

# THE IMAGINED WEST: EXPLORING OCCIDENTALISM

## INTRODUCTION

After the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1995 [1978]), generalizing discourses about the cultures, societies, and peoples of the 'East' were not taken for granted as much as they used to be. In his revered but also criticized book, Said described exhaustively the traditional distorted European view of the East as the polar opposite of the West, or 'the Other'. The Orient was the object of the West's colonization, and of fantasies and generalizations that had little to do with reality. While there has been examination and abundant criticism of Orientalist worldviews for several decades now, scholars have only recently begun to examine the concept and the shifting meanings of the Occident—the 'West' (Bavaj 2011: 4).

The Oxford English dictionary tells us that 'the West' with a capital W—as opposed to the west as a point of the compass—means 'Europe and North America', which are 'seen in contrast to other civilizations'. However, why these geographical areas are called the West, which countries belong to the West, and what socio-cultural elements make a society 'Western' depend on the discursive context. Sometimes the concept refers to a certain geopolitical formation or a political system; often it connotes a high level of technological development or scientific progress; at other times it simply refers to the populations in the world that are the richest and consume the most. In the historical imagination, the Western world is based on a series of interrelated phenomena including

Christianity, the Enlightenment, the industrial revolution and colonialism. Sometimes, on the other hand, 'a Westerner' is simply a euphemism for a 'white' person, which means that a Westerner can be anything from a reindeer herder in Northern Lapland to a stockbroker in Manhattan. Considering the actual socio-cultural heterogeneity of the West, it is surprising how unproblematically and vaguely the term has been used both inside and outside of academia (see, e.g., Korhonen 2013; Péteri ed. 2010; Makdisi 2002: 772–773; Bozatzis 2014: 130–134).

The concept of the West has always been dynamic. A major shift in its meaning occurred when Europe lost its colonies in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the United States became the new hegemonic world power, and at the same time the Americans took a central role in the imagined West. The rest of the West meant, as Pekka Korhonen (2010: 8–9) describes it, 'a disparate collection of American allies from Norway and Turkey to Japan and Australia'. According to Korhonen (2016; see also Jouhki 2015), the West has more geopolitical coherence than the East has, but it is still an amoeba-like, ever-changing formation of states (which sometimes even includes some Asian countries) presented as one, single actor. In systemic terms, the relation between the concept and the reality is *not* a problematic one. There is definitely and undeniably something called 'the West', and although geopolitically, socially, and culturally what the concept refers to is in constant flux, people believe in its unity. The West is 'a widely

used euphemism' that stands for an 'underlying unity of culturally rooted values, institutions and a way of life' (Miklóssy and Korhonen 2010: ix).

Occidentalism—the belief in a coherent socio-cultural entity called the West—is like nationalism or any other ideology that constructs a collective identity. Occidentalism, too, requires an aggregate of people who feel they belong to an 'us' and not to a 'them'. As a nationalist believes that a nation is to some meaningful extent a homogenous formation, an Occidentalist believes that a fuzzy set of states and nations called 'the West' or 'Western countries' has enough internal coherence to exist as a meaningful whole. Pekka Korhonen (2016; see also Jouhki 2015) likens the West to a big orchestra playing rapid jazz tunes non-stop. Whether any members of the band leave or new ones arrive is irrelevant as long as there is noise.

In the present introductory article, the concept of Occidentalism is examined through the academic literature. The aim is to examine 'the West' as a concept, a product of imagination, and a discursive tradition. Despite their fuzziness, the terms 'the West' and 'Western' serve a purpose: they identify and classify a combination of world regions and categorize ideas about certain ways of life. Although it is not exactly clear what these terms denote, they are used as if there was a corresponding distinctive reality out there in the world. Among countless other 'Us/Them' divisions, the West/East (or West/non-West) categorization forms and reinforces links between a geographical, historical, and sociological paradigmatic chain of concepts. The result is an almost tangible and inescapable image of the world divided into coherent units, one of which is called 'the West' (Coronil 1996: 52). However, to understand the images of the West, it would be helpful first to take a look at how its counterpart, the East, has

been viewed in Euro-American thought, and how the Western 'Self' has been perceived as being in existence.

## EXAMINING THE WEST BEHIND ORIENTALISM

Edward Said called the tradition of imagining, writing about, and having power over the non-West as 'Orientalism'. Before Said's treatment, the term Orientalism had high academic value and it simply denoted to an interest in the history and cultures of the Orient. After Said's book, however, Orientalism came to suggest a skewed, colonial view of the world. According to Said, in the previous academic and popular imagination the Orient was perceived as monolithic: everything between Morocco and Japan was seen as basically the same culture. Moreover, the Orientals were represented as essentially irrational, emotional, child-like, and collectivist, and on a lower level of progress and civilization compared to the West—which justified their colonization (Said 1995).

