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# *“Is there a West?”*

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# **IS THERE A WEST?**

By *Dario Quintavalle*

Index	1
Preface	2
<b>1. Introduction</b>	3
<b>2. West of what? <i>Origins and evolution of the concept of “the West”</i></b>	4
<b>3. From Eleven Nine to Nine Eleven: <i>from cohesion to division</i></b>	5
3a. Two Wests?	7
<b>4. Manic depressive West: <i>the self perception of the West between optimism and sense of decline.</i></b>	8
4a. Triumphalism: Eurocentricism and the American tradition	9
4b. The declinist tradition	10
4c. Prophets of decline: Spengler and Toynbee	12
<b>5. The West, today</b>	14
5.a West, where and what?	14
5.b West, when?	17
5.c West, whiter?	18
<b>6. The West and the future. Conclusions and prescriptions</b>	19
Bibliography	23

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***This work is dedicated to Laura, with love***

## Preface

*I choose this topic because I deemed it was the most stimulant among those proposed to the participants of GCSP ITC.*

*A security policy analyst is asked to make forecasts about the developing trends of international relations. When you try to see in the future, and you ask yourself: "Where we are going?" it is necessary to understand where we come from. The past can influence the future, but the way it does is not so automatic as one may believe.*

*When one turns to the past in order to predict the future, he will focus on certain aspects, and overlook others. In a sort of way, history is not a matter of reconstruction, but of positive construction. The perception of the importance of historical facts depends from interpretations and points of view, and those who make those interpretations are deeply influenced by received thoughts, commonplaces, and previous thinking over the subject.*

*There is currently a big debate in the literature about the actual existence of the West. Many commentators in those last years discussed different theories, all of them having one thing in common: that the West is in decline, or divided, or no more relevant. I tried to prove they are wrong.*

*I reviewed this debate, but I didn't stop there: I choose to try to find the common roots of it, in order to show that the idea of a fading, or divided, or collapsing West is not new or original as it may seem, but has a long and deep tradition in the Western thinking. By highlighting this tradition of biased thinking I tried to understand what the West is, or is not, and this way to better focus the nature of a concept which is deeply volatile, and indeterminate, but because of such ambiguity is still vital, relevant, and fertile.*

*In fact, when you are asked to answer such a question as: "Is there a West" you cannot only limit to its actual existence, but should also inquire about its vitality: actually, most of those who wrote about the West thought that yes, there is a West, but it is moribund.*

*Let's be clear, this is a conceptual paper. I did not address problems of petty politics. Still, this is a paper about security policy. The West I'm talking about is a security policy actor, not simply a philosophical concept or a cultural phenomenon.*

*Police stories come in two categories: those where you discover the murderer at the end, and those where the name of the murderer (usually, the butler) is revealed at the very beginning.*

*When I started my readings, 6 months ago, I was deeply convinced that there was no such thing called "the West". I gradually changed my mind.*

*I invite the reader to take my hand and follow me in a short intellectual trip through the history of an idea.*

*“Many people in the West are good and gentle people”  
Osama bin Laden<sup>1</sup>*

## **1. Introduction**

Is there a West? One could give this apparently simple question a simple, Cartesian-like, answer: yes, there is a West, as everybody thinks there is. Yet, when it comes to defining what is the West, where it is, who is in and who is out, and the meaning of it, there is the utmost incertitude.

Gone are the days when a (seemingly) united West celebrated its bloodless victory over the communist menace. It wasn't a mere victory of force, but of values. After a decade in which the West failed in imposing a new world order, it found itself divided and impotent facing the new terrorist menace.

What was supposed to be a block united not only by interests, but by values and culture, seemed to split soon after it was deprived of a common enemy.

One could ask: so was the West merely a *side*? Does it need an enemy, or at least a competitor, to exist? Or is it a civilization, which can be defined by itself, without the need for an alter ego? And even if it is a civilization, why does it fail to keep its unity?

Is it possible that the victory of the West over the East may be like that of the Greeks against the Persians? Yes, the Greeks had much in common: a cultural, linguistic and religious common tradition. Thus they were able to unite against a common threat. But their failure to keep united after the threat passed made them prey to another more powerful conqueror, the Romans.

From a security policy perspective, asking if there is such a thing called 'the West', therefore, means asking the following questions:

Is this concept still politically relevant? If for the moment the West is presumed to encompass primarily Western Europe and United States, can Europe and United States still walk together? Are they bound by more profound ties than the menace of a common enemy? Will the West be able to shape the 21st century as it did the 19th and the 20th? Are the present divisions of the West temporary, or we are witnessing a new shift in history?

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted in Anonymous, *Imperial Hubris. Why the West is losing the war on terror*, Brassey's, DC, 2004, page 156

This paper seeks to address some of these questions. After seeing why the problem is raised today, I will examine what are the origins of this concept, to investigate if the West is a concept limited to the Cold War (and therefore no more actual now that the Cold War is over) or if it is more ancient.

In this paper, I will demonstrate that there has always been a 'crisis' of the West; that the West has created inside itself its own competitors; that the idea of a divided and failing or 'decadent' West is as ancient as the use of the term "West" itself, and therefore *nihil sub sole novi*. That the enemies of the West are inside the West itself. Further, I will show that the different sources of the West - the Christian civilization, the Roman-Christian universalism, the coexistence of two different paradigms of liberalism, the Anglo-Saxon and the French one - make this concept highly ambiguous, but at the same time that it is not *despite*, but *because of* this ambiguity that the concept is so vital.

