

# THE RECEPTION OF THE WEST: THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF EUROPEAN EXPECTATIONS

## *Receptarea Vestului: conceptualizarea așteptărilor europene*

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*Abstract: The paper is an approach to the metonymy / synecdoche "America = West" and to the particularities of the European reception of the concept of America. Following the rationale conceptualized by Karen Kupperman, according to whom "America represented the chance to realize European dreams", and by Tzvetan Todorov, who argues that "the conquest of America heralds and establishes our present identity", the paper approaches concepts of western identities, alterities, spatiality and border zones.*

*Keywords: metonymy / synecdoche, "America = West", identity, alterity, spatiality and border*

“The West is the best, / The West is the best, / Come here and we’ll do the rest” – so goes a fragment from a song composed by a leading icon of the 20<sup>th</sup> century American counterculture, Jim Morrison. Using the accessible communication code that rock music represented in those times, he put into words an idea that was floating around loosely and had been doing so for a significant period of time. The concept of the West – pervading, overwhelmingly attractive but equally fluctuant and unstable represents one of the most significant ideas in the history of humankind.

”The west” is significantly different from the other cardinal points. Through consistent usage and significant historical manifestations, “the west” is one of the most powerful myths that humankind has ever created.

The aim of this paper is to identify the features of the myth of the west in the cultural history of the world in different historical times and the effects of this mythical perception.

From a historical, cultural, ideological and sociological perspective, the west represents a symbolic and powerful concept. Apart from being one of the four cardinal points, the concept of the “west” is a long-lasting, enduring myth that the world has incorporated globally into its epistemological system.

The West is perceived, in its essence, “democratic and capitalist” (Gress 1998) but the complexities of the contemporary world have revealed the highly contradictory aspect of this pervasive concept. Especially in the light of the difficult period that the so-called “western’ world in going through these days due to the global financial crisis, the two aspects that the west have come to embrace are becoming particularly contrasting. On the one hand, the old school of the western theory is still trying hard to see and promote the west as globally triumphant and foresee a future in which societies and cultures converge towards a westernized norm. On the other hand, there is an equally strong manifested tendency of dismissing the west and the subsequent capitalism as an evil culture of exploitation and a legacy of Eurocentrism.

There are several perceptions of the concept of the west, depending very much on the space of perception of Occidentalism and of the purposes of the discourse. The first perception identified the western civilization as originating in the Ancient Greek democracy, promoter of liberty and philosophic thinking. David Gress dismisses this theory and does not acknowledge the ancient Greeks as the first democrats, given their denial of women’s vote, their acceptance of slavery and their direct rule by all citizens instead of representation through universal suffrage (1998). In exchange, he defines the formation of western civilization as a century-long process which started when the Roman Empire became Christian (4<sup>th</sup> century A.D.), thus insisting upon the religious aspect incorporated in the concept of the west.

Perceived from the inside, in the context of medieval Europe, the concept of the west was by no means a unitary, solid idea; the frequent wars and the religious dissensions made it disunited, fragmented and conflictual. Also, although we currently see the west as a predominantly Anglo-Saxon product, several European nations (Germany, Spain, France) have claimed, throughout history, to be the heart of the western world and civilization<sup>1</sup>. However, until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the west was Europe and, especially given its colonialist impulses, it was perceived as an exporter of civilization, tradition and progress.

Starting with the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, “the concept of the west migrated to America” (Gamble: 2) and if, at the beginning, American and European influences were equal in its global

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<sup>1</sup> The French Revolution in 1789 and the innovating ideas it put forward gave grounds for France to claim its leading status in the western world in terms of democracy. German Nazism made Germany a negative outlier in 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe, while Spain’s political culture as expressed by the behavior of its political leaders was labeled as “Spanish exceptionalism”.

perception, it did not take long before America took the leading role, a role which it has kept to the present day.

After the second World War America emerged as the “unchallenged leader of the west” (Gamble 3) and, by the creation of NATO (1949) the west represented by America was given a discursive shape which became a long-lasting source of identity. The west had had a long history of identification through opposition before this moment: its identity structure had psychologically been reinforced by opposition with a well-defined “Other” (who, in time, was referred to in terms of the “infidel”, the savage or the colonized)<sup>2</sup>. However, it was for the first time that the west became a discursive pattern embodied in a military alliance guided by a set of values and principles in direct and sharp contrast with the ideology of communism.

