



The Decline of the West? The Fate of the Atlantic Community after the Cold War

October 15 - 17, 2009

Conference at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, sponsored by German Historical Institute and the University of Pennsylvania

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Call for Papers (Deadline: November 30, 2008)

Two decades after the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War it is timely and necessary to assess the historical impact of these momentous developments on the West. Victory can be as unsettling in its own way as defeat, and recent events have shown that the West's "victory" in the Cold War has raised important questions about the nature and future of the West as a political, cultural, and economic space in a world where older divisions have passed away.

This conference aims to consider those questions and to contribute to the historicizing of the European and German re-unification process by mapping the North American, European, and global intellectual responses to the events of the past three decades. It will ask how the end of the Cold War changed European and North American as well as non-Western perceptions of the West. By attempting to place the end of the Cold War and European unification within a larger historical context, the conference will examine the extent to which the tectonic shifts that have occurred since the 1970s contributed to rethinking of the West and to what extent the events of 1989/90 advanced and transformed that rethinking. This should help to historically contextualize more recent transatlantic rifts, and contemporary discussions about the relationship between "the West and the Rest."

Throughout the twentieth century European and North American, as well as non-European intellectuals struggled over what exactly constituted "The West." As an ideological construct, the idea was continuously revised even before it became enshrined as an intellectual orthodoxy underpinning the Cold War Atlantic community. In recent years political scientists and historians have made considerable progress in understanding how the idea of a Western community of shared values and a shared political culture emerged during and after World War II. This recent historical research argues that the modern idea of the West is a relatively recent phenomenon. In part it re-appropriated older European concepts of otherness that seemed to go back to antiquity (such as a supposed age-old East/West divide). As a political term, the modern West first came into existence after 1914, used both to highlight the antagonistic goals of the warring European parties and to help overcome the deep divisions between the allied and associated powers of Britain, France, and the United States.

It was after World War II and the defeat of Fascism, National Socialism, and Japanese Imperialism that this concept of the modern West reached its zenith. In the 1950s European and North American "consensus" intellectuals further refined "the West" by contrasting it with competing Fascist and Communist modernities. This also meant that as an intellectual concept, the West was now more narrowly defined. It was frequently used synonymously with the Western alliance (NATO). At the same time the anti-Communist version of the West helped to wed sceptical, post-fascist continental European intellectuals and politicians to the notion of an Atlantic community. In the United States it undercut long-standing claims of exceptionalism. Liberal America (to which anti-Nazi European émigrés had made important contributions) redefined itself as Western, whereas the exceptionalist tradition became now more pronounced on the right, mostly among non-traditional conservatives. In the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and other former colonial powers, notions of the West helped overcome imperial self-definitions.

This (liberal) Cold War narrative of an Atlantic or Western community was often constructed around universalizing social science notions, such as modernization and secularization, that were grounded in the works of Max Weber and others. In the postwar period this refined idea of a single (liberal) West gradually overwhelmed and pushed aside

older competing models such as Anglo-Saxon (ethnic or racial) solidarity, (Catholic) continental European Occidentalism, Protestant ideas of religious mission, secular European civilizing colonialism, Socialist and Communist internationalism, Fascist autarchy, and national isolationism.

Although competing “Western” visions never totally vanished after World War II, the West was being cast in highly monolithic terms. It denoted the liberal capitalist democratic order, whose emergence was retroactively tied to the eighteenth century Atlantic revolutions. During the 1960s this idea of the West came under pressure from strong intellectual counter-currents. In the U.S., the old isolationist cultural streak gained new currency with the rise of a new Right, which fused anticommunism with a preference for unilateral American action. In Western Europe, neutralism and anti-Americanism remained a concern for pro-American intellectuals and decision-makers. Within the context of the decolonization of European empires and the American civil rights movement, a powerful anti-imperialist critique emerged on both sides of the Atlantic. It was soon picked up by the 1960s student movement, which developed one of the most successful intellectual critiques of the West as a modernizing project. Pointing to perceived injustices and inconsistencies (most prominently the US intervention in Vietnam), the New Left questioned the ideological underpinnings of the Atlantic alliance and radically challenged the idea of a Western ideological unity.

Against this historical background of Western cohesion and consent, the conference attempts to pick up the story in the 1970s and 1980s and take it to the present. It will examine how hegemonic ideas of a liberal West lost their attractiveness during the second half of the 1970s, and to what extent they could be maintained and revived.

Some of the questions conference presentations should address could include:

- How did detente and the deflation of the East-West antagonism influence ideas about the West in the 1970s?
- To what extent did the shifting domestic paradigms in the late 1970s, such as concerns about the future of the welfare state, prepare the ground for competing Western visions? In both North America and Western Europe the Keynesian growth model was strained, although it was only in Britain and the US that the libertarian critique gained considerable political ground.
- How did Western concerns with human rights and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan lead to different reactions on both sides of the Atlantic?
- How did the peace movements of the 1970s and 1980s, or their precursors in the student protest movements of the 1960s, encourage competing visions of how the West should deal with its antagonists?
- How did non-political networks—business connections, academic and cultural exchanges, tourism—reinforce or challenge notions of a coherent West?
- How and for how long did the revolutions of 1989/90 reinforce the idea of a Western community? What other developments worked against the unity of the West?
- Where do regional concerns, such as American impulses toward the Pacific Rim or European attempts to establish an ever-closer supra-national European Union, fit into larger conceptions of the West?

To keep the conference focused, paper proposals (2 pages maximum, plus CV) are invited that concentrate on intellectual efforts to make sense of “The West.” Contributions may cover parts or all of the period from the mid-1970s onwards, with the high tide of detente and the oil price crisis as chronological and conceptual points of departure. Proposals are welcome which address developments after 9/11, when the soul-searching about what distinguished the West from “The Rest” became more urgent. Contributors should make an effort to frame their questions within a longue-durée context and locate them within transnational contexts. Papers should focus on intellectual debates, which are by definition distinct from specific policy initiatives but often intersect with debates within government circles. For the purpose of this conference, the “intellectual” is being used as an analytical concept, and does not necessarily mean “outsiders” or “critical voices” (as older definitions of “the intellectual” often had it). Contributions may focus on a wide range of members of cultural elites, who see their purpose in creating meaning through public discourse.

Please send paper proposals (2 pages, plus CV) by **November 30, 2008** to Philipp Gassert at gassert@ghi-dc.org.