## **2. West of what? Origins and evolution of the concept of "the West"**

What do people exactly mean when they talk about "the West"?

The West is at once both an equivocal and an ethnocentric definition. Apparently it refers to geography, but its essence is much more political. Politics knows many others of such supposedly geographical but actually political definition such as "North and South" or "The Balkans" (a mountain, a region, or a way of life?).

Despite the many books on the subject, a definitive and accepted history of the genesis and the evolution of the concept of "West" has yet probably to be written.<sup>2</sup> Most of the authors take the concept essentially for granted, without much enquiring about its origins. In common parlance, the term 'West' is used as a vague synonym of America, or America and Europe, or America, Europe, Japan and the Anglosphere. In actual fact many authors who talk about the West mean a different thing, like the transatlantic partnership, or NATO.

We can probably trace the first entrance of this term in European history to the partition of the Roman Empire by Diocletianus in two parts: the Eastern and the Western. According to the medievalist historian Franco Cardini,<sup>3</sup> the invention of the Occident

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<sup>2</sup> See bibliography

<sup>3</sup> Cardini, Franco, *L'invenzione dell'Occidente* (The invention of the West), Il Cerchio 2004, page 12

starts when Pope Pius II, the humanist Enea Silvio Piccolomini, elaborates the thesis of the identity of Western Europe and Christendom.

The appearance in world politics of the modern concept of West is much more recent, but had different meanings: in 19<sup>th</sup> century ‘West’ to Europeans meant ‘Western Europe’, while for the American inventors of the Hemispherical Geopolitics around president Monroe (1823),<sup>4</sup> the ‘Western Hemisphere’ was the American continent while Eurasia was the ‘Eastern’ one. It should also be noted that in the purest American experience, the West is not the *core*, but the *border* of the civilization.<sup>5</sup>

Then, there is the ‘Cold War West’. During the Cold War, the World was conceptually divided into three parts: the “First World” was the Western bloc, composed of NATO and other countries aligned with the United States. The ‘Second World’ was the Eastern Bloc, the countries belonging to COMECON and Warsaw Pact as well as other communist countries as China. The ‘Third World’ consisted of non-aligned countries. This definition was both political and economic, but the two spheres were not coincident: thus, the First World was roughly liberal and capitalistic; the Second was communist and had state-planned centralized economies; the Third comprised a broad spectrum of developed and underdeveloped countries with different economic systems, often characterized by a different degree of intervention of the State. Politically, the West was also the “Free World”, where *‘free’* meant, quite hypocritically, ‘free from communism’, and therefore comprised democracies and cruel dictatorial regimes.

In the post-Cold War world the notion of West – like a character in search for an author - needs to be redefined.

### **3. From Eleven Nine to Nine Eleven:***from cohesion to division*

Thursday 11/9, 1989, was a fantastic day. The Italian television – as many others - started broadcasting images from Berlin, with the sole musical comment of the “Ode to Joy” from the Ninth symphony of Beethoven. The Berlin Wall had been opened, and

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<sup>4</sup> Cardini, Franco, *L'invenzione dell'Occidente* (The invention of the West), Il Cerchio 2004, page 14

<sup>5</sup> In the words of an American historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, author of *The significance of the frontier in American History*: “the winning of the West was central to America’s progressive character and self perception as the redeemer nation. The frontier was the mobile meeting line between savagery and civilization”. As quoted in Herman, Arthur, *The Idea of decline in Western history*, The Free Press, 2002, page 175

suddenly everybody realized that the Cold War was over. The West had won, no doubt about that, and on this victory a New World Order, based on Western values, could be built.

In this moment of excitement and self congratulation, two books were published with enormous success: *‘The End of History and the Last Man’* by Francis Fukuyama, and *‘The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the world order’* by Samuel Huntington. These works are well known. The vision of history by Fukuyama was progressive and optimistic. According to Fukuyama, history had come to an end, not because nothing will happen in the future, but in the Hegelian sense of the word, because democracy and free market represent the absolute culmination of the historical process. There are no more alternatives to the Western model of democracy, liberalism and free market economy. Therefore the West cannot be challenged anymore, and the other cultures will sooner or later converge on its model, making possible a Kantian peace and the creation of a world government.

On the other side stood Huntington. According to him, the world politics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be characterized not by clashes between states or ideologies, but between civilizations.

Some cultures, first of all the Islamic, are deemed totally indifferent or hostile to the Western values of democracy, freedom of the individual and free market. Therefore, the West should not try to impose these values on other civilizations, lest these may ally among themselves (especially the Islamic and the Confucian) against the West.

It is interesting to note that, while the two authors differ - with Fukuyama having an optimistic vision of the future and Huntington a pessimist one - both assume as a starting point that the West is a *cohesive and coherent community*, which has solved every contradiction inside itself, and while the world history of the past two centuries has been shaped by the confrontations inside the West, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the confrontation will be between “the West and the rest”.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Huntington, Samuel, P., *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of World Order*, NY, 1996, chapter 8

