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The Best in the West? The “West” in and as School Crisis Narratives

Competing with each other, surpassing one another, or at least cutting a good figure compared to others, are deeply human incentives that operate well beyond the arena of sports. They require *inter alia* concepts of competition, self and alterity, and a set of gradual differences of comparable similarities. Historically and today, we can find many examples, coalescing around certain characteristics of identification. Regional perimeters are used widely here in everyday language to provide an exemplary possibility of identification. While boundaries are partly random and elastic, it does not harm the concept of belonging: on the contrary, it seems to vitalize its application. While this positioning is highly selective and problematic for others, the “Western tradition” is one identification option which undoubtedly has “historical blindnesses and [...] destructive consequences,”¹ even as it remains a point of reference up to the present day.² The commonality among these allusions is the invocation of the “West” as a localized and directionally oriented idea, always in relation to a given individual’s geopolitical and socio-political position.³ However, as Andreas Oberdorf and I have already pointed out in the introductory section to this volume, the “West” cannot be clearly defined or located. In the absence of a map delineating the “West” and the impossibility of creating one without immediate contradiction regarding its precise location and in-/exclusion criteria – particularly in the context of reporting on the Ukraine conflict, which raises intriguing questions – this chapter offers the opportunity to contemplate historical sources and attempts to conceptualize the “West.” Since Max Weber,⁴ the “West” is mainly characterized by the theorem of rationalization with regard to how to conceptualize, understand, and teach about the “world” around us, an idea disseminated by distinguished scholars such as Jürgen Habermas or influential public intellectuals such as Samuel P. Huntington.⁵

1 Penny Enslin and Kai Horsthemke, “Rethinking the ‘Western Tradition’,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 47 (2015): 1172.

2 Armin Nassehi, “Wo liegt der Westen? Eine Standortbestimmung in unübersichtlicher Zeit,” *Kursbuch* 211 (2022): 118.

3 Nassehi, “Wo liegt der Westen?,” 116–118.

4 Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie I* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1920): 1.

5 Helmut Heit, “Fortgesetzte Identitätskrise. Der Westen im Spiegel Chinas,” *Kursbuch* 211 (2022): 58–59.

When schools are considered as “Western” institutions designed to perpetuate and deepen a rationalized world view or “thought styles,”⁶ the principal thesis guiding this chapter is that the “West” seeks to constitute itself particularly through the institution of the school⁷ and through warnings about its decay or decline,⁸ expressed in the mode of competition. To explore this thesis, we first address the significance of public schools in “Western” societies and explain why school crisis narratives garner public attention here in particular (Part 1). This allows us to examine a genre of sources (Part 2) that invokes the “West” in these school crisis narratives, and which seek to constitute the “West”. Simultaneously, the reverse scenario is invoked, suggesting that the crisis lies in decline or total collapse of the broadly conceived “West,” and schools, as genuinely “Western bulwarks,” should counteract this decline (Part 3). As mentioned, from this, a specific mode of competitiveness should be derived (Part 4), increasingly disseminated internationally through supranational organizations like the OECD,⁹ contributing even more to the diffusion and dissolution of the concept of the “West.” The effects of globalization, thus evading a concrete location, renders any boundaries indeterminate and stresses the question addressed in the conclusion (Part 5) – whether “Western thought” is *in regressus ad infinitum*.¹⁰

1 Schools as “Western” Therapies to Crises

Interestingly, all known “high cultures” have had school-like institutions that systematically attempted to organize and arrange teaching and learning.¹¹ Early in human history, it seemed insufficient for those in certain social positions to acquire the necessary knowledge, skills, and cultivation on the fly, that is, through participation, observation, and guided experimentation in everyday life. For this

6 Luca Sciortino, *History of Rationalities: Ways of Thinking from Vico to Hacking and Beyond* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

7 Francisco O. Ramirez and John Boli, “The Political Construction of Mass Schooling: European Origins and Worldwide Institutionalization,” *Sociology of Education* 60 (1987): 2–17.

8 Bernhard Hemetsberger, *Schooling in Crisis: Rise and Fall of a German-American Success Story* (Berlin, New York: Peter Lang, 2022); or Matthew W. Seeger and Timothy L. Sellnow, *Narratives of Crisis: Telling Stories of Ruin and Renewal* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

9 Maren Elfert and Christian Ydesen, *Global Governance of Education: The Historical and Contemporary Entanglements of UNESCO, the OECD and the World Bank* (Cham: Springer, 2023).

10 Daniel-Pascal Zorn, “Das Denken der Anderen. Eine kurze Geschichte westlicher Hegemonie,” *Kursbuch* 211 (2022): 87–88.

