THE DECLINE OF THE WEST?
THE FATE OF THE ATLANTIC COMMUNITY
AFTER THE COLD WAR

Conference at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, October 15-17, 2009. Co-sponsored by the GHI, the University of Pennsylvania’s Department of History and Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures, the DAAD, the American Council on Germany, and the Heidelberg Center for American Studies. Conveners: Philipp Gassert (University of Augsburg), Ronald Granieri (University of Pennsylvania), Eric Jarosinski (University of Pennsylvania), and Frank Trommler (University of Pennsylvania). Made possible by a grant from the University of Pennsylvania’s University Research Foundation as well as the University of Pennsylvania’s Mellon Cultural Diversity Grant. Participants: Riccardo Bavaj (University of St. Andrews, Scotland), Elizabeth Borgwardt (Washington University), Uta Balbier (GHI), Thomas Banchoff (Georgetown University), Volker Berghahn (Columbia University), Stephen Brockmann (Carnegie Mellon University), Lily Gardner Feldman (Johns Hopkins University, American Institute for Contemporary German Studies), Dorothea Fischer-Hornung (University of Heidelberg), Sandeep Gopalan (University of Reading School of Law), William Glenn Gray (Purdue University), Ellen Kennedy (University of Pennsylvania), Martin Klimke (GHI), Ariane Leendertz (University of Munich), Thomas W. Maulucci (American International College), Wilfried Mausbach (Heidelberg Center for American Studies), John A. McCarthy (Vanderbilt University), Adam Michnik (Editor in Chief, Gazeta Wyborcza), Samuel Moyn (Columbia University), Ben Nathans (University of Pennsylvania), Simon Richter (University of Pennsylvania), Mary Elise Sarotte (University of Southern California), Bryan van Sweringen (US Army Europe, Pentagon, Washington DC), Henry Teune (University of Pennsylvania), Martin Thunert (Heidelberg Center for American Studies), and John C. Torpey (CUNY Graduate Center).

Adam Michnik opened the conference with a keynote speech, “The Decline of the West Seen from Poland,” in which he drew on his own experiences in the Polish opposition to communism to link the concept of the West to democracy and tolerance. Although noting the problems and doubts facing the contemporary West and the United States in particular, Michnik saw no alternative to the Western model, and concluded that critiques drawing on the West’s own intellectual and moral traditions are proof both of its cultural significance, and the need to defend its basic principles. “A sinful
democracy,” he declared, “is better than an innocent dictatorship.” His perspective, at once knowledgable, ironic, critical, and hopeful, set the stage for the discussions to follow.

The first full day of the conference consisted of three panels and a roundtable discussion, all of which sought to analyze theoretical and cultural foundations of the West. The opening panel addressed the concept of the West and the perception among intellectuals of a post-1968 crisis in Western civilization. Riccardo Bavaj’s paper “A Cultural Crisis of the West? Liberal Intellectuals and the Challenges to ‘Western Civilization’ in the 1970s” explored how the student movements of the late 1960s sparked the Left-leaning intellectuals Richard Löwenthal, David Bell, and Raymond Aron to revisit earlier hypotheses about the decline of Western civilization. Western culture was closely intertwined with ideals of liberty, progress, and stability, and as an intellectual space for negotiating the tensions accompanying modernization and industrialization. Bavaj proposed that the notion of “Western decline” originated in the existential crises of rapidly transforming societies. In her contribution to the panel, “Complex Problems in a Complex World: America, Europe and the Postindustrial Challenge of ‘the West’ in the 1970s,” Ariane Leendertz agreed with Bavaj’s assessment. She asserted that the perceived decline of the West and emphasis on conflicts reflected a process of sociocultural transformation since the late 1960s. Leendertz noted that the cultural differences between the United States and Europe were eventually translocated into the political arena. Having successfully ushered Europe into the modern industrial era, Leendertz contended, the Americans lost interest in Europe. She therefore saw the crisis of the West partially as a crisis of the United States. In response to Bavaj and Leendertz, Thomas Maulucci inquired whether or not the political move to the right, especially in the United States, Britain, and West Germany in the 1980s was conceived as a means to stabilize the cultural crisis, or the perception thereof.

