

Orient and Occident – Perceptual and Complementary Macro-Regions by Viorel MIONEL

The *Occident* (*The West*) is a term that is borrowed from Latin (*occidens*) and translates as "sunset". From an etymological and semantic point of view, it refers to features of a *geographic* nature. The sunset, seen from the perspective of a fix point, means the west. Anyone at any point in the world can see that the sun always rises from the east and sets in the west. It follows that the West is located somewhere, where the sun sets. Examples of names that include terms such as *occident* and *occidental* (the West and western) are numerous, both in the western and eastern hemispheres: *the Western Sahara* or *Occidental Sahara* (the West African geographical region administered by Morocco), *the Western Carpathians* (Carpații Occidentali in Romanian; a Western Carpathian subdivision), *Occidental Grand Erg* (the area covered with sand dunes in the West of the Sahara desert), *the Sierra Madre Occidental* (mountains in western part of Mexico) or *Negros Occidental* (an administrative sub-region located in the western part of the Negros Island of the Philippines).

But, we have found that the West is always something else for every point on the globe. The West is more than a geographic expression. Several forms of the term "West", "Western" and "Occident" are used in English. The latter is mainly used in the academic world. In fact, the academic community attributed more features to the term. Starting from the Greco-Roman cultural roots, it is noted that the West means a *special culture*, based on the emergence of Christianity. The Renaissance, Protestant Reformation and Enlightenment are only a few cultural streams that gravitated around Christianity and individualized Western culture, leading to advancements marking the European space as the world's foremost area in economy, technology and military might. The differences between the West and the rest of the world became apparent during the time of the great geographic discoveries and went even further.

The superiority of Western culture, emphasizes by an obvious scientific and technological advance for more than four centuries, added other features to the region such as *development*, *wealth* and *modernity*. The rich Western states, which dominated the world during the four centuries (starting around 1500) until the Cold War, were in Samuel Huntington's view: England, France, Spain, Austria, Prussia (later Germany) and a few others. Unlike other analysts, Huntington speaks of a Western civilization based on culture, religion (mainly the Catholic-Protestant religion), its core values, its richness and its specific customs. The Western Huntingtonian civilization excludes the Christian Orthodox Eastern countries, due to a low *standard of living*, as mentioned below. According to Huntington, the West is *opposite* to the East, but this approach still needs to be reflected upon.

While its economy is helping to develop the world's states, it is clear that today the West, in terms of development, modernity and wealth, means more than Europe. The primary geographic aspects of the West remained in part the prerogative of the Western culture to continue its Western enlargement. The former New World British colonies thrived more than other colonies, being readily assimilated to the West, especially because they were Catholic and Protestant, just like their former metropolis, as well as due to features of their demographic development, only partially replicated in South America and elsewhere. It has come to such a situation that the West is assimilated to the idea of *Americanisation*. The United States, the world's largest economy and only hyperpower, is the state that has

moulded international institutions and norms and assumed the role of world policeman and waged wars in the name of Western values, democracy, liberalism and human rights. According to some analysts, the backbone of Occidentalism remains the Anglo-American link. In some circumstances, the West has become a concept *synonymous* with the materialism of development, wealth and modernity, thus being less geographically, religiously and culturally defined. Terms such as "Occident", "Occidentalism," "Western" are used today to describe a *different* reality from the past, which necessarily implies a modern culture of consumption, based on economic development and wealth.

Map 1. *The West* nowadays



Moreover, the West is today an economically developed space with a superior quality of life and no spatial constraint on the Western hemisphere. It is a civilization-machine, dominated by cold, mechanical and soulless rationalism. Being a perceptual region, the West does not have *clearly* defined geographic boundaries. Occidentalism can flourish anywhere. Japan, once an anti-Western nest, is now part of the Western states. The best indicator of a spatial outline of the West is HDI (the human development index). States classified as "very high HDIs" now make up the Western space. The volatility of the Western space is highlighted by *passing* from the geographical and cultural meaning to the economic one, on the one hand, and by the evolution of the world economy that can include or remove certain states from the West, on the other hand. The European Union as a whole, the Anglo-Saxon America, a few states in South America, Australia and New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, Singapore and a few other Asian countries make up the West today (see the 1st map).