11 Bernhard Hemetsberger, “Schule,” in *Bildungswissenschaft in Begriffen, Theorien und Diskursen*, ed. Matthias Huber and Marion Döll (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2023), 533.

group, it was necessary to learn in the abstract and by generating the differentiation that comes along with social distinction: Firstly, it was claimed that learning should be initiated before immediate application. Secondly, learning is initiated at an abstract level that separates itself from specific problems of individual cases and claims to be applicable to multiple situations, or deducible from them. Thirdly, and this is an early central characteristic, social distinction can be established through this learning, which confers specific social rights, advantages, and legitimacy.¹² Examples include the ancient Egyptian priests and their administrative training, Chinese civil service examinees, or citizens of ancient Greek free city-states and their educative settings. These types of schooling intended to free individuals from immediately vital activities. For a certain period of time schooled groups are relieved from activities from which they nevertheless make a living – in all societies, up to the present day, schooling is therefore a phenomenon of prosperity.¹³ This is historically a privilege accorded only to limited groups of people who must be socially legitimized through knowledge, skills, and cultivation compared to all other social actors, who are mainly occupied with tasks that support everyday life. This type of schooled cultivation is not intended for the majority. Their general civilization changes with time, as Norbert Elias has traced, corresponding to sedimented trends, but always in the light of religious or cosmological explanatory contexts.¹⁴ There is a divine or world-explaining framework within which humans are encompassed, and in which they can act.

Michel Foucault outlined monumental changes in the “West” in the late seventeenth and throughout the eighteenth century, until the transition to the nineteenth century.¹⁵ The apparatus of power and control – through practices of punishment, castigation, and imprisonment – diffused into the logic and functioning of publicness and rationality. Besides hospitals, prisons and especially schools turned into normalizing institutions that served an expanding but simultaneously more tightly woven government(-ality) of humans on the European continent (and later beyond). With the disintegration of religious and cosmological explanatory

12 See, for example, Horst Schiffler and Rolf Winkeler, *Tausend Jahre Schule. Eine Kulturgeschichte des Lernens in Bildern* (Stuttgart, Zürich: Belser, 1985); or Sabine Kirk et al., eds., *Schule und Geschichte. Funktionen der Schule in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* (Bad Heilbrunn: Klinkhardt, 2000).

13 Schiffler and Winkeler, *Tausend Jahre Schule*.

14 Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen. Erster Band: Wandlungen des Verhaltens in der weltlichen Oberschicht des Abendlandes* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976).

15 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, transl. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1977).

contexts, and also through the intellectual deconstruction of the Enlightenment, extended publicness and discourse emerged, based on logic, scientificity, and rationality.¹⁶ This idea of an enlightened public, based on a “cosmopolitan” bourgeoisie, is always contentious. Worldviews, explanatory contexts, and interpretations of “reality” are constantly under evaluation, critique, and eventually driven into crisis. Reinhart Koselleck argued that with publicness, a discursive space emerges – almost unique throughout the “West” – that allows for the negotiation of general problems in the mode of critique.¹⁷ If criticism becomes excessive, it indicates that shared explanations and explanatory modes are decreasing, fragmenting or even missing, as crises perceptions are spreading. Critique attacks and ultimately overturns the connecting foundations of world interpretations. Crises are then conceived as stages of explanatory crises, which is considered a uniquely “Western” perspective that potentially includes the discursive participation of everybody in the community.

Perceptions of crises and their public negotiation became particularly pronounced at the end of the eighteenth and the transition to the nineteenth century, especially in Europe and North America, and are shared by a constantly growing majority of the population. The political systems on either side of the Atlantic differ in the way they perceive and utilize this publicness. In Europe, well into the second half of the twentieth century, bourgeois publicness is perceived more as an attack and a danger to person-centered government systems, whereas in America, publicness was increasingly used for negotiating social issues and decision-making, although its logic was not yet fixed at the end of the eighteenth century. Thus, criticism and publicness took on society-constituting forms around the turn of that century, an era which has entered scientific periodization as *Sattelzeit*.¹⁸

In the same period, that is, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in German-speaking countries and the nascent North American Republic, general compulsory education and common schools were being conceived and introduced.¹⁹ They were supposed to stabilize critical and crisis-driven social conditions

16 Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988).

17 Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*.

18 Reinhart Koselleck is considered the “inventor” of this term for a transition period between 1750 and 1850; see Reinhart Koselleck and Christoph Dipper, “Begriffsgeschichte, Sozialgeschichte, begriffene Geschichte. Reinhart Koselleck im Gespräch mit Christoph Dipper,” *Neue Politische Literatur* 51 (1998): 195.

19 Ramirez and Boli, “The Political Construction of Mass Schooling,” 2; and James Van Horn Melton, *Absolutism and the Eighteenth-Century Origins of Compulsory Schooling in Prussia and Austria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

by conveying generally shared attempts to interpret the world²⁰ – that is, to understand how the world might mathematically, linguistically, artistically (and so on), be comprehensible, experiential, and explainable? From this point on, schools become public and common institutions designed for as many people as possible. Schools promised, in an increasingly opening vision of the future, an improvement or positive vision: through schooling, “Western” society in the future could achieve knowledge, happiness, and usefulness, and find solutions to their problems; this is how meaning is generated in times of fragmented explanations, i.e. crises.

