



# The deconstruction of the West: an unaccomplished task. Towards “the politics of imagining the West”

Lorenzo Casini

## Abstract

Despite the ambition of Postcolonial Studies to place deconstruction of “the West” at the heart of contemporary social sciences and humanities, the authority of this notion has never been so strong, and the West appears today to belong to a “natural order” of thinking and speaking about our current reality. Having pointed out the limits of the postcolonial critique of the West, this study then individuates and connects several lines of research to a common epistemological basis in order to map the contours of an emerging field: “the politics of imagining the West”. From this perspective, the West is no longer conceived of as a subject of history but as a historically determined narrative articulated by individuals and social groups with strategic aims in the context of wider discourses.

## Key Words

Imaginal politics / Occidentalism / Arabic novel / deconstruction / the west

## Author

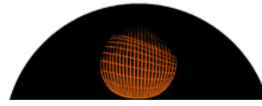
Lorenzo Casini - lcasini@unime.it  
Dipartimento di Civiltà Antiche e Moderne (DICAM)  
Università di Messina

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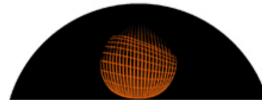
## I. Introduction

In the first chapter of his classic volume *White Mythologies* published in 1990, Robert Young celebrates Postmodernism and Poststructuralism as attempts “to decolonise the forms of European thought”, stating that if one had to respond to the general question “of what is deconstruction a deconstruction of, the answer would be, of the concept, the authority, and assumed primacy of, the category of the West” (Young, 1990, p. 19). In similar terms, Jan Nederveen Petersee (1991), a renowned critic of theories of development, places scrutiny of the notion of the West at the heart of contemporary social theory and identifies its deconstruction as a prerequisite for deconstruction of the development paradigm. Fourteen years after the publication of *White Mythologies*, however, Alastair Bonnett wonders if the West has really been the object of such scrutiny. And he concludes that despite the widespread criticism of attitudes and practices assumed to be Western, the genesis of the idea of the West and its uses in both “Western” and “non-Western” contexts has remained almost unexplored:

For although critical social theory in Europe and North America has challenged the West in many ways it has been largely uninterested in how the West is imagined, either in the West or around the world. Sadly, the rise of “post-colonial studies” has, so far, failed to subvert this tendency. I say this with a tottering pile of “post-colonial” Handbooks, Readers, and Anthologies at my side. Far from examining the idea of the West, these volumes offer general and generalising meditations that take its form and nature as pre-given and beyond dispute. In fact, the nature and role of both Western and non-Western narratives of the West has been almost invisible within the social sciences and humanities (Bonnett, 2004, p. 6).

This article looks at the West as an “invented tradition” (Hobsbawm and Rangers, 1992) that enjoys undisputed authority. It assumes that the very authority of this tradition accounts for the invisibility of both its narrative fabric and its historical determinacy, not only in academic disciplines but in public discourse at large. If an invented tradition is to fulfil its cultural and political functions, it must appear to be a timeless entity. This explains why its process of production and the ideological motives behind it should neither be visible nor questionable. In the case of the West, its authority as a timeless factual reality has for the most part remained undisputed in the *senso comune* (the reference, here, is to Antonio Gramsci’s understanding of this notion) but also in the sphere of intellectual discourses and academic research.

Today, the popularity of the West as a paradigm to understand the world we live in does not stem from the hegemony of one single ideology. On the contrary, two opposing cultural trends with substantial influence over the last two decades have been instrumental to its success.



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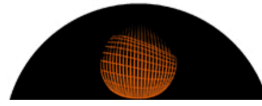


The first of these – which is clearly reactionary – can be identified as a set of multifaceted identitarian discourses, nourished by “the myth of the clash of civilisations” (Bottici and Challand, 2010). This identitarian trend was conducive to shaping the idea of a world divided into separate civilisations by different means: on the one hand, sophisticated intellectual discourses such as the erudite studies by Bloom (*The Western Canon*, 1994) and Huntington (*The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, 1996) in the United States or that of the philosopher Hasan Hanafi (*Muqaddima fi-ilm al-istighrāb - Introduction to the Science of Orientalism*, 1991) in Egypt and, on the other hand, daily invented icons reproduced by the media. A particularly powerful icon used to represent Islam in Europe and highlight the threat it posed to the very foundations of the French Republic is the image of “La Marianne voilée” published for the first time by the French magazine *Le Figaro* in 1985 and reproduced over time by this and other French magazines and newspapers. In the Arab context, on the other hand, “the land of infidels” and the imperialist power are the two most widespread icons used to portray the West (Bottici and Challand, 2010, Ch. 2).

