

**Riccardo Bavaj, Martina Steber (Hg.),
Zivilisatorische Verortungen. Der »Westen« an der
Jahrhundertwende (1880–1930), Berlin, Boston (De
Gruyter) 2018, 162 S. (Zeitgeschichte im Gespräch,
26), ISBN 978-3-11-052678-3, EUR 16,95.**

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Michael Geyer, Chicago

If it were only as easy as the front page image suggests. It shows Britannia lightly dressed, empire-style, with a Greek helmet, holding a billowing white flag inscribed with »Civilization«. Two armed soldiers at her side protect a manly colonialist positioned behind her; they face a jumbled mass of African limbs, armed with spears. Out of this mass arises a leader on a ferocious white horse holding up a small, dark banner inscribed with »Barbarism«. The image is from the humor magazine »Puck« and articulates a mindset. Ten authors and the two editors of this volume set out to explore the uses of this white-clad »civilization«. They view it as similar in position and structure, but dissimilar in function to the concept of »The West«, which they present as one of the most important political terms of the twentieth century.

In his concluding commentary, Christian Geulen suggests, however, that while this may have been true of »The West« in some places at some times, unfortunately it was not the case at the turn of the twentieth century, the »space/time« that the volume considers. Geulen's commentary spins off the ad-campaign of the (Reemtsma/Imperial Tobacco) cigarette brand »West«, which shows the puffs of smoke that provide exquisite pleasure but might also give you cancer. The simile fits, because the cigarette brand was an outstanding imperial venture, conquering Russia, Eastern Europe and the former GDR, in unison with the collapse of Soviet hegemony over »The East«. Indeed, you couldn't find a better index for the progress of »The West« than the progression of »West«, the cigarette brand.

While it may not have been entirely the editors' intention, the essays result in the consistent finding that »The West«, as a mobile signifier, is not universally applicable, a conclusion I take as an indication of the authors' scholarly honesty. The editors, Riccardo Bavaj and Martina Steber, would like to think of »The West« as a foundational term of (Western) political language emerging in the aftermath of the Congress of Vienna (1814/1815). They agree that the term received a universalist make-over in the first era of globalization, when it came to connote development and progress. But they also recognize that the term remained spatially and temporally in motion, a puff of smoke. Its common denominator, we gather, was a mobile semantics of progress, to which we might want to add that the term was used more prominently and programmatically by those who aspired to progress rather than by those who had it.



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This was most prominently the case with the British and French empires, which were seen as and considered themselves to be the quintessence of progress, though for this purpose it largely sufficed for them to be thought of as British and French, rather than »The West«. Christian Methfessel shows that the British at the turn to the twentieth century saw themselves as the mirror of universal progress, if an increasingly disturbed one. Where Alastair Bonnett and Christopher GoGwilt view »The West« as an imperial concept, Methfessel discovers that in regard to Europe, newspapers used »The East« to denote autocracy and backwardness. The fact that Germany was made into the paragon of »The East« suggests a turning point, but it remains unclear what this turning might have entailed.

By contrast, Jakob Lehne's intervention sees 1899 as a turning point in »civilizational rhetoric«, highlighting the link between war – the Spanish-American War, the Boer War, the Boxer rebellion – and the (critique of) civilizational progress. He believes this critique led to the (re-)discovery of multiple civilizations, an imperial »historicism« about which one would like to know more. Peter Hoeres, discussing German opinion (Max Scheler and Thomas Mann) in World War I, would on the surface of it present the clearest case for using »The West« in their interpretation of the geopolitics of the Triple Entente or Allied Powers. He finds a growing ideologization and bellification of the term, but he also finds a multitude of other terms that suggest the same thing. Unfortunately, he misses the chance to exemplify his case in a reflection on the war over Belgium, which quite in the image of the title page becomes »la lutte même de la civilisation contre la barbarie« (p. 87).

At this point, one might conclude that the term is used any which way you please, which leads several authors to decide the term is »highly complex«. Others sidestep the term altogether and thereby help reduce complexity and generate new insights. First, Silke Mende argues that for the *francophonie républicaine* being modern, Western and French was self-evidently the same, the French language perfectly articulating the identity of universal civilization. If everyone had spoken French, there would have been no need for »The West«, except of course to fight off the Germans.

Second, Benjamin Beuerle finds Russia or, in any case, modernizing groups within Russia, as the most dedicated followers of »The West«. He makes clear that this West is very Russian indeed and depends on extensive debates within Russia, to which Leonid Luks adds that the debate continues in the form of the »Eurasian« opposition to the West. Third, Florian Wagner surprisingly makes the German *Kolonialbewegung* not only into the antagonists of the Alldeutsche Verband, but also into a movement that embraces »The West« (without using the term) as an International of colonialists in support of scientific colonialism and a multi-imperial civilizational mission. Fourth, Florian Greiner and Katja Naumann focus on the United States, and it is Naumann who discovers a fully developed concept of »The West« that becomes a basic unit in the US curriculum. Greiner highlights »The West« as a twentieth-century, trans-Atlantic invention. Most interestingly, he argues



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that for this to happen Europe, including the former paragons of civilization, Great Britain and France, had to become peripheral.

In sum, what we learn above all is that the term »The West« – at least as a political concept – is less deeply grounded in the past than we might expect (though this view would change, if a somewhat broader semantic field were studied); that it is used more to denote intra-imperial rivalries and oppositions than a post-colonial approach would suggest; and that one must look at the Western and non-Western semi-periphery to find full-fledged debates about »The West«. This latter positioning might point to Japan, but it also perfectly well describes the »spatio-temporal« location of Heinrich August Winkler's four-volume »History of the West«. Christian Geulen, on the last page of the book, argues that »The West« is less a horizon of stable values than an indication of disorientation in »worldmaking« (Adom Getachew), a proposition that will benefit future scholars of the subject.

19./20. Jahrhundert – Histoire contemporaine

DOI:
[10.11588/frrec.2019.3.66572](https://doi.org/10.11588/frrec.2019.3.66572)

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