

The West

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The West is a fairly recent mythical construct. Older uses of "west" or its equivalent in other languages indicated a direction or an area on a given political map, such as the west-east division of the Roman Empire in the mC3, the division of the Christian church into Western and Eastern from C11 (R. Williams, 1983: 333), the "New World" of the Americas perceived from Europe, or the oceans located furthest west of the Central Kingdom (China). However, the globalizing phrase "the West" came into general use only over the past two centuries as the capital originating in Western Europe came to be seen as omnipresent in colonial domination world-wide. "The West" supposedly unifies a group of people called **Westerners** in terms of their residential geographies, traditions, races, pedigrees, and shared civilization; it appears to be a proper name and this is often marked by a capital letter, as it is in this book. However, the term is notoriously slippery, and the unity that it affirms has increasingly been challenged in recent decades.

Used adverbially, "west" suggests a direction and often a movement towards a more or less vaguely indicated place: "There lies your way, due West" wrote Shakespeare in *Twelfth Night* (1601). Associated with both the glowing color and growing darkness of sunset, "going west" is an old-fashioned phrase for death or disappearance ("dear old friends now 'gone west,'" 1915; "valuable evidence gone west," 1925), but it more powerfully carries in colonial contexts a utopian promise of space that is all the more alluring for being obscure: Henry Kingsley wrote in Australia of "splendid pastures, which stretch west farther than any man has been yet" (1859), while the famous injunction within the United States to "Go west, young man!" dates from 1851. These uses promote a fiction that "the west" is a definite place as well as a direction or an ever-receding frontier, making it easy to assume that the term can refer to a specific geographic region on the surface of the earth.

However, since the earth is a globe no single, stable location can lay exclusive claim to be west, since any point in the world can be so called from another. A global West can only be delimited within this mundane, universally available "west" if it is distinguished on non-geographical grounds from something *non-west* – the rest of the world, as in **the West and the Rest**. Here, the definition of "the West" is dependent upon how "the Rest" is determined: in 1297 "Engelond" is the far west of the world, but from the C16 and C17 an opposition between Europe and "Asia" or "the Orient" became active, with Orientalism emerging as a field of study and an aesthetic cult from the C18: "Once did she hold the gorgeous east in fee; And was the safeguard of the west" writes Wordsworth of Venice (1802). As these examples suggest, the West can be imagined as an identifiable cartographic referent only when the Rest is also thought of as fixed: "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" sang Kipling erroneously (1892). Yet the **non-West** also moves according to context and political need: defined from the C11 as the Islamic world in contrast to either the Christian or the Greco-Roman West (R. Williams,

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1983: 333), it could stretch from the Mediterranean to India and China; shrink to a single enemy ("in the West there seems to be an impression that the fleet of Japan is a mere matter of show," 1902); and, in the C20 and especially after World War II, flow back to Europe as a communism opposed to the non-communist "Western" states.

Even as a cartographic index, "the West" has little coherence. The majority of people living in Western Europe believe themselves to be Westerners, but at the same time many white people in South Africa and Australia insist they too are Westerners. Conversely, people of color in North America are not necessarily recognized as Westerners even if most residents in North America have claimed, especially since the end of World War II, that they too are in the West. So it may appear that the West is primarily a racial index rather than a cartographic one; it is closely associated with racial fantasies of whiteness. But this assessment is at odds with the historical fact that Eastern Europe has been generally excluded from the West, not only during the Cold War but throughout the C20. Moreover, the racial notion of whiteness is loose enough to allow groups who may be excluded from whiteness in some regions of the world – peoples from the Middle East, for example – to be recognized as white in East Asia or North America. As people move from one place to another, their racial identity may well change. Like the concept of race in general, whiteness as a social category is historically so arbitrary that it can hardly be an index of a stable identity.

However, "the West" as a mythical construct achieves powerful effects as it gathers varying and contradicting properties around itself; like the idea of the Orient, "the West" has "a history and a tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence" (Said, 1978: 5). Yet it is important not to forget that what we believe we apprehend by this myth is ambiguous and incongruous, precisely because "the West" is a reality whose supposed objectivity is globally accepted; as a mythic element it still regulates our hierarchical way of assigning a place to peoples and institutions on the world-historical map. Until a few decades ago, "the West" was unquestioningly used as a historical index to measure how modern a society might be in relation to another, thus mapping geographic location on to a historicist chronology of progress. Beyond as well as within the so-called developed countries, "modernization" was **Westernization**, and this formula made it possible to overlook painfully obvious problems with the idea that some societies run ahead of others and that the former are located in the West while the Rest lag behind. In fact every social formation contains things new and ancient just as it includes people young and old, but the fantasy of linear progress represses this complexity. Predictably, "the West" then serves as a norm of modernity against which something specifically local and **non-Western** is frozen in time as non-modern. This does not only lead to the simple denigration of the latter. Typically in ethnic nationalism, a "local" culture is valorized in systematic rivalry with the putative traits of the West.

Thus the West plays an ideological role in organizing desires in non-Western societies as much as in so-called Western ones. Until the 1980s many inhabitants of the Rest imagined

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the West to be the ideal marker of their future and the goal toward which their societies must progress. Recently, however, the power of "the West" as a social imaginary seems to be fading. An increasing number of young people are aware of "non-Western" aspects of societies in Europe and North America as well as of the "Western" aspects of life in many societies in the so-called non-Western parts of the world. It seems that, being neither as threatening nor as alluring as it once was, the figure of "the West" may be to some extent losing its grip on desires in many parts of the world in spite of its militant proponents – and the military might at their disposal.

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See: ***COLONIALISM, ETHNICITY, ORIENTALISM, RACE, SPACE.***