Paradoxically, the second influential trend that contributed to the current popularity of the notion of the West sought its deconstruction, namely, the Postcolonial academic tradition, notably when informed by Poststructuralist or Postmodernist approaches. This should not be interpreted as belittling the crucial role played by Postcolonial Studies in developing a critical awareness of the influence of colonialism on modern European thought. Important here, however, is that despite deepening this awareness, Postcolonial Studies has failed to subject the paradigm of civilization to radical questioning. On the contrary, making the West the main target of their criticism has helped to buttress the idea that it exists as a material reality and a subject of history. Significantly, the most problematic aspects individuated in Said’s *Orientalism* – see, for example, Sadik al-Azm (1981), Aijaz Ahmad (1992) and Fred Halliday (1993) – concern the ambiguous and contradictory use of the category of the West.

In light of the cultural atmosphere briefly outlined above, the West emerges as a fundamental component of the “natural order” of thinking and speaking about our present world. As Enzo Colombo has rightly observed with respect to the notion of identity, however, when a concept seems unproblematic and its meaning beyond dispute, “it ceases to be useful to understand the world and deserves to become itself an object of inquiry” (Colombo, 2006, p. 12). An inquiry into the concept of the West is particularly pressing when it comes to the role of the paradigm of civilisation as a source of conflict and misunderstanding in current historical reality, where the global social imaginary is imbued with a pounding message: a war of civilisations between Islam and the West is already taking place.

The time has really come, we believe, to place critical scrutiny of the West at the heart of a collective scientific endeavour. This article maps out the space and scope of this endeavour by describing and connecting research domains that seem particularly



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meaningful to the task and where some salient studies have already been conducted. Common to the various studies mentioned in this article – including my own work on the invention of the West in the Arabic novel (Casini, 2008, 2011, Casini et al., 2012) – is their perspective on the West, not as a subject of history but as a historically determined narrative articulated by individuals and social groups with often opposing material interests and world views. Consequently, their aim is not to develop a critique of the West, but rather to highlight the political motives behind the production of its specific representations. By connecting these different domains and emphasising their common epistemological ground, a wider field of research unfolds, whose thematic core can be identified as the politics of imagining the West.

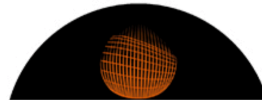
There are several reasons for this choice of definition. On the empirical level, it seems to encapsulate the basic assumptions and common emphasis of this emerging field: that the West can best be approached as a set of individual representations and social imaginaries produced in (and crossing through) distinct locations for a multiplicity of purposes, and that these representations and imaginaries perform crucial political functions that deserve to become the focus of scientific inquiry. On the theoretical level, “the politics of imagining the West” connects our research field to a key philosophical debate on the relationship between politics, individual imagination and social imaginary. In this respect, “imagining” can be read as the verbal equivalent of the notion of “imaginal” as developed by Chiara Bottici in her philosophical research on “imaginal politics” (Bottici, 2011). “Imaginal” simply refers to what is made out of images. Bottici uses the term to subsume and incorporate concepts of “imagination” (as an individual faculty) and of “imaginary” (as a social product). Their political dimensions have been researched and given prominence by a philosophical tradition that includes Hannah Arendt<sup>1</sup> and Cornelius Castoriadis<sup>2</sup>.

The article is structured as follows. The first part examines the invention of the “Western tradition” in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Europe in the light of studies conducted by Ezequiel Adamovsky (2006) and Alastair Bonnett (2004). The second part focuses on the invention of the West in the “non-West” with reference to the emerging field of studies on Occidentalism, where notably work by Xiaomei Chen (1995) has had considerable influence but is not without shortcomings. After discussing and reformulating Chen’s definition of “Occidentalism”, the article emphasises the relevance of this theoretical perspective by referring to the specific case study of the Arabic novel.

