Nation, Culture and Civilisation: Talking about and beyond 'the West' (1860–1940)

Veranstalter: Martina Steber, Universität Konstanz / Institut für Zeitgeschichte München-Berlin; Konrad M. Lawson / Riccardo Bavaj, University of St Andrews
Datum, Ort: 07.12.2015–08.12.2015, Munich / St Andrews
Bericht von: Anneka Thomson, Münster; with contributions from Lina Isabelle Mair, München

Building on the recently published volume „Germany and 'the West': The History of a Modern Concept" (2015), this workshop sought to explore the transnational discourse on 'the West' from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century (1860–1940). While the first part of the workshop, held at the *Institut für Zeitgeschichte* in Munich, focused on Germany, Britain, France, Russia and the US, the second part, held at the University of St Andrews, shifted the geographical focus to Japan, Korea, China and the Ottoman Empire. The workshop sought to answer a variety of questions: When, where, and why did 'the West' become a central point of reference in intellectual and political discourse? Why did people begin to talk about the West in a sociopolitical and often civilisational sense? Did the concept of the West, as Christopher Go-Gwilt has argued, eclipse the concept of Europe around the turn of the century, or did it displace the notion of 'whiteness', as Alastair Bonnett suggests? What influence did racism, social Darwinism and imperialism have on conceptualisations of the West? How did different spatial identities relate to each other: national, European / Asian / Islamic, Western / non-Western, and civilisational? Did countries typically seen as paradigmatic of 'the West' today consider themselves part of such an imagined community at the time? In what ways were conceptions of the West deployed to shape national identities in non-Western regions that had become increasingly incorporated into the communicative networks of Europe and America?

Opening the first part of the workshop, PETER HOERES (Würzburg) examined notions of 'the West' in the First World War. While acknowledging the fact that intellectuals on both sides of the war constructed an opposition between German culture and Western civilisation, he emphasised that this opposition was by no means absolute. In fact, several German intellectuals highlighted Germany's close relationship with 'the West' – a 'West', of course, that was less defined in political terms as along cultural, historical and 'spiritual' lines. For the philosopher Max Scheler, for instance, it was not Germany but Britain and the US who, unable to defend the 'West European cultural spirit', had betrayed 'the West'.

FLORIAN WAGNER (Freiburg / Florence) considered Germany's relation to transnational entities such as 'civilisation', 'Europe' and 'internationalism' in German colonial imagination. He identified two strands within German colonialism: Pan-German colonialism, which was initially dominant, precluded any German membership in a community of civilised nations. It considered colonies a means of creating pure, *völkisch* settlements, where the 'genuine culture' of the Germanic barbarian – not 'European civilisation' – could flourish. In the 1890s, colonial internationalists challenged this view and instead emphasized economic concerns and the need to approach colonialism in the spirit of scientific rationality. They wanted Germany to be part of a community of civilised nations, whose membership was defined by the ability to colonise – hence the outcry following the loss of Germany's colonies post-WWI.

JAKOB LEHNE (Florence) confirmed the significance of the term 'civilisation' as a political catchword in turn-of-the-century international discourse. He argued that 1899 presented a turning point for this rhetoric: While the Spanish-American War, the Second Boer War and the quashing of the Boxer Rebellion were all justified rhetorically by the term 'civilisation', these events gave rise to two critiques of the concept. First, it was thought to merely mask an imperial agenda, and, second, it was deemed to be in need of pluralisation, as there were not one, but many civilisations.

Moving on to the early interwar period, FLORIAN GREINER (Augsburg) analysed the discursive construction of a transatlantic

community in the quality press on both sides of the pond. While in US political commentary a clear distinction tended to be made between America and Europe, and thus the 'Western hemisphere' and 'Europe', the notion of a unified 'West' as a common space of progress and modernity emerged in discussions on the Americanisation of Europe, and the Europeanisation of America, as well as in imperial contexts and as an identity marker that was based on the opposition to Soviet Russia ('the East'). The category of 'the West' was not stable, however, but changed depending on the relevant 'Other' and the context in which it was used: colonial, transatlantic, or inner-European.