### 3a. Two Wests?

Fifteen years later it is hard to speak of the West as a cohesive community. After September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, Europeans took to the streets to declare deep sympathy for the USA. Jean Marie Colombani, director of “*Le Monde*” wrote: “*Nous sommes tous Américains*”.<sup>7</sup> In the immediate aftermath, the attack to the WTC tower was perceived by many as an evil attack against the Western world as a whole, the coming true of Huntington’s prophecy. But on February 15, 2003 Europeans were again on the streets protesting against the US’ unilateralist policy towards Iraq. These demonstrations were hailed by two eminent European philosophers, Jacques Derrida and Jurgen Habermas, as the moment of birth of an European identity, distinct, distant, and possibly opposite, from America. The same Habermas in his recent book: *The Divided West* recognizes the division of the West but puts the blame on “the policy of the US -government, that pushes the United Nations to the bottom of the wall and stays put with breaking off Europe”.<sup>8</sup>

In the European perception, as Michael Ignatieff wrote, “An attack that seemed directed at Western civilisation itself, at the capitalist system and its values, has been slowly transformed, at least in Europe, into an attack on the US alone”.<sup>9</sup>

An analyst like Dominique Moïsi, who, already before the 9/11 attack, had denounced the transatlantic crisis,<sup>10</sup> asked himself in 2003: “Does the West still exist? Have we moved from a world with two Europes and one West to a world with one Europe and two Wests?”.<sup>11</sup> His answer was in the affirmative. And Robert Kagan, in his *Power and Weakness*, warned: “It is time to stop pretending that Europeans and America share a common view of the world, or that they occupy the same world”.<sup>12</sup>

According to these authors, the paths of Europe and America are increasingly diverging and estranged. As if this were not enough, Charles A. Kupchan, in *The End of the American era*<sup>13</sup> argued that not only are their paths diverging, but also colliding.

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<sup>7</sup> Le Monde, September, 12, 2001

<sup>8</sup> Habermas, Jürgen, *L’Occidente diviso* (Original title: *Der gespaltene Westen - 'The Divided West'*), Laterza 2005, page 1

<sup>9</sup> Michael Ignatieff, “The divided West”, *Financial Times*, August 31, 2002

<sup>10</sup> Moïsi, Dominique, “The Real Crisis over the Atlantic”, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2001

<sup>11</sup> Moïsi, Dominique, “Reinventing the West”, *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2003

<sup>12</sup> Kagan, Robert, “[Power and weakness](#)”, *Policy Review*, June 2002

<sup>13</sup> Kupchan, Charles, *The End of the American Era: U.S. Foreign Policy After the Cold War*. Vintage Books, New York, 2002

According to this author, in fact, America's position of global dominance in the world is far less durable than commonly presumed, and the next challenger to it will be neither the Islamic world, neither China, but a rising Europe, which in its integration will grow as a counterweight to the United States power, a reaction to its unilateralism.

The same Francis Fukuyama came to the question: "Does the concept of the 'West' still make sense in the first decade of the 21st century? Is the fracture line over globalisation actually a division not between the West and the Rest, but between the United States and the Rest?"<sup>14</sup>

In the analysis of these many learned scholars, whereas during the Cold War a common enemy created enduring solidarity, September 11 has divided, instead of unifying once again the West: therefore we find ourselves with no more one West but two, positively estranged if not at odds with each other.

**4. Manic depressive West: *the self perception of the West between optimism and the sense of decline.***

Should we put this "Mr. West" on Freud's couch we could discover many things: he was born with the trauma of a separation within a civilization, the Roman Empire and Catholicism, which was supposed universal, hence he's obsessed with unity and universality, while at the same time compulsively thriving on schisms.

His achievements are amazing, as well as his failures: therefore he oscillates between optimism and pessimism, hubris and a sense of decline, in what a psychiatrist would call a "manic depressive" mood.<sup>15</sup>

To give an account of its splendid achievements, some historians built history as an univocal and directional process of historical development and progress, from a point A to a point B. To give an account of its many crises, others suggested that history has to be seen through the framework of cyclic patterns, from rise to decline to rise again. Historians *à la Fukuyama* belong to the first tradition, thinkers *à la Huntington* to the second.

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<sup>14</sup> Fukuyama Francis "Has History Restarted Since September 11?" The Nineteenth Annual John Bonython Lecture The Grand Ballroom The Grand Hyatt, Melbourne Thursday 8 August, 2002

<sup>15</sup> A manic depressive disorder is a mood swing between mania (euphoria, hyperactivity, productivity, hyper imagination) and depression (anxiety or sadness, even suicidal thoughts), resulting in unusually extreme highs and lows.

#### **4.a Triumphalism: Eurocentricism and the American tradition**

It is today generally acknowledged that until the discovery of America, Europe was not superior to other parts of the world, and all human families roughly progressed at similar rates. It is only in the past 500 years that Europeans achieved an unprecedented and unrivalled degree of economic, social, political and technological development, at the same time managing to dominate most parts of the world.

When confronted by such incredible expansion, European historians asked themselves how could Europe rise out of medieval backwardness, and become richer and stronger than any other part of the world. The “Eurocentric” explanation was that progress in Europe was autonomous, natural, and more or less continuous, and was grounded on an immanent cultural superiority that originated in ancient or medieval times.<sup>16</sup>

By explaining the development of the West as a natural, continuous, teleologically finalized process, boosted by a natural instinct of progress that was immanent to the rational European mind (as in Max Weber<sup>17</sup>), the Eurocentric historians were deliberately overlooking how much of the European progress was due to the discovery of America and to the immense wealth that came from it, from gold to potatoes.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the United States – from Independence to the intervention in World War I - grew as a largely different and separated entity from Europe, shaping much of its constitutional tradition in opposition to the past British domination. In the American experience of XVIII and XIX century, as well as in the feelings of the many European immigrants who chose the US as their country of election, Europe was “what we have left behind”.<sup>18</sup>

