

L'Occidentalisme des occidentaux

Svante Fischer

The purpose of this talk is to highlight a very real problem in Western intellectual tradition – that of the Occidentalism projected by westerners themselves. The terms Orientalism (Said 1978) and Eurocentrism (Amin 1988) are postcolonial terms describing the way westerners portray and regard the Orient and how they also consider European values and the European past as more central to human intellectual achievement than those of other cultures. Then there is Occidentalism (Carrier 1995). This is described as a counterpart to Orientalism, and is thus a set of ideas that describe aversion to Western society.

The idea that the West is united by specific sets of values, e.g. Christianity, Roman law and Canon law, but also dominant western languages such as English and French is very attractive in that it can be regarded as one of moral philosophy. It can be understood as a set of timeless values, detached from the contemporary politics or economic discrepancies between various parts of the world. But the deliberate generalization, the manufacture of a purported common Western past, also serves a very different purpose. It will be argued that the worldviews of scholars such as the American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington (1996) and the French legal historian and psychoanalyst Pierre Legendre (1995) serve to reinforce notions of Occidentalism. They stake out claims that invite the outside spectators to indulge in stereotypical assumptions. In hegemonic imperialist languages they assume that all westerners are cast from the same die, deliberately ignoring the diversity of western culture, and above all, seeking to enjoy hegemony over the subaltern westerners, be it smaller linguistic or religious communities, ethnic minorities, or the less developed or enlightened, or the least traditionalist in the flock.

This moralistic generalization has another purpose, as pointed out by J. K. Galbraith: *“the modern conservative is engaged in one of man’s oldest exercises in moral philosophy, that is the search for a superior moral justification for selfishness. It is an exercise, which always involves a certain number of internal contradictions and even a few absurdities. The conspicuously wealthy turn up urging the character-building value of privation for the poor.”*

In this talk, I shall also seek to evaluate some of the claims regarding western unity within the fields of religion, law, and language. In particular, Legendre’s claim that the West is an institutional realm governed by civil law in unity with Christianity will be evaluated by an overview of the history of the Swedish Lutheran Church, the Swedish legal tradition, and the current state of bilingualism in the European Union. It will be argued that there is very little in the Swedish Lutheran Church (an institution that has operated separately from the Catholic Church since 1527) that would prove acceptable to modern-day conservative French Catholics. Similarly, the Swedish legal tradition and its Germanic past, as expressed in the 10th century runic inscription Hs 7 on the Forsa ring (Brink 1996) and the early 13th century Äldre Västgötalagen (Holmbäck and Wessén 1946) have relatively few common denominators with the Code Civile. Finally, it will be shown that bilingualism with English as a second language is something that unites subaltern western nations in the European Union, whereas the education systems of the nowadays second-rate imperialist powers of England and France are increasingly lagging behind. Rather, the traditional refusal of France to embrace bilingualism should be seen as a major feature that separates French culture from the rest of Western society.

Primary Sources

Äldre Västgötalagen:

Holmbäck, Åke & Wessén, Elias, eds. 1946. *Svenska landskapslagar. Ser. 5, Äldre västgötalagen, Yngre västgötalagen, Smålandslagens kyrkobalk och Bjärköarätten*. Stockholm: Geber.

Hs 7 Forsaringen:

Brink, Stefan. 1996. "Forsaringen: Nordens äldsta lagbud". *Det tværfaglige vikingesymposium. Beretning fra femtende tværfaglige vikingesymposium*. Aarhus. Pp. 15-27.

Europeans and their Language:

European Commission: *Europeans and their Language*. Fieldwork: February - March 2012. Publication: June 2012. ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/.../ebs/ebs_386_en.pdf

References

- Amin, Samir 1988. *L'eurocentrisme. Critique d'une idéologie*. Paris: Anthropos/Economica.
- Carrier, James G. 1995. *Occidentalism: Images of the West*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Galbraith, John K. – "Stop the Madness," Interview with Rupert Cornwell, Toronto Globe and Mail (July 6, 2002).
- Huntington, Samuel P. 1996. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon and Shuster.
- Legendre, Pierre. 1995. "Qui dit légiste, dit loi et pouvoir." Entretien avec Pierre Legendre. In: *Politix*. Vol. 8, N°32. Quatrième trimestre 1995. Pp. 23-44.
- Said, Edward 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.