2016 Reith Lectures, philosopher and cultural theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah debunked the whole idea of “the West,” and stated: “There is no such thing as western civilization.” Particularly, Appiah argues against any claims of exclusive ownership over so-called “Western values” – both because of the global exchange and cross-fertilization of ideas and because of the exclusionary effects of “Western” identity rhetoric. “The real problem,” he points out, “isn’t that it’s difficult to decide who owns culture; it’s that the very idea of ownership is the wrong model.” Appiah is a prominent example of a broad strand of part-cosmopolitan, part-postcolonial literature, which radically questions the epistemological status of the West.¹⁷

A less cosmopolitan and more forcefully postcolonial critique of “the West” has been offered by Indian writer and intellectual Pankaj Mishra – especially in his books *Age of Anger* (2017) and *From the Ruins of Empire* (2012). *From the Ruins of Empire* reminds readers of the critique of European colonialism, which was formulated by Asian intellectuals around the turn of the century. Even before publishing these two books, he had already caused a stir by attacking Niall Ferguson’s “killer app” book in a long article in the *London Review of Books* – something that Ferguson answered with threats of a libel suit.¹⁸ Mishra’s “West” is, above all, a colonial actor and a space of social inequality: “Democracy,” he writes, “Anglo-America’s main ideological export and the mainstay of its moral prestige, has never been what it was cracked up to be.” As can be gleaned from this quotation, Mishra’s “West” primarily refers to Britain and the United States, which he both also subjected to a trenchant critique during the first wave of the COVID crisis. Germany, by contrast, in a postcolonial version of a *positive* German *Sonderweg*, was praised as a haven of social security: “Even the bleakest account of the German-invented social state seems a more useful guide to the world to come than moist-eyed histories of Anglo-America’s engines of universal progress.” Mishra clearly articulates a democratic stance “beyond the West,” but the polemical thrust of his com-

17 “Kwame Anthony Appiah on ‘Western civilization’”: The Reith Lectures (2016). Accessed November 19, 2024. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b081lkj>. The lectures have been published under the fitting title *The Lies That Bind*, and can be read as an answer to Niall Ferguson’s Reith Lectures from 2012, which had warned against a “degeneration” of “Western societies.” Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity* (London, 2018), ch. 6: “Culture” (187–219; quotations at 208, 218).

18 See Pankaj Mishra, “Watch this Man,” *London Review of Books*, November 3, 2011; Niall Ferguson, “Letter,” and Pankaj Mishra, “Reply,” *London Review of Books*, November 17, 2011; Niall Ferguson, “Letter,” and Pankaj Mishra, “Reply,” *London Review of Books*, December 1, 2011.

mentary is framed in such a way that is squarely directed *against* “the West,” thus falling into the very rhetorical trap that Appiah identifies.¹⁹

When considering current debates on “the West” more generally, one can discern two types of conflict: *first* between advocates and opponents of a “liberal-democratic West,” where both sides accept “the West” as a socio-political entity but with one side challenging and the other defending it (e.g. Putin vs. Biden, 2022–2024), and *second* between supporters and critics of “the West” on the one hand, and, on the other, cosmopolitan or postcolonial self-positionings “beyond the West” (such as Appiah’s). If seeking to analyze these conflicts and make the process of “Western” identity-shaping as well as contesting “Western” identity an object of enquiry, it is worth dwelling on two aspects, which are crucial for an analysis of “the West” from the perspective of the history of concepts. This leads to the second part of the chapter.

An Analytical Framework and Heinrich August Winkler’s *History of the West*

This section will first explore two semantic dimensions of the concept of the West, and will then examine the function, appeal, and usefulness of this concept. In the discourse on “the West,” there is often a tension at play between an open-ended evolutionary concept and a spatially confined container concept. The evolutionary concept implies a universal trajectory and a standard of civilizational progress – in terms of social norms, technical advance, economic development, and political values – that, in principle, is attainable by any part of the world. The underlying assumption is that universal progress originates in the West, with a special emphasis on the “Atlantic Revolutions” of the late eighteenth century, and a cluster of norms and ideas centered on human rights, the rule of law, separation of powers, and