George Washington, in his [Farewell Address](#),<sup>19</sup> urged his fellow Americans to avoid “foreign entanglements” and to stay away from “the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humor, or caprice”. The whole American political tradition was built not on the recognition of the common roots with Europe, but, on the contrary, on the

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<sup>16</sup> Not only the cradle of all civilizations was in the West, but it moved Westwards. Civilization (according to geographers like Guyot and historians like Michael Mann) marched from India to the Mediterranean basin to Northern Europe, then to America. See: Blaut, J.M., *Eight eurocentric historians* The Guilford press, 2000, page 113

<sup>17</sup> Weber Max, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Penguin Classics, 1999

<sup>18</sup> Prof. Catherine McArdle Kelleher: “*The american world view*” Seminar to GCSP ITC 19, Nov 30, 2004

<sup>19</sup> See <<http://www.csamerican.com/Doc.asp?doc=WashFarewell#pt4>>

estrangement from it.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, when America in 1917 decided to break with such tradition, and become entangled with European affairs, on the side of France and Great Britain, and entered World War One, the US government asked educators at elite colleges to prepare courses to teach the returning servicemen what they had been fighting for and why.<sup>21</sup> It was the beginning of the Western Civilization courses that - all through the 20th century - taught to many generations of Americans the “Western values” of freedom, human rights, democracy, rule of law. Americans learned that these values were the result of a civilization that marched onward, and generally upward, from ancient Greece and Rome, through the spread of Christianity in Europe, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the English, American and French Revolution, the development of capitalism, the bourgeoisie, the universal suffrage, up to the victories in the two World Wars and the American-led Atlantic Community. It was the Grand Narrative of how the West began in Europe and triumphed in America, a progressive, directional, coherent, self-explanatory history which went (as in the title of a book by David Gress) ‘*From Plato to Nato*’.<sup>22</sup>

For Eurocentric historians, reconstructing history as a continuum was a way to not recognize the discovery of America as a decisive turning point in the history of Europe, and build therefore a self-congratulatory path where the triumph of European culture and politics was not the result of a cultural and economical shift – the discovery of America - but rather of given and immanent conditions. To American historians the oversimplification of the Grand Narrative was the foundation and the justification of the American intervention first in European then in World affairs.

#### **4.b The declinist tradition**

The idea of crisis and decline is an intellectual construction which seems to be consubstantial to the Western tradition. Far from being a novelty of the last years, the feeling of pessimism is a deeply rooted intellectual attitude that pervades all of Western history, and goes along and in parallel with the other feelings of hubris and optimism for its achievements.

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<sup>20</sup> For a popularization of this feeling see Mark Twain’s novel “*Innocents abroad*”

<sup>21</sup> Gress, David, *From Plato to NATO*, The Free Press, NY, 1998, page 31

<sup>22</sup> Gress, David, *From Plato to NATO*, The Free Press, NY, 1998.

A 'declinist' interpretation sees history as a succession of cycles of growth and decline.<sup>23</sup> According to it, human history is nothing different from the life of a human being. Men die, so do nations and civilizations. Therefore, if you meet a man during its youth, you can predict that, in a short lapse of time, he will reach its maturity. When he has reached its maturity, you can as well predict quite easily that he will soon start his descending curve, to the old age and, finally, to death. Applying this framework to a country, or to a civilization, a declinist historian will interpret all signs of progress and prosperity of a society as indications of a reached maturity, and from that he will forecast its next decline and end.

Enlightenment and Positivism optimistically viewed the technical and scientific Western progress as fostering human, spiritual, cultural and political evolution. Progress and Modernity were the two ingredients of this forward looking perspective.

As an opposition to Enlightenment, Romanticism provided a different cultural perspective in which "Modernization" was a synonym for the loss of spiritual and moral values,<sup>24</sup> and the foundation of a de-humanized machine-society destined to a maybe gilded, but indeed certain, decline and decadence.<sup>25</sup> Many pessimist writers (from Spengler to Huntington) who deem the West as a failing civilization belong to this tradition. Moreover, as shown in the essay "*Occidentalism*" by Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, the Romantic tradition influenced in many ways and through many channels the enemies of the West, whether they be Russian communists, Japanese nationalists, German Nazis or Islamic terrorists.

The idea - common among many adversaries and competitors of the West - that the West is a rootless, cosmopolitan, superficial, trivial, materialistic machine-society without a human soul - and therefore that it is possible to strip away technical modernization from the so-called "Western values", and achieve the former without assimilating the latter<sup>26</sup> - was actually born in the West. The eponymous hero of it is Goethe's restless Faust,<sup>27</sup> the scientist who sold his soul to the devil for his thirst for

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<sup>23</sup> According to the Neapolitan historian and philosopher Giambattista Vico, who wrote "*La Scienza Nuova*", the historical path of every nation goes through a three-stage rise and decline pattern (the Age of Gods, Heroes, Men).

<sup>24</sup> "*In the tradition of German cultural criticism, industrial machinery is not an emblem of progress, but of alienation and degradation*", Herman, Arthur, *The idea of Decline in Western History*, The Free Press, 1997, page 229.