Said's work has been criticized for presenting 'Orientalists' as one lot—all inherently imperialist, racist, and ethnocentric. Yet, while some 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Orientalist scholars indeed adopted the 'monarch of all I survey' attitude toward the Orient, others were instead quite sympathetic and respectful toward it, and even thought that the Oriental way of life could bring some valuable spiritual content to the soulless, materialistic, and over-modernized society of the West. Although Orientalists actually differed in their attitudes toward the Orient, to Said they were all the same in that they imagined the East and the West as essentially different, or as ontologically binary cultural entities (Adas 1989: 348–350,

353; Clifford 2001: 16; Scott 2011: 301; Said 1995).

Said claimed that differences between groups and societies were emphasized and exaggerated by naming them according to an ethnic or cultural group. Feelings like joy or suffering, or political organization, were defined in terms of these groups. Said pointed out, for example, that in European and American literature about the East there had been narratives about ‘Arab joy’, the ‘Oriental mode of production’, the ‘Indian mind’, ‘Asian superstition’, and so on. According to Said, elements of behavior were attributed to an ethnic origin, which led to their being reinforced or exaggerated. Orientalists examining the East were inclined to view the cultures and societies they studied as evidence of an Oriental existence: no Oriental could progress in time or overcome the influence of their origin. If deviations from the canonized Oriental way of life were observed, they were interpreted as abnormal, non-Oriental, and/or Western (Said 1995: 233–234; Jouhki 2006: 36).

Nowadays, Orientalism is considered a prime example of the power of academic and popular discourse to essentialize a group of people. Concepts such as ‘Asian mind’, ‘Eastern thought’, or ‘Muslim culture’ are still used today, but it is increasingly difficult to justify such generalizing speech. Moreover, ‘the Orient’ as an academic concept has become disputed and widely rejected (Jouhki 2006, 35). Orientalism, however, is certainly not the only problematic practice that upholds stereotyping discourses: humans tend to create imaginative discourses about groupings of any size, from the village-level to the nation. Our ability to perceive reality and to produce statements about it is always limited and thus we have to generalize and draw on pre-existing discourses and narrative traditions. The problem in any such

generalizing discourse is not the fact that it generalizes but the fact that the people who produce and reproduce it are often not aware that they are generalizing. Hence, we claim that Occidentalism—just like Orientalism, nationalism, ethnocentrism, or any other process of communal and identity construction—should be an important focus of academic interest. And yet, it has not been sufficiently examined, probed, and criticized (Bavaj 2011: 4; Beard 1979: 6–7; Jouhki 2006: 59).

Said examined what he called Western Orientalism, and the intertwined Western hegemony in the East, but he stressed that a similar Eastern Occidental discourse should not be created to complement or counteract Western Orientalism. Said (1995: 328) claimed that Orientals would not benefit in any way from constructing their own stereotypes and images of the West, and of Occidentals. However, Said’s warning was surprisingly uninformed, because discourses and images of the West and Westerners have certainly existed for a long time outside of the West. Indeed, Occidentalism (or multiple Occidentalisms) has been reproduced ever since the idea of the West or Western people was formed (Takeuchi 2010: 24; Jouhki 2006: 49), and there are plenty of non-Western counter-narratives about the West (Woltering 2011: 5; Coronil 1996: 55–56; Sims 2012: 207).

## MULTIPLE OCCIDENTALISMS

The academic study of Occidentalism has a relatively short history, and definitions of the concept itself vary. Occasionally, Occidentalism refers to Westernization, the process of a non-Western society adopting, or wanting to adopt, cultural elements that have been labeled Western. In this meaning, the word ‘Occidentalist’ would be used by an academic

to label a proponent of what is viewed as Western culture. Often the word 'Western' is used synonymously with 'modern' in academic and non-academic texts alike. This kind of narrative use is not unlike 19<sup>th</sup>-century cultural evolutionist theories, as it imagines a gradual continuum on which the West represents the future and the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel of progress (see, e.g., Spencer 2003: Baber 2002: 755–756; Jouhki 2006, 61).