Johann Bernhard Basedow was to German-speaking countries²¹ in the 1770s what Horace Mann was to America²² from the 1830s onwards: both publicly promised that schools could promote peace and improve social futures. The school was the institution that could alleviate, overcome, or even prevent social problems concurrently. In the 1760s Basedow proclaimed in the Garden Realm of Leopold III Frederick Francis of Dessau-Wörlitz – after the Seven Years’ War, the rise of landless people, famine, and unusual weather changes²³ – that schools were the solution:

You reasonable patriots of the human race and of all countries, you agree with me that public happiness of the state is not detached from the common happiness of the people; that this happiness is proportionate to public virtue; that public virtue depends on the comprehensive education and on the instruction of those who, in the higher classes, will determine the morals and fate of the others. [...] You agree with me that the essence of schooling and studies is the most useful and surest tool to make the whole state happy and to secure happiness according to its particular nature.²⁴

20 David F. Labaree, “When Is School an Answer to What Social Problems? Lessons from the Early American Republic,” in *Education Systems in Historical, Cultural, and Sociological Perspectives*, ed. Daniel Tröhler and Ragnhild Barbu (Rotterdam: Sense Publisher, 2011), 77–78; and Hemetsberger, *Schooling in Crisis*, 212–213.

21 See Michael Niedermeier, *Das Gartenreich Dessau-Wörlitz als kulturelles und literarisches Zentrum um 1780* (Dessau: Stadt Dessau, 1995): 8–9; and Jürgen Overhoff, *Die Frühgeschichte des Philanthropismus (1715–1771). Konstitutionsbedingungen, Praxisfelder und Wirkung eines pädagogischen Reformprogramms im Zeitalter der Aufklärung* (Tübingen: May Niemeyer 2004), 215–223.

22 Labaree, “When Is School an Answer,” 85–86.

23 See Wilhelm Abel, “Massenarmut und Hungerkrisen in Deutschland im letzten Drittel des 18. Jahrhunderts,” in *Das pädagogische Jahrhundert. Volksaufklärung und Erziehung zur Armut im 18. Jahrhundert in Deutschland*, ed. Ulrich Herrmann (Weinheim, Basel: Beltz, 1981), 29–52.

24 The translations are mine, based on Johann Bernhard Basedow, *Vorstellung an Menschenfreunde und vermögende Männer über Schule, Studien und ihren Einfluß in die öffentliche Wohlfahrt. Mit einem Plane eines Elementarbuches der menschlichen Erkenntnis* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1768), 12–13.

Especially against the background of conditions that were generally perceived as crisis-driven, schools would nurture hope for a better future.

You patriots of the human race and all countries, can't you see the signs of deadly decline in public happiness; have mercy on the millions; so ease the possibility of bourgeois virtue, the renaissance of love for our homeland fostered in the lower and higher schools, where it must happen and has happened according to the previous constitution. I am aware of the fact that current schooling in many places is not solely responsible for the almost universal apathy for the public good in its current form. But it is one of the most important causes. This is enough for me.²⁵

Abstracted from the language of the late eighteenth century (which must nevertheless have been well received at the time, as Basedow was an extremely interconnected, eloquent, and publicly effective personality²⁶), the educationalization of social problems²⁷ becomes apparent and has since been invoked in German-speaking countries in response to countless social problems and experiences of crisis. Basedow managed, in the public discourse on the general perception of crisis in the last third of the eighteenth century, to bring schools under discussion as therapy for social problems such as moral decay, governance issues, or supply shortages. He used his exceptional publicity opportunities for this purpose in an extensive way.

Fifty years later in North America, Horace Mann, as Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, likewise used the associated publicity to draw attention to the dangers of a lack of education for American society:

[I]n the distant villages and hamlets of this land, where those juvenile habits are now forming, where those processes of thought and feeling are, now, today, maturing, which, some twenty or thirty years hence, will find an arm, and become resistless might, and will uphold, or rend asunder, our social fabric. The Board may, trust they will, be able to collect light and to radiate it; but upon the people, upon the people, will still rest the great and inspiring duty of prescribing to the next generation what their fortunes shall be, by determining in what manner they shall be educated.²⁸

The guarantee that school education would push back against, prevent, or even solve social problems also resonated with American public opinion during this cri-

²⁵ Basedow, *Vorstellung an Menschenfreunde*, 22.

²⁶ See Alexa Crais, "Elternbriefe an das Dessauer Philanthropinum (1774–1792)," *Cahier d'Études Germaniques* 70 (2016): 106.

²⁷ For example, Paul Smeyers and Marc Depaepe, eds. *Educational Research: the Educationalization of Social Problems* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008).

²⁸ Horace Mann, *Lectures and Annual Reports, on Education* (Cambridge: published for the editor, 1867): 40–41.

sis period after the War of 1812 – including plantation relocations, slavery discussions, and the expansion into Western territories – giving a veritable boost to the common-school movement initiated by Mann.²⁹ That no top-down school law could prevail, Mann understood immediately:

In the first place, the education of the whole people, in a republican government, can never be attained without the consent of the whole people. Compulsion, even though it were a desirable, is not an available instrument. Enlightenment, not coercion, is our resource. The nature of education must be explained. The whole mass of mind must be instructed in regard to its comprehensive and enduring interest.³⁰

In a persuasive, explanatory, and enlightening manner, Horace Mann managed to present the benefits of common school education, especially the possibility of educationalizing social problems,³¹ that is, delegating them to schools, and gaining parental trust, which is seen early in school attendance statistics.