<sup>25</sup> For a reference in literature see Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*

<sup>26</sup> See Mahubani, Kishore, "The Rest of the West" p.41: "*Each non-western society... will have to carefully decide which aspects of western systems and culture can be retained and absorbed in their societies and which systems cannot.*", [BBC website](#), 2000

<sup>27</sup> Spengler, Oswald, *The Decline of the West*, vol I, Alfred A. Knopf, 20<sup>th</sup> ed, 1997, page 20, 21

wisdom and power. In many countries the progress of the modern society, with its consumerism and mass participation in national politics, made social and cultural elites feel displaced and menaced in their prominence.<sup>28</sup> They saw the end of *their* world as the end of *the* world.

There are two mainstream views about the declining West: the first in Europe, is held by those who, from different perspectives witnessed the near self-suicide of the Western European Powers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In America it is held by those who, for different reasons (for instance, racial minorities<sup>29</sup>), could not recognize themselves in the reconstruction of the American tradition in the framework of the European heritage.<sup>30</sup> Not always did those who foresaw the end of the Western civilization dread this event. Many looked at it even with joy.

#### **4.C Prophets of decline: Spengler and Toynbee**

Two writers are especially interesting, because they announced the end of the West from opposite sides: the German Oswald Spengler and the British Arnold Toynbee. These two enormously influential authors<sup>31</sup> are the cornerstones of the declinist tradition.

They both identified a Western civilization, giving various definitions of it, and both saw in the success of the West a symptom of its future decline.

**Oswald Spengler** published his “*Die Untergang des Abendslands*”, usually translated as “*The Decline of the West*”, in the aftermath of the First World War.<sup>32</sup> In this work of enormous and persistent influence he is the first to conceive the West not as *the* civilization, but ‘*one among many*’ civilizations<sup>33</sup> - and not always the most important. He celebrates the West as a culture that has achieved unprecedented levels of technical and intellectual growth, but has lost its soul. The meaning of ‘civilization’ (*Zivilization*) in Spengler is not positive: he makes a distinction between ‘cultures’ (*Kultur*), which are growing because focused on themselves, and civilization which are only expanding, and

<sup>28</sup> For instance Henry Adams, and the so called “Boston Brahmins”

<sup>29</sup> An important figure in the U.S. was W.E.B. Du Bois, the ‘american Negro’, founder of the African-American tradition

<sup>30</sup> “Only in the mid twentieth century did Americans begin to think of themselves as a multiracial, multiethnic society”. Huntington, Samuel, “Creedal Passions”, *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2004

<sup>31</sup> It seems that Henry Kissinger gave Spengler’s work to President Nixon as a bedside book.

<sup>32</sup> The first volume was published in the summer of 1918, then revised in 1922. The second volume, subtitled *Perspectives of World History*, was published in 1923.

<sup>33</sup> Spengler lists eight High Cultures that have existed: Babylonian; Egyptian; Chinese / Confucian-Taoist; Indian / Brahmanic; Aztec / Mayan; Hellenic / Classical / Apollonian; Magian / Arabian; Faustian / Western

therefore destined to decline. To him, the West had entered its “winter stage”, and wasn’t facing a sudden decline, but rather a twilight or sunset.

Wealth, prosperity, technological innovation, far from being signs of progress, were instead symptoms of decline. In his view, democracy, as adopted in the Weimar constitution, was a foreign import.<sup>34</sup> The antidote he proposed for Western decadence was vitalism and militarism only hope left was a radical subversion of all the pseudo-values of the modern age, and of the entire political system in order to create a new Kultur. “The European civilization that rational science and the Enlightenment had made, and that France and Britain represented, was breaking apart. Germany may have lost the battle, but it was destined to win the war that was certainly coming, a struggle between cultural life and death, that is, between Germany and the liberal West”.<sup>35</sup> He predicted that:

“ The last century [*the 19th*] was the winter of the West, the victory of materialism and scepticism, of socialism, parliamentarianism, and money. But in this century blood and instinct will regain their rights against the power of money and intellect. The era of individualism, liberalism and democracy, of humanitarianism and freedom, is nearing its end. The masses will accept with resignation the victory of the Caesars, the strong men, and will obey them”.<sup>36</sup>

Yet the new Caesar, Hitler didn’t love him. The last book of Spengler, “*The Hour of decisions*” was banned, and his death in 1936 went virtually unnoticed.

Well before Samuel Huntington, **Arnold Toynbee**<sup>37</sup> presented history as the rise and fall of civilizations, rather than the history of nation-states or of ethnic groups. In his ten volume “*A Study of History*” he identified civilizations following cultural rather than national criteria. He identified the “Western Civilization” with the history of Western Europe since the collapse of the Roman Empire, as distinguished from both the “Orthodox” civilization of Russia, as well as the Greco-Roman one.

Toynbee – for twenty years director of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, better known as ‘Chatham House’ - has many points of contact with Spengler. But, while Spengler was publishing his book in the defeated Germany, Toynbee developed his ideas in interwar Britain. According to Toynbee the rise of civilizations was due to “creative

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<sup>34</sup> Thomas Mann declared “ *What is coming now is the Anglo-Saxon dominance of the world, that is perfect Zivilisation* ”; Letters page 90, as quoted in Herman, Arthur: *The Idea of Decline in Western history*, The Free Press, NY, 1997 page 244

<sup>35</sup> Quote from: Herman, Arthur, *The Idea of Decline in Western history*, The Free Press, NY, 1997, page 234

<sup>36</sup> Spengler, Oswald, *The Decline of the West*, vol I, Alfred A. Knopf, 20<sup>th</sup> ed, 1997, page 39

<sup>37</sup> Toynbee was a pacifist, an internationalist, and an appeaser, who considered the United States the more serious threat to world peace: quite ironically, as his ideas were totally misunderstood, he knew a wide popularity in the United States to the point he was portrayed on the cover of Time Magazine.

minorities" who devised solutions in response to some extremely difficult sets of challenges. To him, the West was decadent because of its mass industrialization and democracy.