In an evening lecture, ANDREAS WIRSCHING (Munich) traced the German path to modernity and revisited the question of a possible 'deviation from the West'. Underlining the importance of political culture he highlighted four aspects of German peculiarity: first, Germany's bi-confessional divide, and the evolution of a national Protestantism that worshipped Germany as God's chosen nation; second, the non-identity of state and nation, which meant that the process of nation-building did not evolve in a well-defined container space, and that expansionist fantasies of an unbounded living space could flourish; third, a regime of temporality that was characterised by the fear of losing out and the feeling that 'time worked against us'; fourth, the defeat of 1918, widely perceived as a national catastrophe among the German bourgeoisie, who fell back on the stab-in-the-back legend as a coping mechanism that undermined the legitimacy of Germany's first democracy. Compared to Britain, France and the US, Wirsching argued, Germany was less able to frame its national project in terms of universal categories, instead fostering a climate conducive to the radicalisation of nationalist particularism.

In his analysis of the British press around the turn of the century, CHRISTIAN METHFESSEL (Erfurt) confirmed Greiner's argument that the concept of the West acquired different meanings depending on whether it was used in a global colonial or inner-European context. While in the latter context Russia figured as the West's paradigmatic 'Other', in the context of imperial expansion the concept of 'Western civilisation' included Russia and tended to be used interchangeably with 'European civilisation', or 'civilisation' tout court. Rejecting the hypothesis, advanced by Alastair Bonnett, that the concept of the West rose to prominence due to a crisis of 'whiteness', Methfessel emphasised instead the importance of the Entente Cordiale (1904), i.e. the rapprochement between the two 'Western powers' Britain and France, whose common values (especially democracy) the press highlighted.

The civilising mission, however, that was promoted by the *Mission Laïque Française* (MLF), was based on the premise of France's uniqueness – a premise that included the claim to represent the universal process of emancipation, but was rarely framed in terms of „la civilisation occidentale". This became clear in SILKE MENDE's (Tübingen) talk, which focussed on the MLF's approach to spreading the French language in the Mediterranean and the Middle East as a vital carrier of 'culture and civilisation' (and not just commerce, as in the case of the English language), and a means to 'modernise' and 'civilise' colonised peoples. Mende could show that, around the turn of the century, the previously dominant assimilationist colonial doctrine gave way to an 'associational' approach that allowed for a plurality of civilisations. This plurality, of course, contained a civilisational hierarchy, where the Syrians, for instance, were to be enabled „to develop within the parameters of their own civilisation".

LEONID LUKS (Eichstätt) explored the ideas of a movement that demanded an „Exodus to the East" and the radical abandonment of Europe and the West: The Eurasianist movement, which was founded in 1920 by Russian émigrés – among them the Orthodox aristocrat and linguist Nikolai Trubetskoi –, criticised European concepts of progress and civilisation as a smoke screen that masked a brutal agenda of colonial expansionism. Eurasianists advocated a radical break from all forms of European culture and called for a worldwide revolt against Europe's political dominance. The historical implication of their geo-ideology was a wholesale rejection of the reforms of Peter I, and a

re-evaluation of Genghis Khan and the Tatar-Mongol rule. Luks also drew parallels to the anti-Westernism of the 'Conservative Revolution' in Weimar Germany.

Finally, MICHAEL KIMMAGE (Washington D.C.) argued that, from the perspective of US diplomacy, the political project of a transatlantic West only emerged after the end of the Second World War. Kimmage referred to America's isolationist stance after the First World War, and the existence of a specifically Anglo-American, rather than US-European, relationship. In a broader cultural sense, of course, the idea of a transatlantic West did exist, and this cultural space certainly included Germany. It was only after the 'inner-Western war' had ended in 1945, however, that the political project of a transatlantic West, and a fully-fledged American ideology of the West could be brought to fruition.

In his concluding comments, CHRISTIAN GEULEN (Koblenz / Landau) raised a number of points: first, the necessity to reflect on the contemporary significance of the topic, and the historical roots of today's mental maps; second, the relation of the topic to Shmuel Eisenstadt's conception of 'multiple modernities'; third, the logic of inclusion and exclusion which is inherent in conceptions of 'the West'; fourth, hierarchisations within the West and gradations of membership to the Western community (e.g. regarding the ability to colonise, or to universalise national narratives); fifth, the flexibility of the concept of the West, and the question about the limits of this flexibility; and lastly, the need to widen the scope of the investigation: to make it more inter-disciplinary, and to include, for example, literary sources and cultural artefacts.