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<sup>1</sup> Hanna Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, Brighton, Harvester, 1982. Quoted in Bottici (2011), pp. 60-61.

<sup>2</sup> See in particular Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1987.



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## 2. A successful “invented tradition”: the European invention of the West

The few authors who have researched the history, uses and transformations of the modern idea of the West situate its establishment between the last four decades of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century (Gogwilt, 1995, p. 220; Bonnett, 2004, p. 5; Adamovsky, 2006, Ch. 7; Trautsch, 2013). This period roughly coincides with what Eric Hobsbawm (1992, Ch. 7) singled out as the age of “mass-producing traditions”. In the following, we contend that this coincidence is by no means accidental and that the idea of the West as developed in Western Europe performed the basic functions that Hobsbawm identified in other modern traditions invented during the same decades.

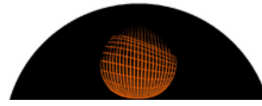
According to Hobsbawm’s classic analysis, the years 1870-1914 witnessed the flourishing of new traditions, often invented by the social formation that had contributed most to breaking down the old order and weakening pre-modern traditions in the name of a “rational” social order, i.e., the liberal bourgeoisie. The invention of new traditions was inspired by the fact that the liberal bourgeoisie was forced to respond to challenges to its hegemony arising from the spread of electoral democracy and mass politics, and did not possess the legitimacy of previous ruling élites:

So long as the masses remained outside politics, or were prepared to follow the liberal bourgeoisie, this created no major political difficulties. Yet from the 1870s onwards it became increasingly obvious that the masses were becoming involved in politics and could not be relied upon to follow their masters. After the 1870s therefore, and almost certainly in coincidence with mass politics, rulers and middle-class observers rediscovered the importance of “irrational” elements in the maintenance of the social fabric and the social order (Hobsbawm, 1992, p. 268).

Most modern traditions symbolised social cohesion and community membership. Developing within a world of contract and legal equals, they could not openly justify marked inequality and tended, instead, to “foster the corporate sense of superiority of élites” (Ivi, p. 10). Nevertheless, in the process of symbolising the community they indirectly sanctioned an unequal social order and inculcated the value systems and behaviour models of the élites.

On the basis of the few existing studies on the historical development of the notion of the West, we can infer that the West – understood as a cultural community and a civilisation – fulfilled the same functions Hobsbawm observed in other modern traditions. By identifying the distinctive feature of Western civilisation (and the reasons for its superiority compared to other peoples) as the middle class and its social mores, the idea of the West legitimised the leading role of the bourgeoisie and the liberal ideology vis-à-vis competing social groups and alternative political options.

In his ground-breaking study *Euro-Orientalism. Liberal Ideology and the Image of Russia in France 1740-1880*, Ezequiel Adamovsky argues that identifying civilisation with the



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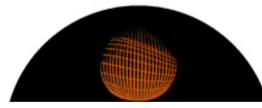
determinate characteristics of north-western European countries – primarily the presence of a strong middle class and civil society – results from the “liberal narrative of civilisation” constructed against the backdrop of a specific imaginary of Russia. This narrative, which assigned the bourgeoisie a leading role in West European societies, was shaped in the course of a century by the works of dozens of philosophers, historians, men of letters and political thinkers from Diderot to Tocqueville via Eschery, Segúr, Hugo and Guizot:

The main historical agent in this idea of civilisation was the bourgeoisie or middle class, for it was perceived to be at the same time the engine of economic progress and the guardian of political freedom and social peace, thanks to its ‘intermediate’ place in society. (...) In the narrative of civilisation, that invaluable agent – the bourgeoisie cum ‘middle class’ – only emerged in the particular historical development of the West, which offered the fertile soil of an independent urban development and a legal system that protected private property (Roman heritage), and intermediate bodies and independent associations, which protected the individuals from the power of the sovereign/state (Germanic and Catholic heritage) (Adamovsky, 2006, pp. 212-13).