¹⁹ Pankaj Mishra, “Flailing States,” *London Review of Books*, November 16, 2020; Pankaj Mishra, “The Liberal Establishment Is ‘a Stranger to Self-Examination’,” *The Nation*, November 23, 2020; Pankaj Mishra, “Grand Illusions,” *The New York Review of Books*, November 19, 2020; see also Pankaj Mishra, *Bland Fanatics: Liberals, Race and Empire* (London and New York, 2020), esp. 1–15; Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (London, 2017); Pankaj Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire: The Intellectuals Who Remade Asia* (New York, 2012); as well as Pankaj Mishra, “Das Reich der Mitte: Warum Deutschland nicht länger auf dem Weg nach Westen schlafwandeln sollte,” *Der Spiegel*, 4/2023, January 21, 2023: “Germany [...] should no longer be sleepwalking on the road to the West.”

parliamentary democracy, but that at some point in the future “the West” may be (almost) everywhere.²⁰

This evolutionary concept of “the West” conveys meanings of temporalized space, or what some human geographers call “TimeSpace.”²¹ This is most obvious in terms such as “Westernization,” where the temporal component is built into the concept, but it is also evident from statements such as Hegel’s (alluded to at the start of this chapter) that “world history” is travelling “from east to west”: “for Europe is the absolute end of history, just as Asia is the beginning.”²² The key message of this temporalization of space is, as mentioned above, that “moving westward” means “moving forward.” The container concept is, instead, largely defined along cultural, religious, linguistic, and also ethnic lines. It is therefore constituted by features that, even in principle, are much less universalizable. This concept implies a plurality of civilizations with different trajectories and only a limited degree of convergence (if any).²³

To illustrate the tension between the evolutionary and the container concept of the West, I will now turn to what is the main work in German scholarship on the subject, namely Heinrich August Winkler’s four-volume *The History of the West*. Winkler, emeritus professor at the Humboldt University in Berlin, has long left the proverbial “ivory tower,” and his target area has been the wider intellectual field where citizens search for political guidance and moral leadership. Political education has been the primary impetus of Winkler’s work, especially since Germany’s reunification. It is no wonder that Winkler, as an intellectual, frequently speaks out on matters of general concern such as European integration, Russia’s annexation of Crimea, and the war in Ukraine. The political implications of Winkler’s work are obvious, and he himself makes no bones about the normative angle of his scholarship.

20 See especially Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London, 1992); R.R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution. A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800* (Princeton, 1959); see also Paul Nolte, “Westen ist überall: Der Anspruch auf Menschenrechte, Freiheit und Demokratie gilt universell,” *Die Politische Meinung* 58 (2013), no. 523, 34–39.

21 Jon May and Nigel Thrift, eds., *TimeSpace: Geographies of Temporality* (London and New York, 2001).

22 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History. Introduction: Reason in History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, 1975), 197. These lectures were originally given between 1822 and 1830.

23 See above all Samuel P. Huntington, “The West: Unique, Not Universal,” *Foreign Affairs* 75 (1996), no. 6, 28–46; Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York, 1996); see also Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, “How to Think about Civilizations,” in *Civilizations in World Politics: Plural and Pluralist Perspectives*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein (London and New York, 2010), 176–200.

Winkler's *History of the West* was published between 2009 and 2015 and runs to more than 4,500 pages. More recently, it has been complemented by a follow-up volume on a crisis-ridden present and an up-to-date summary, bringing the total to nearly 6,000 pages.²⁴ Before that, he had published the two-volume bestseller *Germany's Long Road West*, kept to just under 1,500 pages, which became a defining work for a unified Germany ten years after its reunification. *Germany's Long Road West* quickly gained the status of a master narrative for the new Berlin Republic.²⁵

The pivot of Winkler's story is what he calls the "normative project of the West." This "West" is defined as an evolutionary concept centering on the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789). The norms of this project are mainly derived from ideas advanced by these two "Atlantic Revolutions," as outlined above. Winkler's *History of the West* is both the story of the emergence of this cluster of "Western values" and the story of their appropriation, rejection or violation. While critics of *Germany's Long Road West* had been quick to point out that Winkler had reviewed German history against the ahistorical yardstick of an idealized West, he now followed the French, British and Americans, too, on their circuitous paths to "the West" – through the muddy waters of imperialism, racism and slavery. The "Westernization of the West," he declares, was a process marked by "non-simultaneity" (*Ungleichzeitigkeit*) – some became Westernized faster than others – and there were many contradictions between "project" and "practice" on the way.²⁶ (The "Western project" itself, however, remains unblemished. Winkler's "West" leaves little room for the dialectics of the Enlightenment.)

