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1. The Rise Of Occidental Heroes And Villains

The Rise Of Occidental Heroes And Villains

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Body

Civilised or overly materialistic? Alistair **Bonnett** asks how the West is seen through Eastern eyes.

Many academic fashions spring from nowhere and return there soon after. The study of occidentalism is unlikely to be one of them. Western nations are sealing off their borders out of fear of what "they" think about "us", and so understanding the genesis of ideas and images of the West has become more than an ivory-tower concern. Over the past decade, historians, literary critics and social scientists from many different parts of the world have been turning their attention to the West. In the main, they have been driven not by hostility or adoration but by the realisation that the idea of the West is central to the examination of non-Western identities from pan-Arabism to pan-Asianism.

It is unfortunate but inevitable that occidentalism will be read as a footnote to Edward Said's Orientalism. He covered Western conceptions of the Orient, so the next obvious step is to give a little credence to Eastern conceptions of the occident. What this rather suspect lineage bypasses is the idea that the West has an older and richer heritage outside its boundaries than within them. Moreover, the history of how "the West" was devised and deployed is also the history of the emergence of post-traditional societies.

The first sustained elaboration in English of the West as a political and cultural unit I know of is from a spiky social Darwinist, Benjamin Kidd.

His Principles of Western Civilisation (1902) looked forwards to a world of ceaseless struggle. Kidd reassured his readers that: "We are par excellence the military peoples, not only of the entire world, but of the evolutionary process itself." There are, of course, many much earlier uses of the term.

Yet these neither reflected nor established the West as a social and political identity. Hegel famously built on traditional notions of human destiny travelling westwards into order to locate the Enlightenment in Protestant Germany. Yet even Hegel's West, while symbolically loaded, remained thinly sketched.

In the past century, this peripatetic political unit became a talisman of intellectual authority. Generations of students became immured behind brick-size books on Western philosophy, history, architecture, literature, science and art. Both anti-authoritarianism and anti-Eurocentrism became similarly trapped. An alternative tradition evolved, incorporating an eclectic mix of avant-gardists, environmentalists and anti-racists that defined itself through antagonism to the West. All this activity has given the West an aura of solidity and depth that is largely undeserved.

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The 20th century saw the promotion of "the West" in Western Europe, in large part because of the abandonment of racial vocabulary (more specifically, the concept of "white civilisation") and the need to develop a non-communist identity in the wake of the Bolshevik revolution. Yet "the West" is such a hazy concept that it may not merit the term "identity". It is a grabbable badge of authority. In 1935, Hitler proclaimed that his political programme was designed to secure "the renaissance of the West".

In Britain Nazism was imagined, as the title of Aurel Kolnai's 1938 book had it, as *The War Against the West*. Today, the West, we are told, is engaged in "a war against terrorism". But who would consider themselves "Western"?

If you want to find sustained debates on the meaning and nature of the West, turn to Asia. For Sun Ge, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the West is "a category with almost no significance to intellectuals of the West". By comparison, "in the narratives of the Asian intellectuals (it) functions as the medium that pushes Asians into forming self-recognition". Sun's observation is echoed throughout Asian **occidental** studies. The tone of such work is more self-critical than anti-Western. The Egyptian philosopher Hassan Hanafi's anti-colonial *Introduction to the Science of Occidentalism* (which appeared in Arabic in 1991) is something of an exception. Indeed, the polemical bite of earlier and militantly anti-Western occident watchers is in danger of seeming anachronistic. Yet works such as *Plagued by the West*, an anti-Shah polemic of 1962 by Iranian dissident Jalal Al-e Ahmad, are still worth reading. "It appears from history that we have always been watching the West," groans Al-e Ahmad, adding that Iranians "used the term 'western' before foreigners called us 'eastern'".

To consider the idea of the West in the East, we must examine how stereotypes of the West have been employed in the service of national and political ambitions. In Japan, the early 18th-century court intellectual Arai Hakuseki contrasted Eastern "spiritual civilisation" with the "material civilisation" of the West. The distinction fed into an evolving debate on the character of the West. Pro and anti-Westerners vied to create the most plausible interpretation. Thus Japan's most influential Westerniser, Fukuzawa Yukichi (1834-1901), engaged established stereotypes when he called for Japan to "leave Asia" and enter the "rational civilisation" of the West. The most striking attribute of Fukuzawa's West is that it is a meritocracy. In *Outline of a Theory of Civilisation*, Fukuzawa depicts the West as an open society in which intellectual inquiry occurs "right down to the remotest village". "This process is repeated many times," he tells us, and, "in the end, a national opinion takes shape." For Fukuzawa, the West does not contain cleverer people, but values clever people more. He complains that in Japan people "were leading inconspicuous lives as doctors or writers... All of them were learned men who could not realise their ambitions."

Fukuzawa's image of the West is as a political lever. He was developing a model of the occident designed to service his ambitions for the redistribution of power between the traditional elite and an aspirational class.

Fukuzawa provides an example of how even pro-Western positions need to be understood as creative deployments of the idea of the West. More critical stereotypes of the West require a similar explanation. From Russia to Turkey, Nigeria to Korea, "the West" cannot be grasped simply as a force from without, calling forth modernity.

In my book, *The Idea of the West*, I have traced a number of modernities, including the spiritual modernity of Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, the organic nationalist modernity of Turkish activist Ziya Gokalp, and the communist modernity of the Bolsheviks. In each case, I depict people putting the idea of the West to work, sculpting their vision of the modern with wildly varying stereotypes of the West.

One of the paradoxes of renewed interest in occidentalism is that, in the US especially, the notion that non-Westerners are hopelessly ignorant about the West is heard with some frequency. "What they don't get about the West" is a key rationalisation for "why they hate us".

The title of Hoover Institution researcher Victor Davis Hanson's *Why the West Has Won* captures a mood of belligerence that would have embarrassed even Benjamin Kidd. In 2002, Davis wrote a piece called "Occidentalism: The false West" for *The National Review*. He argues that "the East continues to stereotype the West, with not a clue about its intrinsic nature". Hanson portrays non-Westerners as baffled by a "mysterious

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Western paradigm - the freedom to speak freely". Hanson tells us that the most ignorant American knows more about "what his own culture is, and is not, about; what the Arab world stands, and does not stand, for" than the "most sophisticated" intellectual of Middle Eastern origin. In January of the same year, another article, by Avishai Margalit and Ian Buruma, titled "Occidentalism" appeared in The New York Times Review of Books. The authors describe occidentalism as "a cluster of images and ideas of the West in the minds of its haters". They add that those who view the West from afar hate its secularity and rationalism: "Occidentalists extol soul or spirit but despise intellectuals and intellectual life."

The notion that non-Westerners do not know the "real West" is paradoxical.

The sharp end of Western influence and power is not felt in Western societies but elsewhere. Moreover, debate on the meaning and nature of the West is, if anything, less developed in the West than in other places. The English or French may plausibly argue that they know England or France better than foreigners. But no comparable claim can be made by Westerners.

The reason all this matters is not simply that it helps us towards a more accurate view of how and why ideas of the West were put together. What it also suggests is that modernity itself may be better seen as emerging in numerous places rather than just one. For several centuries, intellectuals from the majority world have been employing the idea of the West to map out pathways into new, post-traditional, social territory. Whether we approve of these routes or not we should still conclude that to ask "whose West, whose modernity?" is increasingly necessary.

Alistair **Bonnett** is professor of social geography at the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology at Newcastle upon Tyne University. His book The Idea of the West: Culture, Politics and History is published by Palgrave next month, Pounds 17.99.

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