Cultural pessimists like Spengler and Toynbee thought the decline of the West was inevitable, and welcomed it.<sup>38</sup> Their influence is deep and can be seen in many radical writers such as Herbert Marcuse, Michel Foucault, Noam Chomsky, Edward Said, Jean-Paul Sartre, to name the most known, as well as in the many analysts who nowadays write about the end or the divide of the West.

All in all, what optimists and pessimists seem to have in common, is a rigid, organic and holistic vision of cultures, societies and civilizations, whose fate is determined by inevitable laws of progress or decline. They both failed in seeing the great legacy of Western liberalism: the autonomous and prominent role of the individual in shaping his/her own destiny and that of the political society where he/she lives.

## **5. The West, today**

### **5.a West, where and what?**

In the previous pages I tried to show that cultural pessimism has always been as much a character of the conception of the West, as optimism and triumphalism.

Both views, the optimist and the pessimist one, have in common the idea of a common civilization that shapes politics, and differ in this, that one deem this civilization is going to encompass the whole world, the other that it should close ranks to defend from an imminent decline. I don't think that both these visions, which combined form what I called "the manic depressive syndrome of the West", are satisfactory explanation of the Western phenomenon.

The research question of this paper is "Is there a West". This means, if there is a West *today*, and if there will be one *tomorrow*. To give a satisfactory answer to this question we have first to come to an answer to an implicit question: "What is the West?". In the first chapter, I showed that the notion of West has never been an absolutely clearly defined concept, nor an homogeneous security entity. As an accepted definition of the

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<sup>38</sup> Toynbee had some hope that a spiritual regeneration of the West could leave a sort of heritage to non Western civilizations. See: Toynbee Arnold "A Study of History", vol IX: *The Prospects of the Western Civilization*, Oxford University Press 1954

West does not exist in literature, I will try to give one, starting with some degree of approximation, saying first what in my opinion the West is not.

I would say, that the West is not a disco club, nor a cooking recipe, nor a shopping mall.

I mean that it is a frequent temptation among many analysts, to try to draw a clear-cut cultural or geographical line between what is “West” and what is not. Having established what are the ingredients of the West, like in a cooking recipe, these analysts pretend to stand at the door and make a selection, like a gatekeeper in front of a disco. There is a picture in the notorious “Clash of Civilizations” by Huntington which well illustrates this attitude. He draws “The Eastern Boundary of Western Civilization”. So, if you are a Latvian, you qualify for the West. Congratulations. If you are an Ukrainian, there is some hope for you, depending on where you was born. If you are a Bulgarian, a Macedonian, a Greek, or, worst of all, a Russian, sorry: you are out!

It makes no sense, in my opinion, to try to draw a boundary line where the West finishes and starts the East, or the ‘Rest’: *the West is not about geography. Nor it is about culture.*

I’m not denying that something that can be *grosso modo* labelled as “Western Culture” does really exist. What I reject is the determinist vision of the civilizational approach, i.e. the idea that a common civilization can, almost automatically, produce a common political entity, or orientate today’s politics. Civilization is no sufficient tie to build a political entity. The proof is that, despite supposedly shared common values, European history is not an history of convergence, but of mutual hate and war. The same can be said for other regions of the world (Arab countries, Latin America), where shared cultural roots, sometimes the same language and religious belief, failed to create some sort of political unity.

As a result of my research, I believe I can say that ‘the West’ is not a cultural paradigm that becomes a political idea, but on the contrary, a political idea that looks to a common cultural root as a foundation for staying together.

So we come to the point: the West is about politics, is a fruit of political choice. I propose this definition: *“the greatest political construction of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whose aim was to save Europe from its own flaws and faults, prevent its self destruction and its*

*definitive marginalization from world politics. Today the biggest security area of the planet, where war is unthinkable*".

It would be a gross mistake to identify the West with some of its institutions. The West is not NATO, not the EU, not the OSCE. Rather, it is a political concept that has been embodied in an unique web of political, military, social, cultural relationships that has no parallel in the rest of the world, and that constitute a safety net that has made war unconceivable.

A further proof that today *the West is no more a side*, is in the fact that a traditionally neutral country like Switzerland nowadays define itself quite light-heartedly as "Western".

As to the shopping mall: the metaphor of the supermarket is used by V.S. Naipaul in his book "Among the believers" to portray the attitude, frequent among many non westerners, to consider the West just a supermarket, where to buy the products of its modernization, while rejecting its values. It is the attitude that Buruma and Margalit called "Occidentalism".

But what are exactly those "Western values"? To a closer sight, they are no thing more nothing less than the liberal values. Representative democracy, rule of law, status of the individual, gender equality, free trade, market economy, free and fair competition, are the values of the liberal tradition.

To me, this is the quintessence of the West: the coming together of the different, diverse and dispersed European liberal traditions. Such a convergence doesn't come from historical necessity. There is no determinism in politics. The West, as a political actor, was a creation of political choice.