In the liberal narrative of civilisation, Russia was associated with barbarism and characterised as lacking the social requirements – the middle class and civil society – that enabled progress in Western Europe. Hence Russia’s image shifted from the positive *tabula rasa* (i.e., land of possibilities) forged by Leibniz and popularised by Voltaire to the negative land of absence. This negative reference to Russia was used strategically by the Liberals to contrast, on the one hand, the reactionary forces of French society that saw a positive model in the absolutism of the Russian tsar and, on the other hand, the demands of the democratic and socialist movements that saw in the “Slavonic peasant commune” the embodiment of the desired socialist community:

Despite the undeniable fact that socialism and communism as doctrines had been born (and as a movement only strong) in what we call now ‘Western Europe’, the French Liberals chose to reject communism as something ‘Eastern’, whilst arguing that their own land was more similar to the USA, that is, ‘Western’ (Adamovsky, 2006, p. 154).

The hegemonic Liberal image of Russia as Western Europe’s Other helps to explain why the intellectual trend of Nihilism, which emerged in Russia during the 1850s, was so radically misinterpreted in France and described as an assault on Western culture. As testified by the protagonists in Ivan Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* (1862) and N.G. Chernyshevsky’s *What is to be done?* (1863), Nihilists were rationalists who relied on science and questioned the very roots of traditional Russian society. In France, on the other hand, Nihilism became a key term for Russian Otherness in general and was eventually associated with quite different, even opposite phenomena such as the spirit of Russian revolutionaries or the conservative spiritualism of the Nihilists’ most notorious critic, Fyodor Dostoyevsky. After 1917, the reaction of the Liberals to communist Russia “consolidated a process whereby an evolving Russian debate about Europe helped



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redefine European culture and history in terms of an opposition between Western civilization and the Russian, or Slavic, peoples” (Gogwilt, 1995, p. 227).

Our interpretation of the West as an invented tradition that legitimised the value systems and behaviour models of the élite is also supported by a study published by Alastair Bonnett (2004) on the relationship between the emerging idea of the West and the decline of the concept of race. Bonnett moves from the assumption that “new identities emerge in the context of existing ones” and demonstrates that in Britain Western identity was shaped in the context of the crisis of “whiteness”. His research centres on two sets of sources: works of imperial and social commentary – which he defines as the “literature of white crisis” – written by white supremacists, and the publications of several founding figures of the idea of the West: Ramsay MacDonald, Benjamin Kidd, Francis Marvin, Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee.

By identifying whiteness as inherently vulnerable to attack and, moreover, as based upon an allegiance between the masses and the elite that neither side was willing to support, this literature of white crisis unwittingly exposed the unsustainable logic of white racism. The idea of the West, developing alongside, within and in the wake of this crisis literature, provided a less racially reductive but not necessarily less socially exclusive vision of community (Bonnett, 2004, pp. 14-15).

The literature of white crisis was widely produced and read in Britain and the United States between the 1890s and the 1920s until the advance of genetics and the ascent of Nazism irremediably compromised the credibility of “race” as a scientific category to classify humanity. The authors found signs of decay in “the white race” everywhere in the contemporary world. Japan’s victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904, and the “fratricidal” First World War both anguished the champions of whiteness, since they demonstrated that international politics was not developing along racial lines. The major threat to “the white race” was seen in class conflict and the political protagonism of the white masses of “Under-Men”:

We must realize clearly that the basic attitude of the Under-Man is an instinctive and natural revolt against civilization. The reform of abuses may diminish the intensity of social discontent. It may also diminish the number of the discontented, because social abuses precipitates into the depths many persons who do not really belong there; persons who were innately capable of achieving the social order if they had had a fair chance. But, excluding all such anomalous cases, there remains a vast residue of unadaptable, depreciated humanity, essentially uncivilizable and incorrigibly hostile to civilization (Stoddard, 1922, p. 24).

