

The Search for a Western Identity

By [Helene von Bismarck](#) | Published: February 15, 2012
© The British Scholar Society

Citation advice: Helene von Bismarck, 'The Search for a Western Identity', February 2012, <http://britishscholar.org/publications/2012/02/15/the-search-for-a-western-identity/>



Helene von Bismarck

The “West” has never been much of a geographical term. The days when it was located west of the Berlin wall have been over for more than twenty years, even though the meaning of the word was never limited to this exclusively geographical description. During the Cold War, the West was an alliance in which far eastern Japan was as much a part as the western United States. Since 1990, international relations have, in many ways, become more complicated and ambiguous, and so have the terms that are used to describe them. With the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the West lost its established antipode. Some people may still speak of the “East” today, but they rarely mean Russia or Eastern Europe. It is much more likely that they talk about China, India or Asia in general. While the “West” and the corresponding adjective “western” are omnipresent in media and public debate, no one seems to be quite sure anymore what these words actually mean, or if they really signify anything. Is the West a geopolitical entity? An economic system? A lifestyle? A philosophy? A set of values? What makes the West distinctively western?

These are the questions that two distinguished historians, Niall Ferguson and Heinrich August Winkler, have taken on in their latest books. The two authors come from dissimilar intellectual backgrounds. Ferguson, an Oxford-educated Harvard professor, is above all else an economic historian. Winkler, who is emeritus chair of contemporary history at Humboldt-University in Berlin and one of the most renowned historians in Germany, concentrates mainly on political developments and the discourses that inform them. While there are enormous differences between their books, Ferguson and Winkler have one important thing in common: they are both searching for the identity of the western world by looking into its history. However, their books represent two diverging ways of delineating an identity. Essentially, the first is outward- and the second inward-looking.

The title of Ferguson’s book, *Civilization: The West and the Rest*, not only looks catchy and somewhat provocative on the bookshelves, it is also indicative of the author’s methodology: to analyze the civilization of the western world by comparing it to others. His aim is an ambitious one. He seeks to answer the question of how, during the modern era, “did a few small polities on the western end of the Eurasian land mass come to dominate the rest of the world?” Imperialism, he argues, is not the answer. It was a symptom of, rather than the reason for, western supremacy over large parts of the world from the sixteenth to the twentieth

century. Ferguson is not interested in narrating the historical process of western expansionism. Instead, he wants to analyze the western capabilities that made this process possible. In his opinion, the civilization of the western world distinguished itself from all the others by the development of six characteristics, or, in his very hip iDiction, “killer applications”, that the rest of the world failed to “download”: competition, science, property, medicine, the consumer society and the protestant work ethic. He dedicates a chapter of his book to each of these western characteristics, using a wealth of historical episodes to illustrate his argument that they were responsible for the “gradual subordination” of the world’s other civilizations to the West after the year 1500. The problematic result of this structure is that Ferguson’s book provides the reader with a long list of western histories, rather than a coherent history of the western world.

It is therefore very good news that Heinrich August Winkler intends to have his epic *History of the West (Geschichte des Westens)*, which takes us from antiquity to the end of the Second World War, translated into English. While the most evident differences between this book and Ferguson’s *Civilization* may be its length and detail (it already consists of two volumes containing 1200 pages each and Winkler is now working on a third volume), they are not the most important ones. What really distinguishes Winkler’s work from Ferguson’s is the fact that he concentrates on the West itself instead of analyzing its relationship with other parts of the world. He argues that the most essential element of the western identity is a political culture that respects universal human rights, the rule of law, pluralism, representative democracy and the separation of powers. This set of values, which Winkler calls the “normative project” of the West, was, for the first time, made explicit during the American and the French revolutions of 1776 and 1789 respectively. Its origins, however, can, in his opinion, be traced back to the invention of monotheism by Echnaton in the 14th century B.C. Winkler’s book has three major themes: the development of western political ideals, their fiercely contested implementation in Europe (the “old West”) and North America (the “new West”) and the huge contradiction between the “normative project” and the actual political praxis in large parts of the western world. Far from arguing that its history was a direct and un-interrupted march towards freedom and democracy, Winkler acknowledges that the West has spent at least as much time betraying its own ideals as formulating them. His book is a very readable and knowledgeable milestone of transatlantic history and especially relevant to those interested in Great Britain, France, Germany and the United States.

The search for a clearly-defined identity usually begins when this identity is no longer a matter of course. The discussion about who we really are and which characteristics distinguish us from others can be the expression of a crisis of confidence and a sense of uncertainty. During the last decade, the inner cohesion and solidarity of the western world has suffered more than one serious blow. The recent series of economic crises have given little occasion for optimism about the future and led many people to question their way of life. It can therefore be expected that the debate about the essence of being “western”, to which Ferguson and Winkler have made very different contributions, will continue for some time to come.

This entry was posted in [News](#), [Op-Ed](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#). Both comments and trackbacks are currently closed.