Particularly in times of crisis, which may be defined as periods in which explanation is fragmentary or lacking, it is crucial that public figures offer interpretations that seem relevant, as Luhmann would argue,³² that is, that they address the respective problem and thus makes it appear surmountable. This is precisely the case with Basedow and Mann, as prominent spokespeople promoting views shared by many and this may be seen repeatedly throughout history, in manifold ways. Hence, these sources are always seismographs of time-specific crisis issues.³³

It is not until the late eighteenth century that we can speak of comprehensive mass schooling *de jure* in European countries. In fact, school attendance statistics show that only in the second half of the nineteenth century did schools become part of the normal experience of life and family in German-speaking countries and the US.³⁴ The idea of exclusive groups in a premodern community educating themselves for certain tasks in schools and arguing about them increasingly frag-

29 Howard M. Jones, “Horace Mann’s Crusade,” in *America in Crisis. Fourteen Crucial Episodes in American History*, ed. Daniel Aaron (Hamden: Archon Books, 1952), 91–107.

30 Mann, *Lectures and Reports*, 286.

31 Labaree, “When Is School an Answer,” 85–86.

32 Niklas Luhmann, “Familiarity, Confidence, Trust: Problems and Alternatives,” in *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations*, ed. Diego Gambetta (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 97–98.

33 Marcus Otto et al., “‘Krisen’ als Seismografen gesellschaftlichen Wandels und Gegenstand schulischer Bildungsmedien,” in *Handbuch Krisenforschung*, ed. Frank Bösch, Nicole Deitelhoff, and Stefan Kroll (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2020), 93.

34 Francisco O. Ramirez and John W. Meyer, “Comparative Education: The Social Construction of the Modern World System,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 6 (1980): 373–375; and Detlef K. Müller and Bernd Zymek, *Sozialgeschichte und Statistik des Schulsystems in den Staaten des Deutschen Reiches, 1800–1945*, vol. 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987), 300.

ments. Ideally, since the Enlightenment, all people would be educated within schools for their socially “most useful” way and represent their opinions and positions in public discourse. This meant a monumental change for parents, who would need to willingly send their children to school rather than putting them to work as soon as possible, urging them to contribute to the family income or to their own subsistence.³⁵

With the expansion of general education, the school promise of leading “Western” societies into a better future spreads and consolidates in these regions of the world. This is what gives parents the conviction that school is a legitimate place for their growing children. Incidentally, “Western” school becomes an increasingly exclusive legitimate pedagogical practice. So, when new social problems arise or crises occur, schools are held responsible for their promise leading societies into a better (not worse) future. These are points in the historical repetition loop where disappointed expectations of schools in public discourse turn into demands for reforms and school crisis narratives.³⁶ Ever since, the latest since the Enlightenment,³⁷ schools are brought into play as therapies against crises or argued to be important for these reasons in the “West.” This idea spreads increasingly within a more general public. As crises are recurring, schools are an immediate point of contact in the “West” – this is an indication that school’s promise of a better future has been and is immensely successful. Had the institution not promised to lead to a better future? Was it not socially tasked with addressing or solving social problems? This explains why various topics such as youth crime, sexuality, financial knowledge, and the like are given to schools depending on contemporary awareness or problem framing, even if, repeatedly against better knowledge, they are doomed to fail: despite sex education, teenage pregnancies cannot be ruled out, as well as criminal offenses of the same age group are not fully preventable with mandatory lessons in ethics, criminal law, and conflict management. Despite these findings, the educationalization of social problems is persistently adhered to in the “West,” and this is based on the school promise and the general trust in it. Public opinion in the “West” created a unique place to react and respond discursively to various crises *ad hoc*.

In summary, during the Enlightenment and thereafter, schools in Europe and North America were expanded into common institutions, gaining their legitimization and social acceptance through a promise of a better future and corresponding

³⁵ Michael S. Katz, *A History of Compulsory Education Laws* (Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa, 1976), 23.

³⁶ Hemetsberger, *Schooling in Crisis*, 211–217.

³⁷ Lukas Boser et al., “Die Pädagogisierung des ‘guten Lebens’ in bildungshistorischer Sicht,” *Jahrbuch für Historische Bildungsforschung* 23 (2018): 303–332.

expectations. If this promise was thwarted by crisis-driven experiences of reality, that is, if the world fell short of the interpretation taught in schools, the schools were held responsible for this (aka school crisis narratives), and school reforms were demanded. This seems to be a uniquely “Western” phenomenon, which evolved and spread from there and became a self-perpetuating and well-known process: social crisis perception, an immediate educationalization of these social problems superseded by school crisis narratives because the institution has failed to accomplish its discursively assigned task, followed by school reforms to equip the institution to adequately address (future) crises until the next critical situation appears.