The conclusions that Bonnett draws from his comparative reading of the crisis literature produced by white supremacists and the coeval texts that shaped the modern idea of the West are particularly relevant. If the “literature of white crisis” made use of the concept of the West – “as a useful device, a quick fix, for when whiteness no longer functions” (Bonnett, 2004, p. 27) – but left it unexplained, the founding figures of the modern idea



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of the West tended to deny intellectual status to the notion of race but continued to make use of the term (Kidd and Marvin), accepted it as part of the common sense (Spengler), or sustained supremacism through the new discourse on the West (Toynbee). The West thus became

a comprehensible collective identity that connoted a certain group of people, who just happened, by and large, to be of European heritage, without it appearing to be mired in the racial mythologies of the past.

Yet, I must not leave any room for the assumption that white racism was eclipsed by the rise of the West. The term “Western” remained and remains racially coded, burdened with the expectation that the world will never be ‘free’, ‘open’, and ‘democratic’ until it is Europeanised (Bonnett, 2004, p. 34).

### **3. “Non-Western” representations of the West. The emerging field of studies on Occidentalism**

The works by Adamovsky, Bonnett and Gogwilt are invaluable but almost unrelated contributions on specific aspects of the politics of imagining the West in Europe. Despite the recent individual efforts by two young historians to delineate the contours of a conceptual history of the West in Europe and the United States (Bavaj, 2011; Trautsch, 2013), a shared research agenda on the subject is not in place. A coherent line of research, on the other hand, has developed over the last two decades in the domain of “non-Western” representations of the West. Interest in this new line of research has increased among young scholars from different Area Studies departments and is emerging as a new field of “studies on Occidentalism”<sup>3</sup>.

The orientalist tradition and more recent postcolonial studies have highlighted the determinant impact of the Western self-image on representations of the West in “the non-West”. The new approach to the study of Occidentalism does not deny this impact but takes into consideration other crucial aspects generally neglected or underestimated by previous scholarly approaches:

1- The first of these relates to the “agency” of social actors and intellectuals in the “non-West”. Far from being mere recipients of ideas developed by others, they displayed

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<sup>3</sup> This understanding of Occidentalism is by no means exclusive. An important line of research that includes the works of Fernando Coronil (1996) and Couze Venn (2000) attaches a different meaning to the term, using it to refer to the European imaginaries of the West. Another popular understanding of Occidentalism can be found in the influential polemic work by Avishai Margalit and Ian Buruma (2002), where Occidentalism is defined as “the dehumanising picture of the West painted by its enemies”.



a great degree of cultural creativity in appropriating, innovating and transforming European imaginaries of the West.

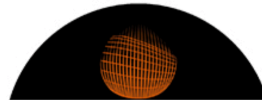
2- The second factor to be considered is the notion of “translocality”. This notion, as developed by several researchers from the Zentrum Moderner Orient in Berlin, “designates the outcome of concrete movements of people, goods, ideas and symbols which span spatial distances and cross boundaries” (Freitag et al., 2010, p. 5). As a research perspective, it “aims at highlighting the fact that the interactions and connections between places, institutions, actors and concepts have far more diverse, and often even contradictory effects than is commonly assumed” (ibid.). Similar imaginaries of the West, as we will see in the following pages, fulfil different or even opposite functions when reproduced in different cultural and social contexts.

3- The third aspect is the “heterogeneity” of non-Western societies. What the civilisation paradigm does not allow us to see is that representations of the West in the non-West were primarily used for strategic purposes in the context of domestic intellectual debates and struggles for hegemony among competing social formations.

In 1991, James Ketelaar’s article *Strategic Occidentalism. Meiji Buddhists at the World Parliament of Religions* introduced the notion of “strategic Occidentalism” to refer to the relationship between the representation of the West and domestic political debates in the “non-West”. Ketelaar’s article focused on the visit of the Japanese Buddhist delegation to the World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893 and in particular on the delegation’s report on their visit after returning home. As Ketelaar demonstrates, the image of the West that emerges in the report was instrumental in strengthening the position of Buddhism in Meiji Japan and should not be interpreted as mirroring the delegation’s perception of the United States.

