Re-constructing the West:
Beyond the Prophecies of Globalization

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The West: Concept, Narrative and Politics

December 8–9, 2016, University of Jyväskylä

The main points:

1) **Introduction** – A preliminary point about orientation in space and politics: direction and ambivalence. When the concepts of West, North, South and East are not used to describe *directions*, as they were originally designed for, but to designate *identities*, the fundamental fact that the Earth is a sphere is forgotten and the equally fundamental fact that meaning of identities is relational rather than absolute is neglected. West is the opposite direction to the East, but they eventually meet and the movement they originally described in opposition become a convergent movement. The meeting moment is also the moment when the meaning of one dissolves into the meaning of the other. This dissolution may be perceived with the connotation of death. The "end of history" and "clash of civilization" are two sides of a single response to the same problem: the dissolution of Ego brought about by the disappearance of Alter. As such they can be usefully understood as symbolic expression of the subconscious fear associated to the disintegration of an "imagined community" which, if we believe in oppositional identities, necessarily follows the disappearance of the Enemy. This homicide/suicide is the cultural breeding ground of the crisis of the last twenty years: a crisis that inspires the construction of the Enemy. The main argument in this text is that we need to re-construct the West to avoid this dissolution and effects of fear and the violence associated to that. In the text that follows I will argue a) why this conceptualization of the West is wrong, dangerous, and influential; b) how we can get rid of it and produce a new, better, safer and ultimately more productive notion of the West.

2) **The "end of history" and the "clash of civilizations** – The latter a response to the former. Both are responses to the end of the Cold War: F. Fukuyama "end of history"

(EoH) and S.P. Huntington's Clash of Civilization (CoC). Both widely criticized texts but nevertheless influential: why? Because they are not "true" but "useful" – the notion of performativity in J-F. Lyotard applied to the "reality" of international politics. EoH and CoC are not "hypotheses" to be verified but "doctrines" to be implemented. Their influence reflects not their "scientific" strength (the soundness and coherence of the arguments on which it rests, the insightfulness of the concepts and the relations it identifies, etc.) but rather the influence of the elites and the constellations of power whose interests are served by those formulations of the future. Those are form of "power/knowledge": discursive formations that make the exercise of control practically possible.

3) **The "end of history" and "civilizational identity"? The conceptual origins of a mistaken argument** – The "end of history" is the conceptual artefact that paves the ground for the legitimization of a hierarchical organization of difference (in culture, politics, socio-economic organization, etc.) and ultimately to globalization as the top-down integration of difference. It can do that because "liberal democracy" is misconstrued and reified: from a hierarchies of values into an organizational form of political power. The "clash of civilization" provides the grounds for the legitimization of violence against difference both inside and outside a "West" constructed as a "civilizational identity". This notion is vague (Said 2001) but allows for the mis-interpretation of Henri Tajfel and John Turner theory of social identity/categorization. In this notion, "civilization" is a form of "collective identity", based in turn on a notion of "individual identity" in which Otherness is reduced to and synonym with Enemy.

4) **The effects of conceptual mistakes** - This way of conceptualizing the role of ideologies (hierarchies of values) and the relations between Ego and Alter in the construction of social identities is simplistic, unnecessary and ultimately dangerous. It is simplistic because it reifies ideologies into the form of organizations of power inspired by them and reduces the process of categorization that lead to the construction of identities to a mono-dimensional process of Ego vs. Alter. It is unnecessary because the relationship with values and Otherness is eminently social and, as such, including aspects of identification and differentiation, cooperation and competition, etc. It is dangerous because, in its simplicity, it confuses the morality of values with the strength of the communities supporting them. This confusion implies a chronical "ontological insecurity" for the moral grounds of the social identities. In practice, when our right to exist is justified only by our capacity to vanquish our enemy(-ies), the awareness of the eminently shallow grounds of "our" identity is compensated for or even repressed through the concentration of attention on and the mobilization of affection and loyalties against the Enemy. The ideological "interpellation" of the competitive/destructive "self" of collective identities becomes not a functional and more or less temporary move (e.g. during war) but the very ground or ontological "core" of the same social identities.

5) **From the "clash of civilization" to the clash within the West: the politics of identity**. The politics of identity/recognition based on competitive differentiation implies a form of relationship in which the influence between Ego and Alter is ultimately a zero sum game and one wins when the other loses. The important point here is that both the "EoH" and the "CoC" hypotheses hide the "clash within" the

Western civilization: the "dialectics of the Enlightenment" and the clash between the competing socio-political logics of "critical thinking" and "instrumental reason". The "West" is here the stake of a political competition for the connotation of this concept in its cultural but also socio-political aspects. This is a clash between e.g. different political economies, different formulas of development, different and in incompatible conceptualizations of the problem of political legitimization: the "justification" of political power. The year 2001 was the turning point: it could have been the year of the dialogue among civilizations but the attacks of 9/11 transformed that year in the beginning of the (global) war on terror.

6) **Re-constructing the West** – We need to re-actualize the West. We need to engage with the politics of identity (a competition we cannot afford to ignore) with a cultural strategy based on a new concept of the West: one based on "blending & selective assimilation of Otherness" rather than "purity and annihilation of Otherness". We need to change the way we tell stories about the West and to represent this not as a place or, even worst, an "empty fortress" (cf. Bettelheim) but a direction, a flow. This process is one of culture production: of deliberate mobilization, organization and deployment of cultural elements in combinations that are suitable to support this alternative notion of the West. Cultural production does not mean manipulation, at least not more than implied in the establishment, preservation or challenge of other forms of cultural identities (here I deliberately avoid discussing the production of a new West in its military, socio-economics or political implications, but I will answer to questions about these).