2 The “West” in School Crisis Narratives

When social problems are educationalized in times of crisis – for example, in the 1960s during full employment but economic stagnation in West Germany, when Georg Picht³⁸ analyzed the numbers of high school graduates as an indicator of social stability and saw in their recent low number a danger that could potentially encompass the whole of society – school crisis narratives emerge, as the institution is perceived to be failing to deliver what is (discursively) expected. Consequently, school reforms become inevitable, and their programs commonly reflect crisis topoi and their pedagogical response.³⁹ These narratives are predominantly cast in the mode of tragedy, accompanied by a warning tone of decline and downfall if no immediate school reform is launched to prevent the worst.⁴⁰ In the transatlantic sphere, numerous examples exist in which the “West” is invoked as a reference in such tragic school crisis narratives. The comparative and reference systems used to orient an institution’s own failures, the current crisis, and inspirations for reform point to “the West” as a better example and thereby position themselves as part of it. Florian Waldow has found interesting insights into international comparative studies and their media interpretation.⁴¹ “Western” school systems, for instance, those slipping in PISA studies, use “Western” societies or systems as refer-

38 Georg Picht, *Die deutsche Bildungskatastrophe* (Berlin: dtv, 1965).

39 David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering Towards Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

40 Seeger and Sellnow, *Narratives of Crisis*.

41 Florian Waldow, “Das Ausland als Gegenargument. Fünf Thesen zur Bedeutung nationaler Stereotype und negativer Referenzgesellschaften,” *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* 62 (2016): 403–421.

ences from which educators should learn.⁴² These most often have positive connotations and are predominately “Western” PISA-winning countries, even though there are better-placed “non-Western” systems on the respective scale, such as, for instance, schools discredited as Asian “drill schools” in Singapore.⁴³ The ranking logic is here twisted in favor of “Western” comparison standards and preferred expectations. Although such studies are now conducted globally, participating states adhere to a reference horizon framed as “Western.” It probably comes as little surprise that when the “West” feels it is in crisis – especially during the heyday of the Cold War – the link between schooling and the “West” is tightened.

Everyone is aware today that our educational system has been allowed to deteriorate. It has been going downhill for some years without anything really constructive having been done to arrest the decline, still less to reverse its course. We thus have a chronic crisis; an unsolved problem as grave as any that faces our country today. Unless this problem is dealt with promptly and effectively the machinery that sustains our level of material prosperity and political power will begin to slow down.⁴⁴

In the midst of the Cold War, the system competition between “East and West,” the launch of the Soviet satellite “Sputnik,” which sent beeping radio signals back to Earth and particularly alarmed the American public, marked the initiation of standardizations in the education sector.⁴⁵ Interestingly, Vice-Admiral Hyman G. Rickover of the US Navy, though not a pedagogical expert (as so often observed of similar public figures), educationalized America’s crisis perceptions and believed he had found a reference to the “Western educational ideal”: that is, “that our schools must return to the traditional task of formal education in Western civilization – transmission of the nation’s cultural heritage, and preparation for life through rigorous training of young minds to think clearly, logically, and independently.”⁴⁶ Rickover refreshes the rationalization thesis of Max Weber and (traditionally) connects the public institution school to it. This seemed obvious to him, as it did to many others, as there would be a “long and honorable history

42 Reinhard Bendix uses the term “*reference society* whenever intellectual leaders and an educated public react to the values and institutions of another country with ideas and actions that pertain to their own country”; see *Kings or People: Power and the Mandate to Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 292.

43 Florian Walchow, “Projecting Images of the ‘Good’ and the ‘Bad School’: Top Scorers in Educational Large-Scale Assessments as Reference Societies,” *Compare* 47 (2017): 653.

44 Hyman G. Rickover, *Education and Freedom* (New York: Dutton, 1959), 101.

45 Bernhard Hemetsberger and Katharina Thyri, “Education and Freedom. Rickover, Sputnik and Educational Standards,” in *War and Education*, ed. Sebastian Engelmann, Bernhard Hemetsberger, and Frank Jacob (Paderborn: Brill, 2022), 95–115.

46 Rickover, *Education and Freedom*, 18.

of learning which sets Western civilization apart from all others and to which the Western world owes its dynamic quality.”⁴⁷ A distinctive hierarchy is introduced here and a well-known “Western” notion of superiority included, which is to be understood in the context of the Cold War. This “arrogant” notion had long been discussed, considered taboo, or refused.⁴⁸ However, Rickover tried to legitimize this, paradoxically in the light of Sputnik. “Since the people of the West also outdistance all others in scientific productivity, the sum of human knowledge has grown phenomenally,” he argued, a debt owed to ancient Greeks, who “gave the West a scientific habit of mind,”⁴⁹ a delineation used here and elsewhere.⁵⁰ Rickover prototypically illustrates a fundamental structure that I would like to break down as follows: a “Western” school system is (increasingly in danger) losing one’s way from the original, exceptionally successful, and internationally unique “Western” path based on ancient Greek rationality and a particular set of world interpretations. This path or tradition is something that can define the “West” (as “Westerners” are all schooled alike), and one should refer to it in order to identify with it. Here, the “West” is used referentially: invocation is thus an assignment.

In 1959, the same year that Rickover published his manifesto, Josef Dolch’s *Lehrplan des Abendlandes* (Curriculum of the Occident)⁵¹ was published in Saarbrücken, West Germany. The book unfolded two and a half thousand years of “Western” history, starting as a matter of course in ancient Greece. The book establishes the organization, selection, and sequencing of pedagogical content over the centuries, orienting them towards the Greek classification which spread in the Middle Ages as the *septem artes liberales*, was strengthened again by the neohumanist movement headed by Wilhelm von Humboldt, and appears in the ongoing debate on general education.⁵² Even today, one “traditionally”⁵³ refers to the foundational thoughts on schooling, the discipline of education, or even the disciplinary basic concepts and terms to ancient Greece, seen as the cradle of “Western” society

47 Rickover, *Education and Freedom*, 25.

48 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 50–52.