The Cold War crystallized the image of the West even more accurately, proportionally with the stature of the enemy: the stronger the enemy, the more sharply the western attributes were reinforced. The ideological boundaries of the west were traced and reinforced in the overwhelming majority of the discourses of the time. Here is such a rhetoric example from the famous discourse known as “The Evil Empire” given at the peak of the Cold War by President Ronald Reagan to the House of Commons, on June 8 1982: “We are witnessing today a great revolutionary crisis, a crisis where the demands of the economic order are conflicting directly with those of the political order. But the crisis is happening not in the free, non-Marxist West but in the home of Marxism- Leninism, the Soviet Union”.

If within this “free West” ideologically built by President Reagan these discursive strategies paid off, a totally different image gained shape beyond Western borders, due to similar, though differently aimed strategies. The Warsaw Pact in 1955 appeared as a reaction to “a new military grouping in the shape of the “Western European Union” together with a remilitarized Western Germany, [...] which increases the threat of another war and creates a menace to the national security of the peace loving states” (The Warsaw).

After the end of the Cold War and the fall of communism in Europe, the west became diluted by losing its most powerful opponent which was a rich source of self-definition. The term are still widely used, but probably more often to define what it is not rather than what it is.

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<sup>2</sup> In an interesting study entitled *The Need To Have Enemies and Allies: From Clinical Practice to International Relationships* (1994) Vamık Volkan argues that people have a psychological investment in the continuation of a given conflict and that they actually use enemies as external stabilizers of their sense of identity and inner control.

The moment 9/11 was an opportunity to reinforce the discursive techniques which had become out of shape in the absence of an equal opponent. The identification of Islamic extremism as a substitute for what communism represented in the past era was the chance to reassert and praise western values of freedom, democracy and capitalism. However, if the west and communism represented monolithical images of the self and of the other due to a long-lasting process of discursive representations, this time the west seemed to have lost its unity and vigor: the criticism and hesitation regarding military intervention both from traditional western allies and from within America were a proof that the myth of the west had become fallible and elusive.

The current notion of the west, probably the most exclusive one, is a consequence of this attitude: only America is the west, its purpose is not to build alliances, but “to assemble coalitions of the willing” (Gamble 4) and in the future America is the only state prepared to defend the Western project (Kagan).

These historical considerations are necessary for a proper understanding of the American myth and of its power of appeal throughout history. Dwelling on originally western ideals and discoveries (scientific methods, capitalist organizations and democratic principles) America perpetuated the myth of the west and labeled it as the “American Creed”.

Overlapping this global concept of the west which has come to be represented by America there is another concept of the “west” which is culturally different from the first one: the American west, or the American frontier. If the global west is rooted in European knowledge and experience, the American western frontier is a purely American cultural paradigm which has gained an iconic status<sup>3</sup>. A perceived confusion and a mixture between the traditionally European concept of the west and the myth of the western frontier has made America to be received as a huge “West”. Donald Worster argues that the west is “movement, expansion, the frontier, and apparently any kind of movement, any expansion, any frontier will do” (1987: 143).

If by “the West” we almost exclusively mean “America”, an approach of the relation between the two terms enters the realms of linguistics: the equation ‘West’ = ‘America’ is a metonymy insofar as we find a relation of causality, of contiguity between the two elements. The geographical identity makes such a relation possible, hence the proximity of meaning. America is

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<sup>3</sup> Originally conceptualized by Frederick Jackson Turner, the American west has become a national icon intently propagated easily recognized in various discursive shapes. Both high and popular culture disseminate this myth: from the Hollywood western cowboy that the “Marlboro man” embodies to the real or imaginary exploits of Daniel Boone, Buffalo Bill’s “Wild West” or Hawkeye, the stereotype of the West and that of the western hero reflect more than any other icon American history and culture

situated in the geographical West, there is an explicit association between them, an association which belongs to the same sphere of thought, which is based on cognitive, not intuitive capacities.