As can be inferred from Winkler's notion of a "Westernization of the West," the term "the West" carries various meanings. It refers not only to a "normative project," evolutionary and ever-evolving, but also to a geographical region preceding this project. There was a West before "the West." This West is presented as a religiously defined container space. Winkler's historical West is defined as that part of Europe where Latin Christianity held sway, and it ends where the influence of the Orthodox Church begins. In Winkler's liberal understanding of the historical West, it is the separation between religious and secular powers that was critical to

24 Heinrich August Winkler, *Geschichte des Westens*, 4 vols. (Munich, 2009–2015); Heinrich August Winkler, *Zerbricht der Westen? Über die gegenwärtige Krise in Europa und Amerika* (Munich, 2017); Heinrich August Winkler, *Werte und Mächte: Eine Geschichte der westlichen Welt* (Munich, 2019). The following draws, in part, on my review in *sehepunkte* 22, no. 2 (2022). Accessed November 19, 2024. <http://www.sehepunkte.de/2022/02/26764.html>.

25 Heinrich August Winkler, *Germany: The Long Road West*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 2006–2007; originally published in German as *Der lange Weg nach Westen* in 2000).

26 Winkler, *Geschichte des Westens* 1, 21.

Western evolution – an essential precondition for the development of individual freedom. The West, as a historical-geographical entity, paved the way for “the West” – the normative project.

The crucial point to make here is that the conflation of evolutionary and container concept leads to limitations of the universalizability of “Western ideas.” Sometimes, the drawing of civilizational boundaries remains implicit, and works more like an unspoken assumption; sometimes, it is made explicit, not least in Winkler’s political commentary. It is those dynamics of exclusion, which are built into Western container-space rhetoric, that are criticized from postcolonial and cosmopolitan perspectives – perspectives “beyond the West.” Critics take exception to the exclusive link that is made between space and idea – for instance, when people are referring to “Western democracy.” Worth bearing in mind is that both conceptual variants, evolutionary and container, are not mutually exclusive, but often coexist in varying degrees of conflation, which create tensions between the West’s universality and Western particularities.

This leads to the second aspect of this section: the function, appeal, and usefulness of the concept. “The West” is not only a cipher for political values, cultural norms, and religious traditions. It is also an effective rhetorical tool to mobilize people for a cause, to fight for a political agenda, and to forge national, as well as transnational, identities. An important part of this dynamic is the spatiality of the concept. One needs to take seriously that “the West” is a spatial concept. This may be an obvious point to make, but it is one often left underexplored. Spatial concepts – once they metamorphose into socio-political ones (and as mentioned above, for “the West” this happened in the early nineteenth century) – are distinct from non-spatial ones in their specific ability to reduce complexity, create orientation, and shape identities. By “specific ability” I mean the homogenization of space. Spatial concepts create orientation and shape identities through spatial homogenization. They evoke an “imagined community” (in Benedict Anderson’s phrase), and create a sense of cultural, historical, and ideological cohesion, which is attached to a certain geographical area. Sometimes, the boundaries of this area are defined very clearly; often they are amorphous, and they also tend to shift over time.²⁷

Once again, Winkler’s *History of the West* provides a good example. The creation of this multi-volume monument is a performative act to anchor Germany firmly in the imagined community of the West – that is, in a community defined

²⁷ See Konrad Lawson, Riccardo Bavaj, and Bernhard Struck, *A Guide to Spatial History: Areas, Aspects, and Avenues of Research* (Olsokhagen, 2021). Accessed November 19, 2024. <https://spatialhistory.net/guide/>, chapter 6: “Spatial Imaginaries.”

by liberal-democratic, pluralist values. This is the political rationale for producing such a work in the first place. Germans should care about the West because they belong to it. That is the central message no German is supposed to miss when browsing in the bookshop. After centuries of fateful deviation from the Western norm, climaxing in Nazism and the Holocaust, Germans have finally arrived in the Western haven – and Winkler has written nearly six thousand pages to make sure no one ever forgets. The English-language book market has, of course, been liberally supplied with histories of the West for more than a century – in the United States since the introduction of the “Western Civ.” curriculum in the aftermath of the First World War – but Winkler’s *History of the West* has been the first of its kind written for a German audience. Like his bestseller *Germany’s Long Road West*, this work explains to German citizens who they are, where they come from, and, most importantly, where their commitments lie.²⁸

