

From *Weltbild* to *Auseinandersetzung*:  
A Heideggerian Re-Thinking of the West

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## **1. Introduction**

The starting point for this essay is a moment of intellectual dissatisfaction with the current debate on the ‘crisis of the West’. The reasons for this dissatisfaction are twofold. Firstly, the debate seems curiously a-historical, as it seems to forget that the West has always been in a ‘crisis’, and that the latter is in a sense a constitutive element of the West. Secondly, it seems that the current debate in effect misses underlying philosophical issues of the current crisis and that some of the proposed solutions end up re-producing the very dynamics that cause the crisis in the first place. As for the first issue, from the sweeping historical narratives of Spengler or Toynbee to the political and strategic discussions about the future of the West during its crises in the Cold War and after, the intellectuals and historians of the West have continuously reflected critically upon, and problematised, the very conditions of possibility for the West. As such, critical reflexivity is itself a constitutive element of the modern Western imaginary. From this perspective, the current debate on the ‘crisis’, ‘demise’, or the ‘future’ of the West simply re-iterates this historical pattern of self-reflexivity and therefore (paradoxically) contributes to the continuation of the West as a secular and reflexive space.

Yet at the same time, and this pertains to the second issue, the current debate often misses the deeper philosophical issues at the core of the current crisis and proposes solutions that necessarily fall short in terms of their ability to re-construct the West in a productive fashion. While prior crises from this perspective led to a re-appraisal and re-articulation of the West, the current one arguably goes deeper than its predecessors, creating a moment that requires a deeper analysis and a more radical re-definition of its predicament. As I shall argue in the following, what is at stake in the current crisis is the possibility that the West will become ‘un-recognisable’. I attach two meanings to this term in the context of this essay: the danger that the West’s civilisational identity fades from sight; and secondly, that its civilisatory faculties are no longer recognised and acknowledged within the global system. The result of these developments could be quite paradoxical. While on the one hand, the West fades from the imagination of its constitutive members, at the same time it becomes the ‘constitutive other’ of those civilisations that increasingly reject its civilisatory

aspirations or pretensions. Ironically, this threat is itself an outcome of the particular ambition of the West to maintain its political, strategic, and epistemic dominance in the global system. The argument offered here locates the current crisis of the West in its very ambition to dominate the world, to conflate its own identity with a global and universal value system, and within the particular epistemic position it consequently assumes vis-à-vis the world. Western identity, I argue in the following, is constituted by setting it off not against other equivalent civilisations *within* the world, but by differentiating itself *from* the world. Western identity is therefore not of this world, as it understands itself as assuming a position outside and beyond it. Yet, as some writers have pointed out, for a variety of reasons, this is no longer a tenable position or assumption. The ontological self-understanding of the West as the temporal and spatial ‘meridian of the present, as it were, by which the political simultaneity of economic and cultural nonsimultaneity is measured’ (Habermas, 1997: 132), and its ability to create or maintain a global order according to its own ‘universal’ norms and values, can no longer be taken for granted. As developments during the last decade have demonstrated, the capacity of the West and its institutions to accomplish the purpose inherent in its identity, i.e., to create and manage a world according to its own blueprint, has met with unprecedented resistance in global affairs. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly difficult to discern what this blueprint in fact outlines, as the identity of the West itself is in danger of fading from sight. Precisely what the West *is*, is becoming increasingly difficult to recognise, as facile gestures towards ‘multi-culturalism’ have replaced the existentialist experience of the encounter with the other.

The essay is structured as follows. In the next section I will review examples of contributions to the debate on the crisis of the West. These will generally fall into one of two camps, depending on whether they locate the source of the current crisis within, or without, the West. The former scholars tend to emphasise internal failings and shortcomings, while the later focus on the external challenges the West faces. As I will demonstrate, in both camps we find arguments that still reproduce the commitments to the West as an ontologically, politically, and epistemically privileged civilisation that are at the heart of a more radical interpretation of this crisis. As such, they reproduce, rather than solve, the crisis. However, in both camps there are also some more philosophically inclined engagements with the current crisis of the West.

The problem with this approach, however, is that it renders only defensive or logically incoherent solutions to the current crisis.