Despite the innovative focus of Ketelaar’s *Strategic Occidentalism*, his study lacks a thorough theoretical discussion on the notion of Occidentalism, which can be found instead in an article on contemporary China published a year later by Xiaomei Chen: *Occidentalism as a Counterdiscourse: “He Shang” in Post-Mao China* (1992). Chen’s contribution is a case study of a Chinese television series from 1988, which was later expanded and published in book form, and included numerous other case studies related to modern Chinese literature: *Occidentalism. A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China* (1995). Xiaomei Chen’s book remains the most important theorisation of the notion of Occidentalism within this line of publications and influenced several later works, such as the historical article by Carter Vaughn Findley (1998) on the Ottoman writer and publisher Ahmed Midhat, the monograph by Rachael Hutchinson on the Japanese writer Nagai Kafu (2011), and the volume on the Egyptian media by Robert Woltering (2011).

In her theorisation of Occidentalism, Chen criticises the reductionist manner in which Edward Said in *Orientalism* uses Foucault’s notion of discourse. She first of all quotes Liebmann Schaub to highlight that by ignoring critical Western discourses on the Orient



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that oppose expansionism, Said seems to make no allowance for the emergence of counter-discourses beneath the official discourse of power in the West. She adds that

Said's claims do not provide for even the possibility of an anti-official discourse within 'Oriental' societies that employs an Occidentalism to combat the official cultural hegemony dominating a given non-Western culture. In such cases, the Western Other at least theoretically can and often does become a metaphor for political liberation against indigenous forms of ideological oppression (Chen, 1995, p. 6).

Occidentalism, in Chen's view, is a counter-discourse articulated by non-Western subjects that employs specific ideas or images of the West for different and sometimes opposing political ends. This definition is expanded and illustrated by two examples drawn from contemporary Chinese history. The first refers to what she calls “official Occidentalism”, the use of an essentialised image of the West by the Chinese government “not for the purpose of dominating the West but in order to discipline, and ultimately to dominate, the Chinese Self at home” (Chen, 1995, p. 2). In an article published in 1965 on the Chinese Communist Party's official newspaper, Lin Bao, Mao's chosen successor, underlines the importance of setting up “revolutionary base areas in the rural districts and encircling the cities from the countryside” (Chen, 1995, p. 3). The article, intended as an endorsement of the Cultural Revolution, describes the United States and Western Europe as “the cities” and Asia, Africa and Latin America as “the rural areas” of the world. The domestic goal of this discourse, as Chen also observes on the basis of historical developments and despite addressing Third World Countries against the West, was the creation of a Maoist cult.

The main thrust of Chen's book, however, is not “official Occidentalism” but rather the different forms of anti-official Occidentalism expressed through literature and cinema. In the case of anti-official Occidentalism, representation of the West becomes a rhetorical weapon in the hands of the opponents of the official state discourse. Chen identifies the 1988 television series “He shang” (River Elegy) as the most powerful example of this kind of Occidentalism. The series, which received enormous popular acclaim, not only subverted the dominant negative image of the West but also “traditional Chinese cultural fetishes” (Chen, 1995, p.25). The Yellow River, for example, which symbolises the cradle of Chinese civilisation in China's dominant nationalist imaginary, becomes a source of poverty and disaster.

My understanding of Occidentalism shares several aspects with Chen's theorisation of this notion but differs in one fundamental point. Similar to Chen, Ketelaar and later contributors to this field, I believe that representations of the West have frequently been used by individuals, institutions and social groups as strategic devices for various political ends in the context of domestic ideological debates. But precisely because of its strategic nature, Occidentalism, cannot be defined in Chen's sense as a “counter-discourse, a



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counter-memory and a counter-other to Said's Orientalism” (Chen, 1995, p. 6) or even as

a discursive practice that, by constructing its Western Other, has allowed the Orient to participate actively and with indigenous creativity in the process of self-appropriation, even after being appropriated and constructed by Western Others (Chen, 1995, p. 2).

Chen's enduring reference to Said and the twin categories of Orient and Occident in defining Occidentalism, is quite inexplicable in the light of her legitimate critical remarks on some of the epistemological foundations of Said's work, including – as observed above – its interpretation of Foucault's notion of “discourse”. Adamovsky's Euro-Orientalism demonstrates with great precision that the attempt to legitimise the world supremacy of “Western civilisation” was not carried out by the West (which is itself no more than a set of ideas and discursive practices) but by specific social formations with particular material interests and a shared world view.