The second part of the workshop shifted the geographical focus to Asia and the Middle East, and thus to regions typically considered to lie beyond the West. Various questions were identified at the outset: Did historical actors think in terms of one single universal civilisation attainable by all, and did they conceive of that one civilisation as having originated in 'the West', or did they think in terms of a plurality of civilisations with different trajectories and only a limited degree of convergence? Were there any global moments of the West, where regions across the globe engaged in intense discussions on 'the West' – for instance at the time of certain key events in international history, such as the Crimean War, or the Russo-Japanese War? What impact did transnational transfers of ideas and concepts (translation!) have on conceptualisations of the West? What impact did cultural 'Westernisation', or Europeanisation, have on national identity formation in Asia and the Middle East, and in what ways were distinctly non-'Western' identities asserted? What counter-concepts to 'the West', for example, evolved in Pan-Islamism and Pan-Asianism?

Starting with Japan, DANIEL HEDINGER (Munich) considered the changing conceptions of 'Western civilisation'. The term 'West' (*seiyō*) came to be identified with North America and Europe following the success of Fukuzawa Yukichi's book „Things Western", published in 1866. 'The West' marked the pinnacle of civilisation (*bunmei*), and Japan was to move westward in order to move forward. By 1900, however, Japan found itself in a highly ambiguous position, as reflected in Okakura Tenshin's book „The Ideals of the East" (1904). Japanese intellectuals increasingly distanced themselves from 'Western civilisation'. Pan-Asianists, in particular, advocated a non-Western, alternative modernity – a process with major implications for the whole of East Asia.

Similar ambiguity towards 'the West' was apparent in Korea, where a plurality of opinions existed, as EUN-JEUNG LEE (Berlin) explained. Originally denoting India, Europe-related conceptions of 'the West' first emerged in the early seventeenth century with the Jesuit missionaries to China, from where Korea derived most of its knowledge of other countries. Koreans received various images of 'the West' from China: while the traditional Chinese view depicted Europeans as barbaric, the Jesuit missionaries advanced a view of Europe as the centre of science and technology. Henceforth, both these images were used depending on the context of internal East Asian conflicts. Intense controversy developed, for instance, over the adoption of certain Western customs, as exemplified by the haircutting decree of 1895, which was heavily debated, for example, between the *Kaehwap'a* („Civilisation-Enlightenment") fac-

tion and the *Wijŏngch'ŏksap'a* („Right-Ideas-and-Prevention-of-the-Wrong-Thought") faction. The fact that 'civilising' and Enlightenment reforms were widely identified with 'Japanisation' further complicated the dispute, which was also fuelled by anti-Japanese nationalism.

SHIRLEY YE (Birmingham) examined photos of 'Western' hydraulic engineering by Chinese travellers to Europe and the US in the 1920s and 1930s. To be sure, while Western travellers to China kept extensive photographic records from the late nineteenth century, for a long time there was a dearth of Chinese photography of 'the West'. However, inspired by the New Culture Movement, which echoed aims of the earlier Self-Strengthening Movement (c. 1861–1895), young students of civil engineering started to tour the major hydraulic projects of Europe and America in the early 1920s and shared their knowledge at home – e.g. Song Xishang's „Record of My Hydraulic Investigation of Europe and America", which depicted 'Western' hydraulic engineering as a symbol of modernity. In what ways visual representations of the transformation of physical space (through hydraulic engineering) shaped the contours of imagined space ('the West') is a question in need of further exploration.

MICHAEL TALBOT (Greenwich) shifted the focus to the Middle East and drew attention to satirical cartoons as an important source for understanding how 'the West' was viewed in the later Ottoman Empire – particularly by members of the Istanbul bourgeoisie. Humour and satire became increasingly focussed on the tensions between Ottoman (*alaturca*) and European (*alafranga*) culture and mores. The often grotesque and surreal critiques of the *alafranga* elite revolved around the „requisites of civilisation" (*medeniyet*) and aimed at the emptiness and shallowness of the newly adapted ways of life, and codes of conduct, in the urban centres of the Ottoman Empire. Western fashion was mocked, Western gender roles were ridiculed, and Western time regimes were challenged. At the same time, a number of publications asserted the Islamic roots of European civilisation, suggesting that *alafranga* was *alaturca* at its core, just with some silly European clothes

and mores picked up on its historical journey.