Another key purpose of Winkler’s *History of the West* is to remind Germans of the country that has acted as a main driving force behind what he calls the “normative project of the West,” namely the United States. The cover image of the second volume of his *History of the West*, which culminates in the Allied victory over Germany in 1945, aptly visualizes this aspect of Winkler’s message: “Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima,” the historic photograph showing five US marines and a navy corpsman raising the American flag on a Japanese island in February 1945, has been one of America’s most popular icons – and works here as a symbol for Winkler’s message that “Western values” are grounded not only in Western European but also in American history.²⁹

“The West,” in other words, creates a space of imagination, in which milestones of US intellectual and constitutional history – such as the *Declaration of Independence* and the *Bill of Rights* – can be conceived as “one’s own,” that is, as part of the intellectual foundation of German citizens. The spatial concept of the West works as a bridge that not only connects one body politic with another, but that facilitates the formation of liberal-democratic, pluralist subjectivities. The key function is the internalization of political values through the self-positioning on a mental map that is oriented to the west: political identity formation through spatial homogenization.

While Winkler is the first to write a *History of the West* in Germany, he follows in a tradition of previous German Westernizers. His scholarship and intellec-

28 See also Heinrich August Winkler, *Wie wir wurden, was wir sind: Eine kurze Geschichte der Deutschen* (Munich, 2020).

29 See Jost Dülffer, “Über-Helden – Das Bild von Iwo Jima in der Repräsentation des Sieges: Eine Studie zur US-amerikanischen Erinnerungskultur seit 1945,” *Zeithistorische Forschungen* 3 (2006), no. 2, 247–272.

tual commitments reflect the legacy of a whole tradition of “Western” missionaries, so to speak, who all left their traces in his work. This leads to the third and final part of the chapter.

Richard Löwenthal and the Spatialization of Political Thought

When historians embark on the historicization of “the West,” they rarely address the question of when, how, and why certain historical actors adopt this concept. This question is, however, important if historians are to gauge its appeal and usefulness in public discourse. My case study focusses on Richard Löwenthal, who emigrated in the 1930s and returned to Germany after the war. Through the course of exile and return, he first transformed into an ardent supporter of “Western democracy” before embarking on his mission to “Westernize” the Federal Republic’s political culture. “Westernizing” refers here to the incorporation of West Germany into a “value community” called “the West.” This value-based incorporation was to go far beyond so-called *Westbindung*, the integration with NATO. It was to drag German society away from what was perceived as the murky currents of a “German special consciousness” characterized by authoritarian statism, anti-democratic nationalism, and the ideal of an apolitical government that would represent an allegedly homogenous, organic body politic called “the people” – in short, beliefs that were deemed to have fuelled Nazism’s “revolt against the West”.³⁰

I will address two guiding questions in this final part of the chapter: In what ways did Löwenthal’s political thought spatialize, that is, incorporate and modify spatio-political frameworks, and which spatial contexts were key to this transformation? First of all, however, a few facts about Richard Löwenthal: He was born in 1908, studied law and economics, and in 1926 joined the Communist Party, but was ostracized a few years later because he did not toe the new party line that declared “social fascism” to be the party’s “main enemy.” In 1933, he joined a left-socialist resistance group called New Beginning (*Neu Beginnen*). He soon had to leave Germany and spent most of his exile in London, where he started working for the news agen-

³⁰ Richard Löwenthal, *Social Change and Cultural Crisis* (New York, 1984), 33 (“revolt against the West”); see, in this context, the following important studies: Julia Angster, *Konsenskapitalismus und Sozialdemokratie: Die Westernisierung von SPD und DGB* (Munich, 2003); Anselm Doering-Manteuffel, *Wie westlich sind die Deutschen? Amerikanisierung und Westernisierung im 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 1999); Michael Hochgeschwender, *Freiheit in der Offensive? Der Kongress für kulturelle Freiheit und die Deutschen* (Munich, 1998).

cy *Reuters* and was later hired by the liberal weekly *The Observer*. In 1947, he became a British citizen. In 1961, he was appointed Professor of International Relations at the Free University Berlin, with a strong emphasis on world Communism.³¹

Löwenthal's path to "the West" was long and circuitous. He started off as the member of a Communist student association in the Weimar Republic, and found himself signing up, in 1950, as a founding member of the Congress for Cultural Freedom – a decidedly anti-Communist organization, and a major conduit of transatlantic cultural transfer that spread ideas of Cold War liberalism and "Western Civilization." How can we account for this intellectual transformation? Three factors stand out: first, the shock waves sent out by the Soviet Union; second, the specific circumstances of Löwenthal's time in exile; and third, the emerging spatial logic of the Cold War in 1946–47.