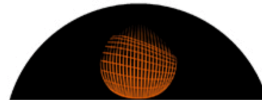
Once the contradictions discussed above are recognised and the idea of a world divided into separate and homogeneous civilizations definitively removed from our epistemological horizon, “Occidentalism” proves to be an useful theoretical tool to investigate the “politics of imagining the West”. Indeed, the notion of Occidentalism can help to relate the construction and reproduction of imaginaries of the West to wider debates and agendas, and appreciate the richness, plurality and conflictive character of the social-cultural context that is examined. A quick reference to the case study of the Arabic novel, which constitutes my main area of research, can help to illustrate the potential impact of this theoretical approach on different areas of humanities and social sciences. Together with “youth”<sup>4</sup> and “the rural imaginary”<sup>5</sup>, the European theme constitutes one of the distinctive features of the Arabic canon<sup>6</sup>, since many of the significant novels published in the twentieth century are set in Europe or include European characters. The considerable bulk of fictional works that revolve around the European theme has attracted, over the years, the attention of many scholars who have regarded this material as an invaluable source to document the evolution of the Arab perception of Europe. To pursue this aim, scholars have tended to limit their critical analysis to the description of the image of Europe inferred from the distinct narrative works that they examined. But despite its apparent neutrality, this descriptive approach has entailed several methodological problems. On the one hand, by focusing their analysis on the image of the Other portrayed in the fictional works, scholars have implicitly accepted as objective realities the antithetical communities represented by the authors (the Eastern civilisation

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<sup>4</sup> The role of youth in the first Arabic novels of the canon has been examined particularly by Maria Elena Paniconi in the first part of the monograph *Modernità Arabe*. See L. Casini et al. (2012), pp. 39-155.

<sup>5</sup> Examined in a specific monograph by Samah Selim (2004).

<sup>6</sup> On this, see Ch.2.1 of *Modernità Arabe*. L. Casini et al. (2012) pp. 155-67.



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vs. the Western civilisation, the territorial or the Arab nations vs. the European nations and so on) instead of analysing them as symbolic constructions. On the other hand, the prevalent tendency to examine the content of the representation (the images/perceptions of Europe) regardless of the mode of representation has not helped to understand the narrative functions performed by the European theme and its interconnections with other key aspects of the canonical texts.

My research on Occidentalism in the Arabic novel, published in the course of the last eight years, demonstrates the strong connections between the “European theme”, the construction of a national imaginary, and the critical reflection on alternative paths to modernisation. The Arabic novel developed in Egypt during the first decades of the twentieth century and its recognition as a high literary genre coincided with the advent of Egyptian territorial nationalism as the hegemonic paradigm to define collective identity. The relationship between nationalism and the novel has been widely debated by social scientists and literary theorists (for example: Anderson, 1983, and Moretti 1998), who identified this literary genre as embodying the time-space (or chronotope) of the nation. In the Arab context, the national chronotope had to overcome traditional conceptions of time and space derived from the Islamic episteme, whereby the religious notion of *umma muhammadiyya* (the community of believers) constituted the main paradigm to define the Self (Wendell, 1972). Following the publication of *Zaynab* (1913) by Muhammad Husayn Haykal, the novel was recognised by Arab intellectuals as the privileged site for articulation of the shift from the traditional Islamic episteme to the national chronotope. Within this process of redefining collective identity operated by the Arabic novel, the European theme fulfilled a fundamental function. When collective identity was articulated with reference to the Islamic episteme, the authority of religious tradition provided unquestionable boundaries to demarcate the space of the Self and distinguish it from Christian Europe. When the religious boundary was abandoned, however, and collective identity began to be imagined through the secular paradigm of the nation, new boundaries had to be devised.