The second panel examined the West at the international level. Sandeep Gopalan’s paper “The Two ‘Wests’: International Law in the U.S. and Europe,” built on an overarching theme of the conference: the existence of multiple conceptions of “West.” Like Leendertz, Gopalan saw a clear demarcation of two different “Wests,” separating the United States and Europe, particularly in the application of international law. He noted that the two “Wests” instrumentalize
international law and its applications for their respective needs, perhaps owing to domestic constitutional cultures. Mary Sarotte employed an architectural framework to examine changes in the post-1989 international order in a paper entitled, “1989 and the Architecture of Order: The Competition to Lead the Post-Cold War World.” She asserted that, while there were various models for post-Cold War order in the aftermath of the 1989 revolutions, the speed of the transition favored pre-existing structures that ultimately prolonged the life of Cold War institutions such as NATO and the European Community. Noting the stark difference between Gopalan’s and Sarotte’s arguments, commentator William Glenn Gray posed the question of how the continuation of Cold War institutions impairs the West, and if a combination of the Americans and European perspectives would create a more cooperative model.

The third panel considered how human rights discourse impacted American and Soviet societies during and after the Cold War. Elizabeth Borgwardt examined the genesis of the UN-adopted Nuremberg Principles, which held individual and state actors to international legal statutes, and which the conservative American opposition attempted to block with the Bricker Amendment. Her paper, “Politics, Culture, and the Limits of Law in Generating Human Rights Norms,” suggested that Cold War fears fed concerns about international meddling in American domestic affairs. Although the amendment ultimately failed because President Eisenhower saw it as curtailing American foreign policy, Borgwardt nonetheless illustrated the primacy of domestic politics in determining the acceptance of international legislation. Benjamin Nathans’s paper “Soviet Rights Talk” traced human rights discourse and practice in the Soviet Union to the “strange” emergence of Russia in the European human rights system. He used the “all people’s discussion” that accompanied each successive version of the Soviet constitution in the post-Stalinist era as a lens through which to view shifting notions of rights among the Soviet public and the government. Extending his analysis to contemporary international legal precedents, Nathans concluded that Russia, in contrast to the United States, consistently embraces international human rights and legal decisions, at least rhetorically if not in practice.

The day ended with a roundtable discussion on approaches for studying the evolving definition of the West. Lily Gardner Feldman discussed how German foreign relations repaired Western Realpolitik
in its pursuit of reconciliation for the Nazi past and the Holocaust. She outlined Germany’s quadripartite model for redefining the West’s international relations as exemplified in its rehabilitative foreign policy towards France, Israel, Poland, and the Czech Republic. Philipp Gassert, reflecting earlier papers by Leendertz and Bavaj, examined the West as an intellectual framework—a construct that is defined by scholars, American Studies programs, and institutions such as the Ford Foundation. He noted that the “transnational project” of American Studies is a clear indicator of American political sentiment. Thus, the influx of American capital to Eastern Europe after 1989 marked a shift to a more multinational model. John McCarthy continued the discussion about post-1989 implications on perceptions of the West. He noted that the once bipolar world has become multi-polar. McCarthy called for the incorporation of “European Studies” into academic programs, and further noted that the reconceptualization of national “selfhood” as European has challenged views of the United States.

The third and final day of the conference examined cultural bonds that bridge the Atlantic divide. The first panel approached the West as experience: Stephen Brockmann’s paper “The Cultural Paradox of Atlanticism” investigated popular culture as the binding element of the West that transcends even German-American political and economic disagreement. Referencing the German critique of American popular culture in 1968, Brockmann suggested an approach that considered this criticism as proof of successful German democratization. Continued enthusiasm for American values such as democracy and human rights, he concluded, could prevent a decline of the cultural West. In her talk “(Re) Making the East and West in Film” on American Cold War movies and their less successful remakes after the end of the Cold War, Dorothea Fischer-Hornung argued that Hollywood utilized American anxieties about loss of individuality, domestic communism (The Manchurian Candidate, 1963, 2004), and internal subversion (The Invasion of the Body Snatchers, 1956, 1993, 2007) as vehicles to complicate East-West binaries. The remakes paid tribute to the persistent fear of subversion, but shifted their focus to North-South dichotomies: corporatism has replaced communism, and American economic interests are linked to global issues. In his comments, Frank Trommler underscored that American popular culture, rather than European high culture, provided a common point of reference for Euro-American civilization: consumption. Though the discussion was marked by differing views on
Americanization, anti-Americanism, and Hollywood’s overbearing tendency to conflate the United States and the West, participants agreed that American cultural exports formulated a language of performance in imagery and plot that has indeed become global.