49 Rickover, *Education and Freedom*, 70–71 and 75.

50 Zorn, “Das Denken der Anderen,” 82–88.

51 Josef Dolch, *Lehrplan des Abendlandes. Zweieinhalb Jahrtausende seiner Geschichte* (Ratingen: Aloys Henn, 1959).

52 Dolch, *Lehrplan des Abendlandes*, 9–10.

53 For example, Hans-Ulrich Musolff and Stephanie Hellekamps, *Geschichte des pädagogischen Denkens* (Oldenbourg: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2006) or Gerald L. Gutek, *A History of the Western Educational Experience* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press 1995) are probably well known (but hardly made aware of) among current university students from their introductory lectures in educational science.

and academia. This is likewise found almost consistently in various overview works on the history of pedagogy.⁵⁴ In this conception, the “West” is united by an intellectual, logical-scientific worldview with its roots in ancient Greece, later shaped by Christianity, and transmitted by schools through the centuries until the present day.⁵⁵

In addition to the contentious public sphere, it seems that the “West” is constituted within the institution of school, through repeated transmission of its genesis and “thought traditions.” One could consequently argue, as Jürgen Habermas did,⁵⁶ that prerequisites for qualified participation in the public sphere must be brought along by the aspiring public actor, meaning that one has to navigate argumentative-logical language games⁵⁷ in order to participate in the (ideally non-coercive) discourse of better arguments. This, crucially, relies on schooling.

In summary, in school crisis narratives (and its set of historical sources), the “West” seems to be invoked as an idea based on a common origin of world interpretation in the scientific-logical-rational tone that originated in ancient Greece, and which, through schooling, has been made increasingly accessible since the Enlightenment to the general public. For this reason, it appears critical and problematic when schools are described as being in crisis because they do not deliver what a “Western” society demands of them, and this is nothing less than “Western” communalization, or the idea thereof. Already, it is becoming clear that it is not only the school that faces challenges but the concept of the “West” itself, which risks being thrown into crisis.

3 The “West” as a School Crisis Narrative

School crisis narratives *inter alia* refer to a “Western” tradition that needs to be regained. Simultaneously, they warn, either implicitly or explicitly, of the signs of complete decay or the threat of the downfall of the “West.” This leads to the formation of a space in these narratives that is perceived as being threatened by

54 For example, Friedrich Paulsen, *Das deutsche Bildungswesen in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung*, 3rd ed. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1912).

55 Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations*, 46–47 draws on the same distinctions.

56 Jürgen Habermas, “Können komplexe Gesellschaften eine vernünftige Identität ausbilden?” in *Zur Rekonstruktion des Historischen Materialismus*, ed. Jürgen Habermas (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976), 92–128 and Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*, 13th ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2013).

57 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Ascombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), 3 and 15–17.

decay – whether it is the all-encompassing decay of “Western” customs, values, or norms, “Western” lifestyles, “Western” democracies and political systems, “Western” achievements, or “Western” global dominance. Oswald Spengler,⁵⁸ in 1917, coined the epoch-making title *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (The Decline of the Occident). This title, which was invoked by conservative or right-leaning quarters in particular, continued to resurface in the media. However, the suggestion that fundamentally conservative or neo-conservative positions seem plausible, a wish to restore better times, is only partially confirmed. Some years after Spengler, in 1931, Karl Jaspers published *Die geistige Situation der Zeit* (The mental situation of our age)⁵⁹ against the backdrop of Nazi ideology, which was at that time pervasive, particularly in educated circles. This raised questions for Jaspers about how this ideology could be reconciled with or even conceivable in the light of “Western”-humanistic education ideals, which must consequently be in decline. While Spengler used seasonal metaphors to structure his argument, Jaspers raised questions about tipping points that would characterize dangerous decay. If the “West” exists as a comparative foil and an aspirational vision in some school crisis narratives, as outlined earlier, the narratives under consideration here envision the “West” as a scenario of decay that needs to be prevented. If “Western” culture and society are constituted through schools, it is conceivable that their perceived failure would shake the entire structure of the “West.” Georg Bollenbeck, albeit writing on the subject of Germany as the country of sublime poets and thinkers, argued that when an idea is constituted and defined over a fading concept, the idea fragments.⁶⁰ What may sound like a circular argument reflects the constructivist perspective on the construction of reality,⁶¹ and invokes the well-known Thomas Theorem: “if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.”⁶² If tragic doomsday scenarios are believed, they are real and alarming in their consequences to everybody touched by these interpretations. Crisis theory suggests that perceptions of time radically accelerate as they move towards a turn-

58 Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes. Umrisse einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte* (Munich: Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1923) and the tradition continues as, for example, Huntington forecast similar trends in the 1990s.

59 Karl Jaspers, *Die geistige Situation der Zeit*, 4th ed. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1955).

60 Georg Bollenbeck, *Bildung und Kultur: Glanz und Elend eines deutschen Deutungsmusters* (Frankfurt am Main, Leipzig: Insel, 1994).