Perhaps more often in academic texts the word Occidentalism means 'anti-Westernism', or movements and/or ideologies that reject rather than advocate ideas, political processes, or material objects labeled Western (Woltering 2011, 5; Sims 2012: 207). For example, Islamic, anti-colonial, anti-globalist, and socialist movements have been defined as Occidentalists (e.g., Buruma and Margalit 2005; Hermes 2012: 8; Chen 2002: 23–42). According to Bryan Turner (1997), Occidentalism is thus a fight against—not advocacy for—'modernization'. Ian Buruma (2004; see also Spencer 2003: 236–250) goes further and describes how aggressive Occidentalism imagines a process of harmful Westernization—or 'Westoxification'—which makes non-Western Occidentalists reject what is seen as the cold, mechanical West, a machine-like civilization characterized by emotionless rationalism, cynical secularism, self-centered individualism, and power-hungry colonialism. The East, in contrast, in this kind of counter-hegemonic Occidentalism, is a place where family values, tradition, spirituality, morality, and hard work are valued (Korhonen 1996, 164–166). Jonathan Spencer (2003: 236–250; see also Jouhki 2006: 72) describes how non-Western critics of the West view it as the origin and place of rationalism, but claim that the Western way of practicing rationality has gone too far. Occidentalists of this school argue that

one can do almost anything, however immoral, in the West, and justify it by rationalizing it.

In general, Occidentalism in Asia is structurally and functionally similar to Orientalism in the West (whatever that is), although it differs in being more defensive than offensive (Korhonen 1996: 159–160; see also Takeuchi 2010: 29–30). As Rio Takeuchi (2010: 26–27) claims, Occidentalism in Asia exists 'as a strategy devised by subordinate people for surviving in the hegemonic world order'. He proposes that Occidentalism is about the perpetuation of distorted images of its target, but at the same time it is also about 'acquiring as accurate knowledge of the West as possible'. For example, Francis Nymanjoh and Ben Page (2002) have studied Cameroonian views of 'white people' and whiteness as a symbol of the Occident, and claim that if upholding an identity requires a competing alter ego (like the Oriental has been to Western people), then the 'Black Cameroonian Self' has been reproduced by creating a 'White European Other'. Many Cameroonians question the fantastic stereotype of wealthy but weak Westerners; however, at the same time they hope that the stereotype is true, because the hope of accessing the bountiful West through white people is an essential part of the Cameroonian survival strategy (Nyamnjoh and Page 2002; see also Jouhki 2006: 154–162).

In this article, Occidentalism has a more abstract, simple, and banal meaning. It means simply the belief in a coherent socio-cultural entity called 'the West', which is thought to be distinctive and homogeneous enough to have its own culture, people, and society. Occidentalism is thus practiced both by people calling themselves Western and by people who do not. It includes both the self-images of Westerners and images of Western society as the Other. The value statements made about the West can

be either negative or positive, or even mutually contradictory. It does not matter if there are different images about the West, because as long as any images exist, there is Occidentalism. Although we view the West as an entity that owes its existence to a significant extent to the collective imagination, this does not mean that it is pure fantasy. Like any imagined community, the belief in it has some concrete foundation, as well as very real or practical consequences (Anderson 2006 [1983]; Jouhki 2006: 43–44).

Being united under a name produces feelings of affinity and loyalty. This leads people to signify experiences selectively in a way that buttresses the sense of union. In other words, when one labels oneself as a Westerner, one is more committed to narrating observations in the empirical world as Western. Naming ideas, political systems, historical processes, and even academic disciplines as Western strengthens the Western community. Moreover, a feeling of belonging to Western culture can lead to political engagement in that particular collective. If one sees oneself as a Westerner, one also usually feels politically loyal to ‘the West’. Thus, to claim that a cultural category such as the West is an imagined community does not mean that it is not a relevant and meaningful phenomenon. The West might be fuzzy or imagined, but it has a true meaning for people and practical ramifications both in the West and outside of it.

## OCCIDENTALISM IN ANTHROPOLOGY

In anthropological discourses, too, the West has traditionally been treated as a natural entity, an unquestioned polar opposite of the exotic Other. For example, Gewertz and Errington (1991: 82–83; see also Jouhki 2006: 184) see Margaret Mead as the ‘Great Occidentalizer’ in the history

of anthropology. She is said to have presented the non-Western Other and the Western Self as diametrically opposed categories. The Balinese, the Samoans, or the Papuans Mead studied—all seem to be manifestations of the Other, the opposite of the Westerner. Mead viewed the objects of her research as homogenous, stable, and standardized in contrast to the heterogeneous, dynamic, and diverse Occidental Self she presented in her studies. The essential contrast that Mead found (or created) seemed to suggest that the lives of ‘primitive groups’ were defined and predestined whereas Western peoples living in their ever-changing societies were free to choose the lives they wanted to lead.