In the second panel, John C. Torpey and Uta A. Balbier agreed that the religious divergence between North America and Europe tends to be overstated; both continents are foundationally Christian, which provides common ground, even if differences have recently become more apparent. Torpey presented a sociological analysis of statistical data on European and American secularism in his paper “The Return of God and the Decline of the West.” Both continents experienced secularization during the Cold War, though to differing degrees and with different outcomes. The emerging Cold War culture of disbelief has triggered a backlash in the United States, however, which overemphasizes the role of religion in public affairs today. Balbier’s paper set a different tone with the case study “Crusading against Secularization—Billy Graham in Germany.” Balbier investigated the appeal evangelical missionary Billy Graham had to German audiences in the 1950s and 1960s. Public viewings of Graham’s services bridged the divide across the Atlantic by making Germans part of a growing global media society. Balbier argued that this sense of transnational belonging and a Wirtschaftswunder search for values beyond materialism attracted Germans to Graham’s religious spectacle.

Volker Berghahn’s public lecture on “The Fallacy of Triumphalism” that afternoon attracted a broad audience beyond the conference participants. Reflecting on the lessons American intellectuals learned from the collapse of the Soviet Union—leaving the United States the “victor” of the Cold War—Berghahn claimed that triumphalist attitudes among American elites hurt domestic and international policy making. These sentiments found expression in post-Cold-War unilateralism, which failed under the second Bush administration as the United States approached an economic and political state that is best described by Paul Kennedy’s concept of imperial overstretch. Berghahn criticized American elites for failing to learn the right lessons from the end of the Cold War, missing the opportunity to promote lower military spending and to invest in reforms of social institutions and the economic system. The current economic crisis is both the result of that failure and an indication of the problems to come. In his comment, Henry Teune
responded with his own critique of American post-Cold War policy, emphasizing the short-term strengths and long-term weaknesses of many decisions. Ronald Granieri used his comment to argue that only an equal partnership with the European Union and a renewed sense of shared responsibility within the transatlantic community would save the United States from collapsing under the burden of an overstretched empire.

The concluding roundtable discussion featured two main presentations. Martin Thunert extracted three concepts of the West from Western and non-Western literature: the territorial West marked by NATO, EU, and EFTA; the material West, driven by interests rather than values; and the philosophical West based on the equality of men and anchored in modern science. Challenged by Afrocentrism, Asian values, and anti-modern radical Islam, which are all part of the “Rise of the Rest” in a post-American world, the West has lost its monopoly on interpreting the world. While today’s West is open to all, Thunert argued, it faces a paradox: How can a democratic minority sustain a predominantly undemocratic world while maintaining its support for democracy? Thunert’s presentation suggested that one fruitful way of thinking about “the West” is to look through the eyes of the “Other.” Bryan van Sweringen picked up Volker Berghahn’s discussion of American imperial overstretch. With the double-involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States has made a precarious move. These operations have defined the limits of U.S. military power, as guerilla fighters and terrorists undermine U.S. strategic efforts. What should be essential to the West is to think more about allocation of resources and to consider ways to defend what it has already achieved. The spirited discussions after each panel and at the conclusion left participants with a productive uneasiness over a simplified concept of “the West.” The multiplicity of definitions, such as Western civilization, Western values, and the Cold War West, confirms a need for more research on the West and its possible decline. Despite grim outlooks predicting a “decline of the West,” Thunert suggested that we should rather see this process as a normalization of relations. The postwar 1940s and 1950s had posed an exceptional situation in Europe, a vacuum that Americans were ready to fill. What we see happening in transatlantic relations today, he concluded, is a rebirth of “the West.”

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