

The concept of West in times of conflict

The concept of West, particularly in the context of “Western values” is often used, but rarely defined. We see the concept of West as politically powerful slogan under which Western politics and conceptions of good life are habitually given meaning and justified. Western values, Western democracy, a Western way of life as well as Western politics, are often seen as under threat due to non-Western influence. In our respective research, we approach the concepts of the West and the Non-West from different angles: Visual media representations of the West and the rest in times of crisis and war, and as well the portrayal of the West in Finnish school textbooks in history, geography and social studies Bonnett¹ suggests. We see that the need to define what “we” Westerners are, and what “we” are not (as in what is typical for the Other) is strengthened during times of crisis and conflicts that involve the West and the non-Western “Other”. In our paper we ask what meanings and definitions the concept of West is given during times of war: in visual media representations as well as in school textbooks.

Within critical whiteness studies² positions, such as white, male and middle class identities that have been perceived as neutral, and the extent to which they reproduce political, social and moral power hierarchies, are examined. We see a need for a discussion about these assumptions. Bonnett³ suggests that the concept of West includes a set of values that could theoretically be open for all, however, at the same time it seems clear to all that the whole world cannot become “Western”. The concepts of whiteness (as embodied experiences) and Westernness (an ideological identity potentially open for all) belong to different spheres. Simultaneously, whiteness studies and the study of the West share some common ground. While referring primarily to embodied experiences, the concept of whiteness has also had territorial and cultural/ideological traits. “The West” remains racially coded (ibid.).

However, while the term white is highly politicized, the term Western is used extensively in media, education and even in the academic debate, often without definition. The reason for referring to whiteness as a comparative concept to Westernness in this study is that it provides an incentive to examine the use of the concept of the West in a less neutral light. One major difference between the categories “white” and “Western” is the extent to which they are politicized. The concepts are perceived and used very differently.

¹ Mikander, P. *Westerners and others in Finnish school textbooks*. Academic dissertation, University of Helsinki, faculty of behavioural sciences, 273/2016,

² Ahmed, S. *Vithetens hegemoni*. Hägersten: Tankekraft förlag, 2011. ; Mattson, K. *Vit rasism*. In K. Mattson & I. Lindberg (Eds.) *Rasism i Europa – kontinuitet och förändring*. Rapport från forskarseminariet 5 november 2003. Stockholm: Agora, 2004, 108—141.

³ Bonnett, A. *The Idea of the West. Culture, Politics and History*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004.

Western values are usually understood to signify democracy and human rights. If, supposedly, democracy or human rights were referred to as “white values,” or if the news media reported about threats to the “white world” in the same ways as “Western values” or the “Western world” are mentioned today, many people would probably react with dismay. Yet there are rarely any such reactions towards the frequent references to Western values and Westernness.

In the representation of wars between Westerners and “others”, the concept of Western values is referred to frequently, in political speech, media, as well as social science education. The violence caused by the West is often downplayed or even rendered invisible, our research shows. Young⁴ considers there to be a “strategic blindness and refusal to come to terms with the violence intrinsic to Western culture.” As an example of this, he notes that fascism and the Holocaust are often referred to as exceptional passages within Western culture, while it “took a Césaire or Fanon to point out that fascism was simply colonialism brought home to Europe (ibid.).”

This tendency is exemplified for example by (Western) usage and conceptions of the terms “Western human rights” and “Western global humanitarianism”. In everyday thinking human rights and global humanitarianism are often understood as Western ideals, aspirations and practices of doing good, and helping the ones in need (of protection).⁵ But Western humanitarily framed intentions and actions towards the rest of the world have a centuries-long history, particularly exemplified by the *colonial system*.⁶ Topically, visual representational practices of human vulnerability serve a central function in communicating the Western world order and dominance over the rest of the world. This tendency is poignantly visualized in contemporary imagery of foreign disasters and the Western militarized humanitarian interventions into such situations. Picturing the strong humanitarian yet militarized West vis-à-vis the sick, helpless and the weary rest produces revealing scenery into the global developmental dominance of the West over the non-Western lives seen as lives in a lessened manner.⁷

The results of the study shows in what ways the concept of Western values is used to refer to democracy, human rights and equality, while simultaneously constructing a hegemonic difference between Westerners and others.

⁴ Young, R. *White mythologies. Writing history and the West*. London: Routledge, 1990, 164.

⁵ Barnett, M. *The International Humanitarian Order*. New York: Routledge, 2010.; Duffield, M. *Development, Security and Unending war. Governing the World of Peoples*, Cambridge :Polity, 2007.; Douzinas, C. *Human Rights and Empire: The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism*. New York: Routledge-Cavendish, 2007.

⁶ Barnett, M. *Empire of Humanity. A History of Humanitarianism*. Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 2011.

⁷ Kotilainen, N. *Visual Theatres of Suffering. Constituting the Western Spectator in the Age of Humanitarian World politics*. Academic dissertation, University of Helsinki, faculty of social sciences, 11/2016,