Typical of many Communist and left-socialist intellectuals, Löwenthal became increasingly disenchanted with the social experiment of the Soviet Union's Communist Party. While, in 1936, he still praised the Soviet Union as a "tremendously progressive state [...] freed from the fetters of capitalism,"³² he increasingly castigated the "totalitarian degeneration" of Stalin's dictatorship.³³ His critical stance to the Soviet Union, however, did not lead to the embrace of a system of parliamentary government nor did it include a more conciliatory attitude towards capitalism. It was not until the second half of the war that he gradually abandoned his belief in a proletarian dictatorship as essential prerequisite of socialism.

Emigration studies have stressed the importance of acculturation, that is, the transformation of norms and beliefs through cultural contacts.³⁴ Richard Löwenthal provides a good example of this process. From the middle of the Second World War, he became a regular contributor to *Tribune*, Labour's independent weekly, and he also joined the newly founded International Bureau of the Fabian Society, a forum of intellectual exchange, to which he remained committed for many years to come. By the end of the war, however, Löwenthal had not yet fallen for "the West." In his book *Beyond Capitalism* (which came out in early 1947), he demanded the formation of a socialist Europe as a "third force" situated between

31 For a more extensive discussion, with further references, see Riccardo Bavaj, "Cold War Liberalism in West Germany: Richard Löwenthal and 'Western Civilization'," *History of European Ideas* 49 (2023), 607–624.

32 Ernst [Richard Löwenthal], "Stand und Tendenzen der Sowjetökonomik" (November 25, 1936), in Richard Löwenthal, *Faschismus – Bolschewismus – Totalitarismus: Schriften zur Weltanschauungsdiktatur im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Mike Schmeitzner (Göttingen, 2009), 166.

33 Paul Sering [Richard Löwenthal], "Zwanzig Jahre Kommunistische Internationale" (March 11 and 25, 1939), in Löwenthal, *Faschismus – Bolschewismus – Totalitarismus*, 197.

34 See in particular Angster, *Konsenskapitalismus und Sozialdemokratie*.

the two world powers of “East” and “West.”³⁵ This demand was firmly rooted in previous socialist discussions and was part of several schemes of a European “third force,” which were popping up like mushrooms in various political camps following the end of the war.³⁶

The more evidently the binary logic of the Cold War began to crystallize, however, the less plausible these schemes became. His adaptation to the new realities of international relations manifested itself in an article he wrote for *Tribune* in October 1947, which he concluded by stating that “Communist intransigence” was forcing socialists to confine their work to the “Marshall sphere” and “to act as a progressive force within the Western World rather than as an independent third entity trying to mediate between the forces of West and East.”³⁷ Already in a letter from December 1946 he had pointed out that the conception of a “third force,” while envisioning a Germany independent of all occupation powers, did not imply neutrality between “East” and “West,” as long as “West” meant “democratic Europe”: “Germany is part of Europe, namely a Europe to which Russia does not belong.”³⁸ Here already, we see signs of a container-space rhetoric that would become characteristic of Löwenthal’s spatio-political framework. As he put it in another letter, Russia had maneuvered itself into the “dead end of world history,” while America had the potential to develop in all directions.³⁹ As so often in the conceptual history of “the West,” it was the increasing antagonism towards Russia that contributed to a westward shift of spatio-political imaginations.

Löwenthal had certainly arrived in “the West.” His concept of the West, however, was not static but dynamic, and provided a cipher for various visions of the future. His use of the concept was certainly characterized by container-space rhetoric, but his “West” was, as it were, a container on the move. Later he even highlighted this inner dynamic of “Western civilization,” its specific evolutionary temporality, as its defining feature. He would bring to bear a previously dormant facet of his intellectual socialization at the University of Heidelberg, as his writings on “Western civ-

35 Paul Sering [Richard Löwenthal], *Jenseits des Kapitalismus: Ein Beitrag zur sozialistischen Neuorientierung* (Lauf bei Nürnberg, 1946 [published 1947]), 247, 251, 256–257.