Orientalism is an academic term most associated with Edward Said and is used in art, history, literature, geography, and cultural studies to describe the critical representation of the East from a Western perception and bias. It encompasses Northern Africa and almost the entire Asian continent (without Russia (see the 2nd map)). From the perspective of the civilizations proposed by Huntington, the West and other civilizations, including the Orient, are *antagonistic* geographic regions. As the idea of civilization is not the only most important feature of a geographic space, it will be noticed that the regions are not excluded, but they are rather *complementary*. In order to understand the complementarity of the two macro-

regions discussed here, we need to see how the Orient (the East) was born and how it developed.

The first characteristic of the Orient is, by reference to the Occident, the geographic one. The origin of the term is also Latin (*oriens*) and refers to growth, lifting, birth. These words were used to indicate the sunrise: from where the sun rises on the celestial vault. As such, geographically, Orient means "where the sun rises," i.e. the East. In this case, the names of the places with the Oriental term are abundant: *the Oriental Carpathians* (Carpații Orientali in romanian; eastern subdivision of the Carpathians), *the Oriental Great Erg* (sand dunes in the Sahara, east of the Occidental Great Erg), *the Sierra Madre Oriental* (mountains in eastern part of Mexico), *Negros Oriental* (administrative sub-region located in the east of Negro Island of the Philippines) or *Oriente* (a province of Southeast Cuba). Including the famous *Orient Express* train, created more than a century ago, and which seldom travels, but makes people think of the East. The end point of this train leaving Paris (West) is Istanbul, a city in South-Eastern Europe, straddling the line between Europa and Asia. The Orient Express route links the West to the East and induces the idea of *linking* regions, thus complementarity.

Map 2. The East nowadays



ote: in grey, those states which are sometimes included in the eastern area.

Eduard Said is the most well-known orientalist and one who has dedicated himself to the research and definition of orientalism and of course the Orient. In his view, the Orient is not just a geographic reference, but more than that. He clearly states that "East has always been a European invention" and that, in reality, Europeans perceive this territory as "one of romanticism, exotic beings, obsessive landscapes and memories, and remarkable experiences". For Europe, the Orient has a cultural-geographic load with distinctive landscapes and social behaviors different from its own, which is not the case, for example, in the North American perception. It is very possible, Said says, that the Americans associate the Orient with East Asia, with China and Japan mainly. The Americans thus tend to the Eastern perception and geographic features of the notion, while the French, the British and, to a lesser extent, the Germans, Russians, Portuguese, Spanish, Italians and Swiss have a long tradition of what should be called the Orient.

This geographic macro-region, as far as we can see, will be defined by the Western world. After all, the Orient was the area of Europe's richest and oldest colonies, the source of its cultural competitors and one of the deepest and most recurrent images of the "other". Consequently, the second most important characteristic of the Orient, the cultural one, helped Europe to define itself as the West. The image created in the Oriental space is not purely imaginative, or perceptual, it is an integral part of European material and cultural civilization. In the end, it is *Eurocentric*.

The East expresses and represents that cultural and ideological geographic area - with ethnic and racial religions (Islamic, Hindu, Confucian, Shintoist, etc.), institutions, vocabulary, scholarships, images, doctrines and bureaucracies – some of them passing under European colonial auspices or cultural dominance, and which, with the growing involvement of the United States at international level, widened to the Eastern extremity of Asia. The former Eastern European colonies were sprinkled throughout Asian territory, from the Arabian Peninsula to the present Chinese space, and by forcing the opening of new commercial markets, even in Japan. Though one should distinguish between a colonial relation where a small layer of Europeans controlled key institutions and one where large numbers of Europeans arrive to recreate European society from the ground up, which is called settler colonialism and happened in the Americas and Australia, as well as portions of Algeria and South Africa. The American acceptance of the Orient, though less consistent than the European one, has come to refer to approximately the same geographic area.

Unlike the West, which *has migrated* to the meaning of development, modernity and wealth, the Orient has largely been captured by cultural acceptance. However, we must stress Edward Said's correct observation, namely that the Orient, as well as the Occident, are not natural geographic spaces, but simply perceptual geographical macro-regions. Again, Japan is the best example when we exemplify the role of Occidentalism or Orientalism in the way a state operates and organizes itself. From an economic point of view, Japan is a Western state, but from a cultural point of view, it remains an oriental country. If we assume the concept of economic development, modernity and wealth to the West, and that of culture, traditions and local social values to the East, then the Occident and the Orient are not antagonistic, and Japan is the perfect symbiosis of the two macro-regions.