Mead often essentialized the West and exaggerated its uniqueness in order to criticize it. The same can be said of any self-critique of the West. To criticize the West does not mean that one is not practicing Occidentalism—at least in the sense(s) that Occidentalism is defined in this issue. For example, James Carrier (1992: 201–203) observed how Marcel Mauss (1990 [1950]) essentialized the Western economy and presented it as an inherently cold, rational, and emotionless practice of exchange. While Mauss criticized the West, he at the same affirmed that such a homogeneous society existed. To consider a more recent example, Marshall Sahlin’s book, *The Western Illusions of Human Nature* (2008), assumes that there is a ‘Western civilization’, ‘Western society’, and even ‘Western notions of nature and culture’. In our view, such concepts should be deployed very carefully—if at all. At the very least, anyone writing about the ‘West’ as an analytical category should acknowledge its essentializing quality and treat it as a phantasmatic entity (Favero 2003: 576) with shifting, relative, contextual, and sometimes idiosyncratic content.

According to Jonathan Spencer, anthropologists have historically and ideologically

practiced what he calls Positivist Occidentalism. This means that the West has been viewed as the future of the East. ‘Their’ present is ‘our’ past. In this well known cultural evolutionist worldview, the non-West is suffering from (or sometimes enjoying) a time lag. Anthropologists who have not practiced Positivist Occidentalism have engaged instead in what Spencer calls Romantic Occidentalism. For example Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Clifford Geertz did not imagine a similar evolutionist time-scale as the Positivist Occidentalists, but they did imagine two parallel, different—albeit equal—entities called ‘the West’ and ‘the East’ (or non-West). Romantic Occidentalism might have been a less evolutionist, and thus less hierarchical, view, but its ideology was nevertheless essentialist in its relativism: the two categories, the West and its counterpart, were seen as ontologically different and incommensurable cultures (Spencer 2003: 237–241).

According to Martin Sökefeld (1999: 418) Clifford Geertz is a good example of how anthropology has imagined a ‘Western self’ in contrast to ‘non-Westerners’ selfhood, which is more collective and unbounded. To Sökefeld, the image of the Western Self in anthropology is highly individualist: an entity that is comparable to that presented in René Descartes’ *Cogito*: a bounded, unique, dynamic center for awareness that exists in a distinctive organized whole. However, Sökefeld (1999: 418–429) reminds us that individualism is different from actual individuality. Westerners might believe that they are essentially different from non-Westerners in their independent individuality, and this idea is certainly reproduced in Western narratives of the Self, but it does not necessarily make Westerners act and think in a more individual way.

In general, images of the West have rarely appeared very explicitly in anthropological

fieldwork; they have been, rather, more implicit foundations for comparison. Sometimes anthropologists might report how the people they are studying have commented on something about the West, but more often anthropologists themselves might comment on what they see as the penetration of the West (or Westernization) into the societies they are studying. Often things like wage labor, missionary work, and industrial projects are seen as manifestations of a coherent entity called the West (Carrier 1992: 199). Perhaps there is some empirical foundation for claiming there is such a thing as Western culture, but anthropology has shown very little interest in corroborating it through its basic method, ethnographic fieldwork. Instead, it seems that the ‘Western ego’ has been more a paradigmatic premise, an unquestioned axiom, than an examined or observed fact. Moreover, the ‘Western experience’ is often seen as some sort of standard. For example, if non-Western elements of culture appear in Western culture, they are often called ‘ethnic’. Even in the academic study of Occidentalism, the Western scholar is often viewed as the point of reference (Woltering 2011: 3–4).

## TOWARDS CRITICAL STUDY OF ‘THE WEST’

Occidental discourses frame one’s expectations and experiences of ‘Western culture’ just like Orientalist discourses frame one’s interpretation of the East. Like the Orient, the West is created by infinite self-reference, by endlessly labeling things as Western (Bhatnagar 1986: 12–13). There is no such thing as the West as such, but there is a label, ‘the West’, which is given to different geopolitical and cultural phenomena in different situations. According to Korhonen, the West is a synecdoche that has multilayered narrative content. It is a rhetorical

shell, a container that can be filled with an infinite number of different meanings, but the criteria by which this is done are always under question. Thus the meanings are not stable; what the container holds changes constantly (Korhonen 2010: 16–22; 2016).

