

The West and the global politics of empathy

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The West: Concept, Narrative and Politics

December 8–9, 2016, University of Jyväskylä

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In recent years we have witnessed a pattern that emerges after tragic events – particularly terrorist attacks – in the West. After a short period of mourning, shock and empathy, a self-critical wave follows in which the West is accused of being selected and hypocritical in terms of its acts of empathy. Questions are raised as to why the West pays so much attention to, for example, the Paris attacks of terror and not to the more frequent attacks in Baghdad? Is it because Westerners are more valuable than non-Westerners?¹

This paper examines this ‘empathy gap’ debate and attempts to demonstrate that it ties in with the self-critical tradition in the debate about the idea of the West. In the debate the West is imagined not only as an ethically declinist entity but also as a homogenous actor that is morally repugnant and politically hegemony-seeking. In this paper, the ‘declinist West’ idea is treated as a narrative tradition that has always been an integral part of the debate concerning the idea of the West. The West, as Patrick Thaddeus Jackson aptly argues, was born in crisis and has never been a particularly self-confident social actor.² Michael Allen Gillespie similarly argues that ‘the idea of the West in its fullest sense arises as the idea of the end of the West, as the retrospective

¹ For example, David A. Graham wrote in *The Atlantic* after the terrorist attacks in Paris and Beirut in November 2015: ‘Each time there’s a major terror attack in an American or European city—New York, Madrid, London, Paris, Paris again—it captures the attention and concern of Americans and Europeans in a way that similar atrocities elsewhere don’t seem to do. Seldom do events line up so neatly, offering a clear comparison, as the bombings in Beirut and the rampage in Paris [...] should the empathy gap be attributed to an American and European press that focuses too heavily on attacks in the “West”?’ David A. Graham, ‘The Empathy Gap Between Paris and Beirut’, *The Atlantic*, 16 November 2015, available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/11/paris-beirut-terrorism-empathy-gap/416121/> (20 November 2016). Similarly, Anne Barnard wrote in *The New York Times* six months later: ‘In recent days, jihadists killed 41 people at Istanbul’s bustling, shiny airport; 22 at a cafe in Bangladesh; and at least 250 celebrating the final days of Ramadan in Baghdad. Then the Islamic State attacked, again, with bombings in three cities in Saudi Arabia [...] Where was the outpouring that came after the same terrorist groups unleashed horror in Brussels and here in Paris? In a supposedly globalized world, do nonwhites, non-Christians and non-Westerners count as fully human?’¹ Anne Barnard, ‘After Attacks on Muslims, Many Ask: Where Is the Outpouring?’, *The New York Times*, 5 July 2016, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/06/world/europe/muslims-baghdad-dhaka-istanbul-terror.html> (20 November 2016).

² Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, ‘The Perpetual Decline of the West’ in Christopher S. Browning & Marko Lehti (eds.), *The Struggle for the West: A Divided and Contested Legacy* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 58.

recognition of a horizon that we have now transcended'.³

Jackson goes on to show that there are different narratives of the West's decline, all of which represent 'an inheritance of the "West" tradition, a kind of fundamental anxiety that accompanies debate and discussions about Western action; this makes an appeal to the West's immanent demise an attractive trope for advocate of particular policies to deploy, since the audience – raised in the same "West" tradition – is already familiar with the basic line of argument'.⁴ Today the 'declinist West' tradition is particularly pronounced in the self-critical approach to the global politics of empathy that takes places within the West and largely to a Western audience.

In focusing on this discursive dimension in the debate about the West, the paper challenges the widely accepted idea that 'the West as "the master" and "the established" in the international system completely side-steps the issue of its ontological condition because of its "seeming naturalness"'.⁵ When engaging with the debate on the idea of the West, one hardly gets a sense that the West is either ontologically secure or unified in its supposed master identity. It is needless to say that such a representation is a stereotypical image of the West, which derives not from a direct experience with the West – as the entity does not concretely exist⁶ – but from narratives about the West that we encounter

³ Michael Allen Gillespie, 'Liberal Education and the Idea of the West' in Ralph C. Hancock, *America, the West, and Liberal Education* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), p. 11.

⁴ Jackson, 'The Perpetual Decline', p. 67.

⁵ Ayse Zarakol, *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 254.

⁶ As Jackson argues, the West is a very decentralised and disorganised actor with no front office, organisation or individual 'uniquely endowed with the authority to speak and act in its name', and it is therefore the act of referring to the West that calls the community into existence. Jackson, 'The Perpetual Decline', pp. 54; 57. Kathleen Margaret Heller similarly argues that the West 'does not refer to a location but a direction; the West therefore invokes a relational geography rather than a fixed and locatable space. What it names is therefore not comparable to the name of a nation, which at least can claim to be bound by recognized borders and by its institutional and legal frameworks. The line dividing those who belong to the

in discussions, newspapers, scholarly articles, and so on. To illuminate this, this paper analyses the discursive aftermath of tragic events in the West and puts forward two main arguments that rely on a set of theoretical positions deriving from the literature on the idea of the West as well as the work of Mikhail Bakhtin.

Firstly, the paper aims to show that in the self-critical debate on why we pay more attention to attacks taking place within the West than in the non-West, the West is rendered not only a more meaningful but also a more valuable entity than its non-Western counterparts. Paradoxically, the critical debate that aims to widen the circles of identification and empathy in fact reinforces the hegemonic idea of the West. Demanding recognition exclusively within what is considered the Western public sphere renders the non-Western sphere as irrelevant and not worth attention; it is another way of saying that it is only the West that counts.

Furthermore, even though the debate challenges the West's supposed supremacy in the international system, it ends up simply strengthening the idea that the West as a unified entity that exists beyond the narratives that describe it. This is because when it comes to imagined communities, as Jukka Jouhki argues, it is not relevant whether they are referred to in positive or negative terms as long as they are imagined as something that truly exist as unified actors.⁷

Secondly, the paper suggests that in the 'empathy gap' debate, the West is imagined as a caricature whose 'normalcy' in the international system leads to

West from those who do not is not an obvious one'. Kathleen Margaret Heller, 'The Dawning of the West: On the Genesis of a Concept' (PhD Thesis, The Graduate College of the Union Institute & University, 2006), p. 4.

⁷ Jukka Jouhki, 'Venäjä, Ukraina ja sumea länsi: Banaali oksidentalismi *Helsingin Sanomissa*', *Media ja Viestintä* 38:4(2015), pp. 165–186.

‘smugness’ to view its own condition as ‘natural’, ‘objective’, and ‘matter-of-fact’.⁸

Kathleen Margaret Heller rightly argues that in the discourse of contemporary theory, scholars that emphasise the constructed nature of civilisational or cultural categories fail to ‘make the same kind of claim about the status of the West itself, which is clearly an imaginary cartography as well. That is, the West is not a cultural or political agent that has decided to create Others such as the Balkans in order to solidify its identity, but is itself a projection of ideological antagonisms’.⁹

Approaching these ‘ideological antagonisms’ from the perspective of Mikhail Bakhtin, the article argues that the way in which the Western self is approached in the ‘empathy gap’ debate represents a vulgar understanding of alterity in international relations and produces a one-dimensional caricature of the West when its nature is actually the very opposite: fluid, intersubjective and narratively constructed.

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⁸ Zarakol, *After Defeat*, p. 241.

⁹ Heller, ‘The Dawning of the West’, p. 9. See also Dennis Porter, ‘Orientalism and its Problems’ in Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, Margaret Iversen and Diane Loxley (eds.), *The Politics of Theory: Proceedings of the Essex Sociology of Literature Conference* (Colchester: University of Essex, 1983).

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