61 Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit. Eine Theorie der Wissenssoziologie*, 5th ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1977).

62 William I. Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas, *The Child in America: Behavior Problems and Programs* (New York: Knopf, 1928): 572.

ing point that is perceived as dangerous.⁶³ At such a point, a sense develops that something must be done immediately to avert the worst, with little time remaining. The urgent awareness of standing on the brink of the loss of individual or collective significance may explain the vehemence with which action is taken or attempts are made to counteract this change, to preserve something that should not be lost.⁶⁴

This leads to programs like the recently launched *Save the West* initiative in the United States.⁶⁵ It portrays various complex global threat scenarios in a “culture war” rhetoric that declares these threats to be an attack on the “West,” which, through its continuing cultural, economic, and technological superiority, must defend itself against its own (potential) demise. The civilization gap, as Osterhammel calls it,⁶⁶ is evident in the perception of one’s own “Western” and predominant position over others. At the same time, there is a fear or warning in this structure that, within this framework of the “West,” there is a potential of disadvantage, a need to subordinate or to disappear. This is found in the mid-twentieth century in school crisis narratives by Rickover and Picht, and in the current *Save the West* initiative in the United States, as well as in a large number of earlier documents like “A Nation at Risk” in the 1980s⁶⁷ or the more recent “German Education Catastrophe” of the 2000s, along with its PISA shock.⁶⁸ It is not just about the quality of schools but, beyond that, about the existence of the “West” as an idea constituted through schooling. That is why the institution is presented as one of the

63 Bernhard Hemetsberger, “The Question of Time in Crises, Acceleration, and Recurring School Reforms,” in *Educational Research and the Question(s) of Time*, ed. David Cole, Mehri Mirzaeirafe, and Annie Yang-Heim (Cham: Springer, 2024), 529–542; on the concept of acceleration, see Hartmut Rosa, “Social Acceleration: Ethical and Political Consequences of a Desynchronized High-Speed Society,” *Constellations* 10 (2003): 3–52.

64 Bernhard Hemetsberger, “Öffentliches Schulvertrauen in Krisenzeiten: eine Verfallsgeschichte?” in *In Education We TRUST? Vertrauen in Bildung und Bildungsmedien*, ed. Eckhardt Fuchs and Marcus Otto (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2022), 41–52.

65 “Save the West” accessed January 31, 2024. Accessed November 19, 2024. <https://savethewest.com/>.

66 Jürgen Osterhammel, “Was war und ist ‘der Westen’? Zur Mehrdeutigkeit eines Konfrontationsbegriffs,” in *Die Flughöhe der Adler. Historische Essays zur globalen Gegenwart*, ed. Jürgen Osterhammel (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2007): 105.

67 David P. Gardner et al., *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative For Educational Reform: An Open Letter to the American People. A Report to the Nation and the Secretary of Education* (Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, 1983).

68 Joachim Radkau, “Drohende deutsche Bildungskatastrophen – von Picht bis PISA,” in *Geschichte der Zukunft. Prognose, Visionen, Irrungen in Deutschland von 1945 bis heute*, ed. Joachim Radkau (Munich: Carl Hansen, 2017), 210–241.

most important “bulwarks” of the “West,” the purpose of which is to preserve it by all means.

4 Competition and Rivalry within the “West” through School Crisis Narratives

The preceding argument should have demonstrated comprehensibly that schools, public discourse, and the idea of the “West” are interconnected. It has been hinted that school crisis narratives in and about the “West” operate through comparisons and references, which encompass strong competition, as Rickover notes: “We are finally coming out of our traditional educational isolation and looking at the educational systems of other countries of Western civilization in order to compare them with ours. [...] The whole reappraisal has been painful but good for us.”⁶⁹ Rickover was not only addressing the “Western” idea or the school’s mission to preserve it, but also hinting that within these comparisons, the focus is mainly on being “the best in the West.”⁷⁰ Competitiveness also appears to be a specific feature of the “Idea of the West.”⁷¹ Within selected “Western” references – meaning the acceptance of only a limited circle of comparison – competition arises for better rankings,⁷² learning, and adaptability (policy lending and borrowing), and comparison becomes the driving force for improvement.⁷³ If the “West” does not seem broad enough, global competitions – under “Western” leadership – can be launched to expand the idea.

In 1968, Philipp H. Coombs, then Director of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and later Chairman of the International Council of Economic Development, declared a world education crisis. His book *The World Educational Crisis* immediately became a bestseller; in it, Coombs discussed the extent to which schools in the rest of the world lagged behind the “West” and also their inefficient educational planning, which could explain the economic turmoil observed in “non-Western” states and which could also cause problems for the “Western” financial

⁶⁹ Rickover, *Education and Freedom*, 157.

⁷⁰ Rickover, *Education and Freedom*, 42.

⁷¹ Bernhard Hemetsberger, “Citius, Altius, Fortius – Imperative von Statistiken zur Leistungsoptimierung,” *Vierteljahrsschrift für wissenschaftliche Pädagogik* 99 (2023): 25.