The West might refer to the process of, and the culture surrounding, capitalism and wealth formation (Coronil 1996: 62–64); or it might refer to a multi-layered and complex whole called modernization (Ahiska: 357–365). People choose their narratives, and they might say, for example, that they oppose things ‘Western’, when they actually oppose certain technological developments, political processes, or gender roles which are associated with a fuzzy entity called the West (e.g., Ahiska 258–365). According to Fernando Coronil (1996: 78), it is surprising how many people think that the West is the place and source of modernity. In his opinion the West has been naturalized and fetishized to an autonomous entity. Populations identified by the common signifier seem as if they are living isolated lives, and their characteristics spring from the internal attributes of their selectively imagined history and culture. They come together under the label of ‘Western world’, ‘Western society,’ or ‘Western people’ (Coronil 1996: 77–78; see also Boatcă 2015: 78–80).

In the end, Occidentalism falls into the very human tendency to practice symbolic geography. It reveals the way we identify and define ourselves by locating ourselves spatially and temporally, by drawing the boundaries of discursively constructed social spaces we imagine ourselves to be in. This socially and historically situated process is anthropologically important, because it has an intimate relationship to the formation of identities and identity politics. It is also a form of social control. By repeating what the West and a Westerner are like, norms are enforced and reinforced. This kind of mental

mapping of the West emphasizes shared patterns at the cost of differences. In other words, we ignore our differences in order to feel united, and we fabricate ourselves into coherence (Carrier 2003: 9; Péteri 2010: 2–3; Bhatnagar 1986: 3–5). The West as a source of identity is often ‘a massive body of self-congratulating ideas’. What researchers studying culture should do is not necessarily draw a better map of the West, but unmask the rhetoric that creates it (Clifford 1988: 265; Jouhki 2006: 51). Anthropology has traditionally examined the so-called non-Western Other, and in so doing the explicit or implicit views of the West—however carefully constructed, naïve, or taken-for-granted—that anthropologists hold have been central to the way they have understood and represented it.

Edward Said (1995) shook the academic world by claiming that Europeans and Americans called everything between Japan and Morocco ‘the Orient’. In the same way, discussion is needed now to establish whether everything from Russia westward should really be called ‘the West’. We need to ask if there really is something distinctive or even unique in being ‘a Westerner’. At the very least, anthropology should be more interested in the ways this transnational and multicultural population of a billion people called ‘the West’ is united, and how far its unity is a product of the imagination.

The purpose of this themed issue is to raise critical discussion about the idea of ‘the West’, to encourage further research on the theme, and also to explore some of the potential ways in which anthropological and cultural studies can tackle the topic. In the first article, Sandra Nasser El-Dine analyzes Arab views of the West in the context of Syrian and Jordanian youth. Based on twenty in-depth interviews conducted during ethnographic fieldwork in the two countries, she explores how local gender

relations are viewed and valued in relation to the contrasting imageries of Arab and Western culture. Nasser El-Dine's study shows how the West is a significant symbol for modernity and freedom—which might also mean promiscuity and recklessness—seen rhetorically in polar opposition to 'truly Muslim' customs, which encourage strong marital bonds and emphasize tradition. The article also analyzes how Islam, too, is a context-dependent concept, and might even be used in support of liberal views of gender relations. For example, the young Arabs interviewed for Nasser El-Dine's study tended to use Islam as a discursive resource to negotiate more individual freedom in finding a marriage partner.

Then, Jukka Jouhki's article will draw on Michael Billig's (1995) notion of banal nationalism. In the article he analyzes *Helsingin Sanomat*, the leading national newspaper in Finland, to find out how the issues it reports are categorized as 'Western' in order to reproduce the idea of a Western world. Jouhki's concept of banal Occidentalism extends Billig's banal nationalism by exploring how the idea of the 'the West' (just like that of any nation state) is kept alive not so much by a fervent ideology but by almost undetectable, normalized discursive choices that reproduce the West as an ethno-symbolist unit with shared myths and memories. The article suggests that a community and a sense of cultural unity can be evoked by little more than repeating the name of the community.

In the third article, Nikos Bozatzis presents an analysis of a 2010 travelogue on crisis ridden-Greece, published in the globally circulating life-style magazine, *Vanity Fair*. Using tools and concepts from the theories of discourse analysis and social psychology, the article highlights ways in which Occidentalist assumptions gain rhetorical and ideological legitimacy within

a text that advances a 'culturalist' explanation of the financial crisis in Greece. Like Jukka Jouhki's theoretical foundation, Bozatzis' article also expands Michael Billig's (1995) influential thesis on banal nationalism, and interrogates how Greece is seen as a 'cultural other' in the context of 'Western' society closely affiliated with neoliberalism.

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