Section 3 will introduce Martin Heidegger's concept of the *Weltbild* as a way to establish the basic epistemic premises upon which the West bases its identity, and its political practices. Following Heidegger, I will argue that the West sees its self as positioned vis-à-vis, rather than within, the world. The world-as picture is therefore not a metaphor; it describes the transcendental epistemic disposition of the West as above and beyond the world. In the subsequent section, I will discuss the current problematic policies of the West, its abolition of political, legal, and moral constraints in its interaction with the rest of the world, as necessary outcome of this *Weltbild*. That is to say I take issue with the argument that the current fondness for violence, torture, and extra-legal actions is an aberration or goes against Western identity proper. Section 5 then will argue for a Heideggerian 'throwing' of the West into the world, to immerse it within the *inter-national*, to place it within the 'inter-active' context of global politics in order to force it to take care of its Self. Section 6 will take up the topic of the care of the Self and, following Foucault and Prozorov will argue for an ethics of agonism and a revalorisation of security. Only through the exposure to insecurity, as an ontological condition can the West still maintain its distinctive identity. A short reflection on the probability of such political practices concludes this paper.

### ***The Crisis of the West – An Etiology***

For analytical purposes it is useful to distinguish between two sets of arguments about the origins of the crisis of the West. While the first focuses above all on the internal causes of this crisis within the West, the second one sees it above all as a result of external challenges, most often by other civilisations.

The distinction is not absolute and mutually exclusive; very often the arguments overlap and become mutually re-enforcing. Hence, internal weakness and fragmentation are identified as contributory factors with regard to the West's inability to compete with civilisational contenders. The categorisation below thus reflects the respective primary focus within the respective arguments.

Internal pathologies focus on a variety of factors, ranging from the philosophical to the political. Within this set, we can distinguish between those analyses that consider the crisis of the West immanent and necessary, and those that define it as temporary and accidental. For the representatives of the first group, the very logic of Western philosophy, the Enlightenment, or Liberalism, has reached its historical course and now faces its limits in the encounter with a world increasingly resistant to this logic. For Breyten Breytenbach, for instance, the promise of global progress and the creation of a ‘new man’ as the epitome of this progress have failed. Against the meagre evidence of some progressive movement, Breytenbach cites an array of evidence in support of his argument about the dialectics of progress, in which the latter produces so many detrimental effects as to undermine its own purpose and logic. In his words, ‘[E]very “advance” in our shared condition set of a dialectical process whereby we lost as much as we gained, if not more’ (Breytenbach, 2004).

For Thomas Assheuer, the universalist claims of the West can no longer be sustained. Recent political events drive home three crucial issues of shortcomings within its (liberal) ideology. There is firstly, its un-reflected preference for Identity over Difference or Diversity, expressed in the assumption that the world is inhabited by proto-Western subjects in life-worlds that are best conceptualised as ‘West-in-the-making’. ‘Consequently, Liberalism finds it difficult to appreciate the liberal in non-liberal societies and to recognise democratic substance in their traditions’ (Assheuer, 2004: 41). Secondly, the West tends to misconstrue freedom in only procedural terms, without acknowledging the cultural or civilisational substance informing and underpinning it. It can therefore not appreciate that ‘from the outside’, the ‘implantation’ of democracy is not experienced as liberation, but as a form of subtle violence. And finally, the West has increasingly conflated political freedom with economic market liberalisation. Democracy, the logic seems to be, is supposed to emerge from a free capitalist economy. Yet more often than not, reforms pushing the latter in effect undermine the possibilities of the former.

For Matthias Politycki, the very logic of the Enlightenment and its constant critique and scepticism have undermined the ‘virility’ of the West and replaced it with a general ironic attitude, ‘a shrugging laissez-faire and tolerance towards each and everyone’ (Politycki, 2005). Committed to nothing in particular except a lifeless version of humanism, the West has neither the motivation nor the vitality to respond to the challenges of other cultures: ‘Never before was our normative horizon so

depleted as today, never before were we representatives of a late decadent civilisation [...] so helpless in the face of non-European challenges' (Politycki, 2005). Here then, the diagnosis of the Western malaise translates directly into 'external' problems, i.e., the inability of the West to confront and survive against the sheer vitality and violence of its Chinese and Arab challengers.

For other scholars, the crisis of the West is defined less by these detrimental effects of philosophical dialectics, and more by the exigencies of contemporary politics. Rather than locating the causes of the crisis within the very philosophical or ideological tenets of the West, they locate it on the level of contemporary political decisions and perceptions. The very identity of the West is therefore excluded from critical reflection. Thus, for Michael Cox the confluence of 'Bush and Iraq' has 'obviously had a profound impact on the transatlantic relationship' (Cox, 2005: 207). As he acknowledged, first rifts however already occurred during the Clinton administration, reflecting different emergent interests and perceptions in the USA and in Europe, respectively (Cox, 2005: 212-213). And in its perhaps most 'superficial' version, Timothy Garton Ash ties the crisis of the West to the conflict between the USA on one hand, and France and Germany on the other, on the eve, and in the wake of, the Iraq War 2003. While he notes that the conflict was not simply a confrontation between Europe and USA, as a number of European countries supported the US administration in this war, the crisis as such is exclusively linked to this timeframe and this (narrow) issue. And while Cox remains mute about the about potential consequences of the demise of the West and treats it as a crisis in its own right, Garton Ash links the fate of the West with the possibility of creating a 'free world' and pushing it along a 'path of freedom'. Freedom here is defined in terms of Berlin's 'negative liberties', i.e., 'freedom from removable constraints, so long as removing them does not itself constrain the liberty of others' (Garton Ash, 2005: 239). The precise meaning of this principle is relegated to common sense rather than philosophical reflection: the West should concentrate on 'the most obviously acute and burdensome ones – those that no normal man or woman, in any known culture, would gladly endure if he or she had the chance to get rid of them' (239). Moreover, the West is granted a normative privilege to decide on the appropriateness of interventions in the case of genocides and the possibility of certain regimes or terrorist groups acquiring weapons of mass destruction. Should the UN fail so sanction such an intervention, a 'double majority' of democracies and of the respective country's