## 5.b West, when?

I propose to start the political history of the West from the *Entente Cordiale*.<sup>39</sup> I'm sure that the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Lansdowne, and the French Ambassador, Paul Cambon thought they were just signing an agreement over the settlement of colonial disputes. If it were so, it would have long been forgotten. Instead, its centennial has been celebrated with great solemnity, as the cornerstone of an everlasting relationship. In fact, in European history, the Entente Cordiale, represents an epochal shift from a history overshadowed by conflict and rivalry to a sustained era of rapprochement and *permanent* alliance. It marks, first and foremost, the reconciliation of the two great families of European liberalism, the British and the French. If we accept the Entente Cordiale as a conventional starting point, we can also state that *the West is not an Anglo-Saxon-Protestant thing*.

The American intervention in Europe in the First and then the Second World War was the second stage of the building of the West. This was another historical shift, as America was built in opposition to and estrangement from Europe, and Europe to most Americans was what they had left behind. Even if a branch of the same tree, Americans did not feel much in common with Europe, and the founding fathers expressly guarded their fellow citizens from getting entangled in European affairs. Not only: still until 1898 the US were considered a potential threat from the Royal Navy.<sup>40</sup>

Joining “the West” to Americans meant that they were part of the European civilization, maybe – they thought, and still think – the best part, but nevertheless, that Europe was no stranger to American culture and interests.

After World War Two, the West was joined by Germany. Germany had represented the romantic, anti-rational, anti-Napoleonic, anti-liberal tradition, and had its own

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<sup>39</sup> The Entente Cordiale is a series of agreements signed on April 8, 1904, in London, between the United Kingdom and France. Its aim was settling long-standing disputes between the UK and France in countries such as Morocco, Egypt, Siam, Madagascar, the New Hebrides, West and Central Africa and Newfoundland. Beyond the immediate concerns of colonial expansion addressed by the agreement, the signing of the Entente Cordiale marked the end of centuries of intermittent conflict between the two nations, and the start of the peaceful co-existence that continues to the present day. The agreement also paved the way for the diplomatic and military cooperation that preceded World War I. Spengler had the first idea of writing his “Decline of the West” after the unsuccessful German attempt to challenge the new Franco-British relationship in the Moroccan crisis of 1905.

<sup>40</sup> Kupchan, Charles A., *The end of the American Era*, Vintage Books, 2002

version of Modernity. Twice in the 20<sup>th</sup> century it tried to subvert the European order. Then it became an essential part of that order.

Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War found herself at odds with another rib of its cultural tradition: Communism and Russia. And found an unsuspected ally: the Papacy. Late John Paul II was the first pope who brought the Christian Catholic tradition to come to terms with modernity. While many of his predecessors felt extraneous to the liberal tradition, he recognized that modernity and democracy were providential forces, that the ideas of freedom and self-fulfilment were not against the Divine design.

Not only the Pope was a valued ally of the West in the confrontation against Communism (to the extent that the Reagan administration gave him intelligence news about Poland): the Pope was also the one who reminded that Europe didn't stop at the Iron Curtain, and that Eastern Europe wasn't lost forever. While most of the West was taken by surprise by the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Pope had a prophetic vision of the future enlarged Europe.

### **5.c West, whiter?**

As I see it, the West is not a static, but a dynamic concept: *it is not an end state, it's a work in progress*. The key word to understand the Western phenomenon is "*Enlargement*". I'm not referring of course to the Enlargement of NATO and EU but to a wider historical process, which I think goes all through the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.

History of the 20<sup>th</sup> century tells us that, despite its many failures, the West, far from shrinking, or decaying, or dividing, has been engaged in a process of continuous expansion from its ramparts, France and Britain, to the Cold War West, to the present enlarged NATO and EU. Those were its major successes. Its biggest failure, so far, is the self-exclusion of Russia.

Not only today there are more countries than ever in the West. Also, the allegiance to the Western values in those countries which already belonged to the West is broadening and deepening. In countries like France or Italy, which had great communist and socialist parties, there always was a wide part of the public opinion who felt estranged from the West and opposed liberal values. Far from being a cohesive community, as it was depicted, the Cold War West hosted many who didn't feel at ease in the West.

It is not without significance, therefore – and rather a cultural shift - that the Secretary General of the former Italian Communist Party, Mr. Fassino, recalled very recently the worth and the meaningfulness of the idea of West also for the Left.<sup>41</sup> This means that today the acceptance of ‘the West’ is much more widespread than in the past.

Can the West enlarge as to encompass the whole world? Correctly, Huntington warns that the West is “*unique, not universal*”.<sup>42</sup> But let’s stay away from two opposites: those who think that one day the world will all be westernized, and those who think that the rest of the world is so indifferent or hostile to the Western values, that it is impossible to export them, are equally wrong. The expansion of the West cannot embrace the whole world, still the West should not fear to go beyond its limits. Other countries can adopt Western political ideas, as they can adopt Western technology. The vitality of the West lies in its ability to propose itself as a coherent model of modernization *with* democratization.

## **6. The West and the future. Conclusions and prescriptions**

Now that we arrived to give a definition of what is the West today we must ask ourselves how to keep this West together.

In short, how likely is that, as announced by many commentators, the West could divide, that some of its components could withdraw? And even if they don’t, what’s the use of such a concept, today?

To give an answer to this question, I think we should make a distinction between two aspects: the West *as a security zone* and the West *as a global political actor*.

If we deem that the West is “the biggest security area of the planet, where war is now unthinkable”, the answer is that such a West is surely perennial (the way of course any human construction can be). There always will be some competition, for sure, but the idea that a Western country could tomorrow declare war to another Western country is simply absurd. We tend to give this for granted, but if we look at what Western history was we must underline that this is an enormous achievement.