This explanation is not sufficient and does not put things into perspective. The metonymic relation America = West makes sense only if perceived in a rapport with significant “others”, who reinforce this relation and provide its logic. The cultural reception and the spatial coordinates of this reception of the metonymic relation America = West provide its legitimacy. It is a relation which requires contextualization, therefore it makes sense to claim that America = the West if the perception of this equation is a spatial one, for instance, from an equally meaningful “East” To be more specific, a reception space ideologically shaped as the “East” (signifier of communism, oppressions, conflicts) legitimates and explains the cultural metonymic assimilation of America as “the west”.

Perhaps a more appropriate explanation of the linguistic relation of the two elements would be the synecdoche. There is still the question of the particulars versus universals, which element is part of what whole, and which element gives its meaning a priori: is the ‘West’ part of a larger entity called ‘America’, or is America part of a more comprehensive ‘West’? And, going back to the historical definitions of the cultural concepts of the west, the answer would probably be “yes” to both questions. The “West” is part of a larger “America” if it equals the American frontier. On the other hand, America was, at a certain time, part of a bigger “West” denoting European values, faith, civilization and progress until its influence and power grew big enough to assimilate the entire concept.

The reasons why the west is such a powerful symbol go back in time. Although western civilization has been a historic standard of progress and development for centuries, mainly due to economic and military power, the fascination exerted by the concept of the West – culturally assimilated to America- began long before this power gained shape. Long before the discovery of America, Europeans believed in the existence of a terrestrial paradise to the west, a land of plenty where people enjoyed all their natural rights and lived in a state of perpetual happiness. Homer’s Elysian fields, Hesiod’s Hesperides are both located in the west. Plato also agreed that in that worldly Eden “the earth gave men an abundance of fruits which grew on trees and shrubs unbidden” (quoted in Baritz “Idea” 618).

Jack O. Greene agrees that the cultural reception of the West as a unique space started in Europe: “throughout the Middle Ages, Europeans had posited the existence of a place – for a time to the east, but mostly to the west of Europe – without the corruptions and disadvantages of the Old World. The discovery of America merely intensified this ‘nostalgia for the Golden Age and the Lost Paradise’ and actually aroused new hope for their discovery somewhere on the western edge of the Atlantic” (25-26). He further argues that part of the tradition of the utopian writing in Europe was mainly associated with America: “Through Jonathan Swift and beyond, utopian writers continued to identify the dream of a perfect society with America, and to locate their fairylands, their New Atlantis, their City of the Sun in some place distant from Europe and in the vicinity of America” (28).

This is how the west was primarily Europe’s utopia, a mental construct based not on knowledge and experience, but on hope and desire. Europe imagined the west as a biblical Garden on Eden, peopled by superior people, organized by moral principles of equality and justice, an image that would be a model for the old Europe. This paradise-like world was imagined and modeled according to the tastes and fashions of the time. The west as a cultural concept began as a horizon of expectations of Europeans, embodying their hopes and ideals, and emerging as a mental construct in opposition to Europe’s harsh realities. “America”, claims Karen Kupperman, “represented the chance to realize European dreams” (22).

The concept of the west is therefore culturally shaped, it is modeled by the historical, economical and ideological particularities of the reception space: the harsher the background conditions, the more appealing the west becomes. The opposition between the reception space and the culturally created west is a source of identity definition and reinforcement. Peter Conrad observes: “Because America offers an incarnation of your most recondite and specialized fantasies, in discovering America you are discovering yourself. Europe equips you with a hereditary, natal self. America allows you to invent a self better adjusted to the individual you have become since outgrowing the impositions of birth”(5). Similarly, Tzvetan Todorov notes that “the conquest of America heralds and establishes our present identity. Even if every date that permits us to separate any two periods is arbitrary, none is more suitable, in order to mark the beginning of the modern era, than the year 1492. We are all direct descendants of Columbus”(5).

This is by no means a universally accepted view of the supremacy of west and of its cultural impact. Ian Morris, for instance, views western rule as an “aberration, a brief interruption

of an older, sinocentric, world order”; he considers the triumph of western culture as a local version of broader trends instead of a lonely beacon in a general darkness and attributes the western myth to coincidence, favorable weather conditions and geographical good fortune (2010).

The concept of the west – and its cultural reception as a norm - is currently going through challenging times: the disappearance of all “others” which would reinforce its legitimacy, the growing criticism against capitalism, which is its backbone and the constant rise of Asian countries opens up the question of whether the west still has meaning or if it has been, as Andrew Gamble put it, “fractured beyond repair”.

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