The final lecture by UMAR RYAD (Utrecht) looked at Muslims in interwar Europe. Drawing on the recent findings of an ERC Starting Grant project on „Muslim Networks in Interwar Europe and European Transcultural History", he illustrated a range of interconnections between Muslim religiosity, political activism, and 'the West' in interwar Europe, partly centring on the European Muslim Congress that was held in Geneva in 1935. He depicted Europe as a 'transcultural space for Muslim interaction', and presented instances of Muslim self-assertion in the „lands of the colonisers".

In the concluding commentary, GEORGIOUS VAROUXAKIS (London) emphasized, in particular, the need to further reflect on the relation between 'the West' and the nation. After all, especially in non-Western regions of the world, 'the West' has often provided a key reference point for shaping national identities and forming processes of nation-building. At the same time, Varouxakis mentioned the Indian writer and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore, who, in his 1917 book „Nationalism", fiercely criticised the 'mechanical organisation' of the nation as a distinctly 'Western' invention. This was a due reminder of the importance of the Indian case, which was not covered by the workshop due to a cancellation, but also highlighted the need to investigate the dichotomy of rationality versus emotion in relation to different civilisational entities.

Following the talks, MARTINA STEBER (Konstanz / Munich) highlighted the importance of particularities, but also the many connections between different settings (national, cultural, etc.) in conceptualising 'the West.' She further suggested a closer consideration of language, power, and economics, which were all central to structuring understandings of 'the West' in colonial contexts; in particular, Steber suggested to examine the ways in which colonial languages of 'Western civilisation' were dealt with by the colonised. Along similar lines, RICCARDO BAVAJ (St Andrews) emphasised the need both to explore the agenda-setting power of 'the West' and to investigate the processes of transfer through which notions of the West emerging

in non-European areas reached the 'Western' metropole. Overall, the workshop threw into sharp relief how important it is to hone in on the entanglements of European and non-European concepts of the West – a task for future research.

Conference overview:

Munich, 7th–8th December 2015

Martina Steber (Augsburg / Munich) and Riccardo Bavaj (St Andrews):
Introduction

Peter Hoeres (Würzburg):
Der „Westen" im Ersten Weltkrieg

Florian Wagner (Freiburg/EUI Florence):
With or Against the West? Deutscher Kolonialismus zwischen Pangermanismus und kolonialem Internationalismus

Jakob Lehne (EUI Florence):
1899 – Wendejahr der internationalen Zivilisationsrhetorik

Florian Greiner (Augsburg):
Der transatlantische Spiegel – „Europa" und der „Westen" in der deutschen, britischen und amerikanischen Medienöffentlichkeit der Zwischenkriegszeit

Andreas Wirsching (Munich):
Der deutsche Weg in die Moderne. Abweichung vom Westen?

Christian Methfessel (Erfurt):
Der „Westen" und die imperiale Expansion in der britischen Öffentlichkeit der Jahrhundertwendezeit

Silke Mende (Tübingen):
Im Spannungsverhältnis von Metropole und Imperium. Französische Diskurse um „Westen", „Moderne" und „Zivilisation"

Leonid Luks (Eichstätt):
Russlands „konservative Revolution"? Die Eurasierbewegung und ihre Auseinandersetzung mit dem „Westen" (1921–1938)

Michael Kimmage (Washington D. C.):
Amerika gegen den Westen. Eine frühe Auseinandersetzung, 1880–1930

Christian Geulen (Koblenz / Landau):
Commentary

St Andrews, 3rd June 2016:

Riccardo Bavaj (St Andrews) and Martina Steber (Konstanz/Munich):
Introduction

Daniel Hedinger (Munich):
Neither West nor Rest. Changing Concepts of Civilisation in Japan, 1860–1940

Eun-Jeung Lee (Berlin):
Occidentalism. Images of the West and Western Civilisation in Korea

Shirley Ye (Birmingham):
Environments of „the West" in Chinese Travel Diaries and Photo Albums during the 1920s and 1930s

Michael Talbot (Greenwich):
The Requisites of Civilisation? Satirical Critiques of „the West" in the later Ottoman Empire

Umar Ryad (Utrecht):
Muslims in Interwar Europe. A Transcultural Historical Perspective

Georgios Varouxakis (Queen Mary University of London):
Commentary

Tagungsbericht *Nation, Culture and Civilisation: Talking about and beyond 'the West' (1860–1940)*. 07.12.2015–08.12.2015, Munich / St Andrews, in: H-Soz-Kult 24.09.2016.