The close analysis of some founding texts of the novelistic tradition in Egypt has shown that the representation of Europe in each novel was functional to the construction of a specific imaginary of the Egyptian nation coherent with the political inclinations of the author (Casini, 2011; Casini et al., 2012). Thus, in *‘Awdat al-Rūh* (The Return of the Spirit, 1933) – perhaps the most famous allegory of the Egyptian nation – Tawfiq al-Hakīm associates the identity of the European Other with “individualism”, “rational knowledge” and “social conflict” in order to discredit liberal-democracy and legitimise his version of organic nationalism of “blood and soil” as the sole political perspective in tune with the immortal spirit of Egypt (Casini, 2011, pp. 38-42). Al-Hakīm’s contradictory attitudes towards Europe, dominant among the first generation of Egyptian nationalist intellectuals, were parodied masterfully by Tāhā Husayn through the construction of the character of

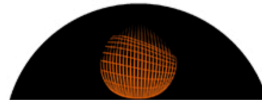


Adīb (literary, “a man of letter”) in the homonymous novel published in 1936 (Casini et al. 2012, Ch. 2.5).

The strategic use of Occidentalism in the representation of the nation is not, however, unique to Egyptian literature. In the novel *al-Masābīh al-zurq* (The Blue Lanterns, 1954) by the celebrated Syrian author Hanna Mina, the representation of the French occupation forces as the nation’s Other is functional to associate the national spirit to the Syrian popular classes while discrediting the existing Syrian élites who mingled with the French. Even if one looks at the more recent tradition of novels from the Gulf, in *Sāq al-bāmbū* (The Bamboo Stalk, 2012, winner of the international prize for Arabic fiction), the young Kuwaiti author Saud al-Sanousi resorts to the image of a predatory Europe (defined by the experience of colonialism and contemporary sex tourism in Asia) in order to postulate an ontological difference between the Europeans and the Kuwaiti people and make acceptable to his fellow countrymen the perspective of an inclusive Kuwaiti nation where Asian migrant workers could find due respect.

As highlighted by the examples above, the relationship between strategic Occidentalism and the representation of collective identity is particularly evident when narratives produce coherent and homogeneous images of the nation. But my research on Egyptian novels published after the 1960s indicates that strategic Occidentalism operates also in the inverse process of critique and deconstruction of the hegemonic national imaginary. Indeed, in the novels *al-Sākhin wa-l-Bārid* (The Hot and the Cold, 1960) by Fathi Ghanim, *Awraq al-Narjis* (Leaves of Narcissus, 2002) by Somaya Ramadan, and *Wāhat al-Ghurūb* (The Sunset Oasis, 2006) by Bahaa Taher the recognition of European culture as part of the Self is used as a narrative device to dismantle the existent imaginary of the nation (Casini, 2008; 2011 b).

This innovative approach to the representation of Europe culminated, in the aftermath of the January 25 2011 revolution, in a bold national allegory that undermined the traditional boundaries between Europe and the Slef : *Nādī al-Sayyārāt* (The Automobile Club of Egypt, 2013) by Alaa al-Aswani. The events of the novels are settled in the post-World War II when the British were largely in control of the country, especially through its corrupted monarchy, but were not able to prevent continuous demonstrations that called for social justice and full sovereignty. In this context, a subversive group intrudes into the strategic Automobile Club of Egypt regularly attended by the king. This revolutionary collective, which embodies the new desired Egyptian community, includes the character of an European woman who is actively involved in political activity. This inclusion of European characters within the symbolic space of the nation is sealed by the final marriage between the revolutionary hero and the rebel daughter of the English director of the Club.



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#### 4. Conclusions

The different domains of study that have been examined here testify to the importance of overcoming the paradigm of civilisation and the research questions that derive from it. If the West ceases to be regarded as a given reality and is approached as a narrative construct, new fundamental questions can emerge on the political motives behind specific imaginaries of the West and the nature of the social actors that produce them. The significance of the research field that opens up is twofold: in the strictly academic sphere, it can provide a deeper insight into a specific subject matter, as in the case of the Arabic novel outlined above. On a more general level, it can serve to develop critical tools to overcome hegemonic imaginaries and discursive patterns based on dialectic dialogue vs. the clash of civilisations.



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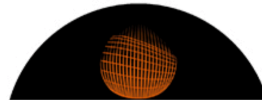
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