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<sup>41</sup> Panebianco, Angelo “A Sinistra recupero dell’idea di Occidente. Il tabù infranto da Piero Fassino”, *Corriere della Sera*, May 11th 2005

<sup>42</sup> Huntington, Samuel, “The West: unique, not Universal”, *Foreign Affairs*, November, December 1996

But can the West be an actor again?

Once again, it's a matter of political choice. The choice of keeping the West operational is up to its many political components. There is no assurance of perennity, here. I cannot predict what this choice will be. I can only show why we (the Westerners, the World) still need an united West.

In my definition the West is: "The political construction that saved Europe from self destruction and marginalization from world politics". If we accept this definition, we must say that Europe needs to be in the West much more than the US. The US can be a global actor alone. Europe can't.

The suggestion by Dominique Moïsi<sup>43</sup> that America and Europe should divide their spheres of interest, and that while Europeans should concentrate on Europe, the United States should have priority in the Americas and in Asia, were followed, would lead to the *de facto* disengagement and self-marginalization of Europe from global politics.

*Europe is not a new or different West.* Europe still is, and must stay in the future, a part of a sole West. It is a dangerous idea, and totally unrealistic, to try to build an European identity as an alternative and opposed to the American leadership.<sup>44</sup> Europe must keep in the West if it wants to keep global.<sup>45</sup>

To remain part of the West, Europe has to take its responsibilities. It has to continue the trend of enlarging the political West, finally bridging the historical gap with the other great European family, the Russian one. On the other side it has to hang together with its best daughter, America.

The US, on their side, must avoid the temptation of isolationism as well as that of profiting of its being a hyperpower. Nothing is more un-American than an unchecked power. Staying part of the West will help the US to moderate its power. The doctrine of the "Coalition of the Willing" was the very denegation of the concept of West as a

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<sup>43</sup> Moïsi, Dominique, "Reinventing the West", *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2003

<sup>44</sup> Dottori, Germano, *La Nato dopo l'11 settembre*, CeMiSS, Rubettino ed. 2004, page 100

<sup>45</sup> The idea of Derrida and Habermas (see pag.3) that a new European public opinion was born in the streets during the anti-Iraq war demonstrations, in opposition to American policy, proved already futile and wrong: the attack on Atocha station in Madrid, March 11<sup>th</sup> 2004, wasn't perceived as an attack on Europe as a whole, but on the sole Spain. Anti-Americanism proved to be a poor foundation to this supposedly new identity.

permanent relationship. Such doctrine has proved in Iraq all its limits, and there are already signs of a rapprochement on the two sides of the Atlantic.

The US, once a “status quo” power, have become a revisionist power. Europeans may well not agree on the means, i.e. violent regime change, but the goal of the expansion of the domain of freedom and democracy in the world is a desirable end state which Europeans should support: where the Cold War West was a force “against”, a viable 21<sup>st</sup> century West can only be a force “for”, a force for good.

Besides, there is still no alternative in this world for Western leadership.<sup>46</sup> The West may have adversaries, not competitors. There is nobody who can relieve the West from its global responsibilities. It’s still only the West, precisely because of its peculiar history, that can speak an universal language.

This leads me to propose some practical policy prescriptions:

- EU should not lift the arms embargo on China. On this issue, Americans are extremely sensitive, and *pour cause*.
- US should clearly treat Russia as a strategic partner of the West. Russia has long made a strategic pro-Western choice, but this choice is not once for all. Therefore it is vital to stop thinking lazily to Russia in a Cold War frame of mind. The mechanisms for interaction between Russia, EU and NATO must offer more in terms of cooperation, integration and partnership, in order to ensure full Russian participation in managing security in Europe and its near abroad, and stability in Russia and in the wider Euro-Atlantic area.
- The creation of a North Atlantic Free Trade Area. In fact, along with its political reality, goes an economic West that has achieved unprecedented dominance and influence through the phenomenon of Globalization.<sup>47</sup> On the two sides of the Atlantic the bilateral investments between EU and US amount to more than €1.5 trillion, and trade of goods and services reached €595 billion in 2003.<sup>48</sup> Freer trade would link the world’s two largest trading areas, encompassing over half of world economic output and over a third of world trade.

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<sup>46</sup> Mahbubani Kishore, “The dangers of Decadence: What the Rest can Teach the West”, *Foreign Affairs* September/October 1993

<sup>47</sup> Lindley-French, Julian, *The story of Power*, page 3

<sup>48</sup> Source: Moratinos, Miguel Angel, “It’s time to renew the trans-Atlantic partnership”, *International Herald Tribune*, April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2005

- EU and the US should improve trade with India in order to support the development of the biggest democracy in the world. India is today a powerful example that democracy works even outside the West and it is not an obstacle to modernization. Such a “good example” must be supported.
- EU and US should support Human Rights and democratization in China. China so far has profited of a totalitarian regime to foster modernization, therefore setting a bad example of modernization without democratization. Unfortunately, the failed democratization of Hong Kong before its handover to China was a missed opportunity for putting a Trojan horse of living Western values in the Chinese field.

Today more than ever, to live up to its responsibilities, the West must guard against its cultural relativism and self-insecurity in its own culture and values, more than from any external adversary.

As André Glucksmann implied in his book “*West against West*”<sup>49</sup>: the first enemy of the West is the West itself.

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<sup>49</sup> Glucksmann, André, *Ouest contre Ouest*, Plon, Paris, 2004

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