36 See Christian Bailey, *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow: German Visions of Europe, 1926–1950* (New York and Oxford, 2013); Rainer Behring, *Demokratische Außenpolitik für Deutschland: Die außenpolitischen Vorstellungen deutscher Sozialdemokraten im Exil 1933–1945* (Düsseldorf, 1999); see also Terence Renaud, *New Lefts: The Making of a Radical Tradition* (Princeton and Oxford, 2021), 183–193.

37 Paul Sering [Richard Löwenthal], “The Exhumation of the Comintern,” *Tribune*, no. 561, October 10, 1947, 8.

38 “Richard Löwenthal to Waldemar von Knoeringen, 30 December 1946,” Archiv der sozialen Demokratie der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (AsD), Waldemar von Knoeringen Papers, vol. 84.

39 “Richard Löwenthal to Karl B. Frank, 18 October 1947,” AsD, Richard Löwenthal Papers, vol. 4.

ilization” would owe much to Max Weber’s theory of Occidental rationalization and the Protestant ethic of capitalism (in its revised form of 1920, which drew explicitly on “Occidental” rhetoric).⁴⁰ Löwenthal was influenced, moreover, by the British historian Arnold Toynbee, who reached the height of his fame in the early Cold War years – at a time when the frequency of references to “Western civilization” soared.⁴¹ Toynbee’s gargantuan, multi-volume study of world civilizations, which to this day has remained unmatched (though certainly not unchallenged), elaborated the view that “Western civilization,” alongside twenty or so other civilizations in world history, was, as mentioned above, an “intelligible unit of historical study” – a statement that was repeatedly quoted by Löwenthal.

When he – and that is the final point of this chapter – tried to make sense of the rapid transformation of industrially advanced pluralist societies from the mid- and late 1960s, he resorted to a political language that was shot through with Toynbeean notions of “rhythms,” “crises,” and “breakdowns” of civilizations. From that time on, it was his mantra that “the West” was facing a “cultural crisis,” a situation of collective anomie. For him, the disaffection of the “young Western intelligentsia” with parliamentary democracy in 1968 was merely an epiphenomenon of a “long-term cultural crisis.” He was particularly worried about “West-wide phenomena” such as a decline in work ethic, which in his view pointed to severe problems in identity formation. Far more serious than the abstract sloganeering of a “Great Refusal” (Herbert Marcuse) during the student revolt, these symptoms of social “decay” revealed a serious “cultural crisis” that undermined the authority of “Western” institutions.⁴²

Löwenthal’s central goal was to preserve the system of liberal, parliamentary democracy through stabilizing an identity “nested” in the narrative community of “Western civilization.”⁴³ The language of “Western civilization,” closely intertwined since the nineteenth century with notions of progress, liberty, and reason, was an effective way of negotiating fundamental values and the future of pluralist societies. At the same time, he deployed the “Western crisis” rhetoric as a means to create a sense of urgency – not too different from more recent examples of West-

⁴⁰ See Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, vol. 1, 9th ed. (Tübingen, 1988; first published 1920), especially 1–16.

⁴¹ See Philipp Sarasin, “Die Grenze des ‘Abendlandes’ als Diskursmuster im Kalten Krieg: Eine Skizze,” in *Das Imaginäre des Kalten Krieges*, ed. David Eugster and Sibylle Marti (Essen, 2015), 38.

⁴² Richard Löwenthal, “Die Intellektuellen zwischen Gesellschaftswandel und Kulturkrise,” in Richard Löwenthal, *Gesellschaftswandel und Kulturkrise: Zukunftsprobleme der westlichen Demokratien* (Frankfurt am Main, 1979), 29–30.

⁴³ Guntram H. Herb and David H. Kaplan, eds., *Nested Identities: Nationalism, Territory, and Scale* (Lanham, 1999).

ern self-assertion and attempts to stabilize “Western” identity. Like these examples, the case of Löwenthal shows that the history of “the West” has always also been the story of a never-ending end.

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