⁷² Gita Steiner-Khamsi, “The Politics of League Tables,” *Journal of Social Science Education* 1 (2003): 1–6.

⁷³ Hemetsberger, “Citius, Altius, Fortius,” 26–27.

market.⁷⁴ Coombs's argument applies a "Western" perspective to global contexts, thus subjecting conditions in "non-Western" areas to these considerations. He also initiates a competitive dynamic in the "West," using rhetoric such as "not falling behind,"⁷⁵ "catching up,"⁷⁶ "backwardness,"⁷⁷ "best practice," "efficiency," or "learning willingly from Finland,"⁷⁸ phrases which are familiar to us today and are still used almost constantly in educational research and practice under the aegis of supranational "Western" organizations like the OECD, UNESCO, and the World Bank.⁷⁹

5 Concluding Remarks

In concluding, I propose that this exploration of the "West" and school crisis narratives, as well as their inscribed competitive mode, opens theses for discussion and a final question.

Firstly, the idea of addressing social problems through public discourse where a future vision for the entire society is negotiated is a specifically "Western" one. Moreover, schools, as institutions meant to supply fundamental principles for all, in order to equip them to participate in public discourse, immediately become places to revise fundamental principles if they are no longer viable in times of crisis.

Secondly, the idea of the "West" is based on references to ancient Greek considerations of science, logic, and knowledge that are transmitted through schools. Identification with this in school crisis narratives accordingly leads to attributions to the "West." Interestingly, this idea has only been around for about two hundred years and withholds the fact that ancient Greek thought was lost to the "West" for a long time; it took multiple waves of transfer from regions coded as non-"Western" for this knowledge to arrive – via Byzantium, Persia, Arabia, and Egypt, to Spain, France, and Northern Italy – back in the "West."⁸⁰

74 Philip H. Coombs, *The World Educational Crisis: A Systems Analysis* (New York, London, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968).

75 Stefan T. Hopmann, "No Child, No School, No State Left Behind: Schooling in the Age of Accountability," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 40 (2008): 417–456.

76 Elfert and Ydesen, *Global Governance of Education*.

77 Keita Takayama, "The Politics of International League Tables: PISA in Japan's Achievement Crisis Debate," *Comparative Education* 44 (2008): 387–407.

78 Steiner-Khamsi, "League Tables."

79 Elfert and Ydesen, *Global Governance of Education*.

80 Zorn, "Das Denken der Anderen," 82.

Thirdly, if schools are in crisis, the existence of the “West” is subject to a threat that schools must counteract. The strong linkage of schooling and the “West” as a concept means that a crisis for one likewise endangers the other. Moreover, considerable public attention is directed to schools or the “West” when “culture wars” are detected in one or the other.

Additionally, *fourth*, tragic narratives of downfall and decay in “Western” schools dynamize, accelerate, and encourage efforts to preserve the “West.”

Finally, competitiveness also seems to be a specific feature of the idea of the “West,” especially when it comes to enhancing the performance of “Western” schools and thus their global dominance or global diffusion. David P. Baker portrayed a fully schooled (global) society,⁸¹ which is organized by school mechanisms such as competition, which has become universal. Particularly interesting in the last point is the possible dissolution of the idea of the “West” through its global generalization and the resulting unnecessary question of who or which nation should be attributed to the “West.” The fact that schools are attributed a significant role in this context, or that schools emerge as either under threat or the agent of salvation in the respective crisis negotiation of the “West,” presents a difficulty that is likely unsolvable and will probably become more radical as perceptions of (world) crises intensify, in turn fostering critique of the worldview, institutions and norms of the “West.”⁸²

Daniel-Pascal Zorn’s analysis emphasized that “Western thinking” measures everything else – including its own creations – against itself.⁸³ This holds true for both global school comparisons and for references to “origins” of schooling and science in the “West.” It thereby constantly seeks to overcome that which threatens to limit it, yet in doing so, it primarily limits itself. Consequently, “Western thinking” is, according to Zorn, thinking in infinite regress. This infinite regress arises as a logical structure through the desire to encompass everything as completely as possible, including one’s own conditions. We have seen this with crisis perceptions, as with school reforms, eager to fix schooling this time for future scenarios. In “Western thinking,” this claim to completeness is not only evident in providing explanations without major gaps and describing objects without blind spots. Instead of excluding tradition, it is integrated. Rational mastery – the history of one’s own thinking – should appear complete without being complete, that is, without endangering the knowledge system that generates this completeness ac-

⁸¹ David P. Baker, *The Schooled Society: The Educational Transformation of Global Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).

⁸² Nassehi, “Wo liegt der Westen?,” 118.

⁸³ Zorn, “Das Denken der Anderen,” 86–88.

cording to its own specifications.⁸⁴ Schools should pass on a rationality equipped for any future crises of the “West” without questioning its essential incompleteness, which requires school reforms to adapt to new crisis scenarios while concurrently legitimizing the institution’s existence and refreshing the idea of the “West.” The other or the alien is erased precisely through being represented as such i. e. as the other. It is not exclusion, but inclusion that is the most radical form of obliteration: Is that why schools are congested with “ideas” and the “West” is in trouble?

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⁸⁴ Zorn, “Das Denken der Anderen,” 88.

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