neighbours can justify such an intervention. Hence while neighbouring countries are involved due to the regional danger of the regime in question, 'democracies' are apparently involved due to their apparent moral superiority, even when not directly affected by an emergent threat.

What is at stake in Garton Ash's view is the very ability of the West to remain the 'main world-shaper' (192). With the rise of Asian countries such as China and India, new and significant challengers are emerging, limiting the dominance of the West to the next 20 years, after which their dynamism and power will likely overtake the one of the West. Only within this timeframe can the West still expect to speak for the world, can it assume that the Western 'we' can speak for 'humankind (193).

The looming (or indeed present) inability of the West to shape, and speak for, the world is the main topic of the authors focusing on the external sources of the Western crisis. For Jan Ross and Bernd Ulrich, the time is already past in which 'Europe and the United States were the nodal point of global politics, were all strings met and ran back individually into the periphery, into Latin America, to the Gulf states, and to Asia. Today this structure has become a network, and everyone can connect and ally with anyone else' (Ross and Ulrich, 2006). Hence the West no longer controls the world, and more than that, it has to realise that 'there is a world without us'.

For Samuel Huntington, the West today faces an existential threat from competing civilisations, above all the Chinese and the Islamic one. Given the internal weaknesses of the West, its deteriorating social fabric and low birth rates, it appears to be only a matter of time until it has to relinquish its dominant position in the international system. (Huntington, 1996)

While Huntington remains ultimately ambivalent about the status of the West as either one civilisation amongst many, or as a site of continued moral and political privilege, James Gow explicitly identifies the West with global order, and to defend the West is therefore tantamount to defending such order.

[Since 1992] the need to uphold the principle of sovereignty was no longer a matter of protecting individual states from other states, but of protecting all states and their sovereign investment in international order, peace, security and stability from the disruptive acts, or effects, of particularly problematic states, non-state actors. Preserving order, under these conditions, was effectively defending the West (Gow, 2005: 37-38).

There is, it should be noted, little in Gow's analysis that supports this conflation. The threats he analyses are for the most part, in his own words, particular to the West (58), and it remains unclear in what way they threaten global order as such. Moreover, as Gow himself notes, the concepts of order and civilisations are not confined to the West alone. Different cultures are in his view diverse expressions of Civilisation as such. If we accept his definition of civilisation as a 'process in which human groups master their environment and their mutual relations' (11), we might infer that order can appear in different forms and instantiations. To defend the West might thereby be understood as defending a particular order, but not necessarily order as such.

Gow's argument becomes even more problematic as he turns the alleged necessity to defend the Western/global order also through pre-emptive war. In order to be able to fight the new threats against the West, Gow insists, we can no longer confine ourselves to the traditional doctrines of warfare. Instead, we need to pre-empt certain threats before they materialise.

Within the context of this essay I am not so much concerned with the validity of this claim (although I frankly have grave doubts about its logic and internal consistency). Rather, it is the conflation of order and the West itself that is to be problematised in the following

Overall, we can discern two versions of the crisis of the West that cut across the internal/external sources divide. There is firstly, the diagnosis of a deep philosophical and ideological crisis inherent to the West. And there is a more 'superficial' political analysis that, while acknowledging the severity of the crisis, nonetheless sees the possibility of overcoming it and reasserting the West's dominant position in the world. The former etiology renders solutions that are at best 'damage control', demanding an end to Western 'double standards' (Assheuer, 2004: 41; Ross and Ulrich, 2006), an embrace of cultural diversity (Breytenbach, 2004), or the rescuing of ideological certainties from their constant deconstruction through Enlightenment philosophy (Politycki, 2005). As such, these 'remedies are defensive at best, and implausible at worst. Overall, it seems that the demise of the West appears as an inevitable outcome

On the other hand, the proponents of solutions to the political crisis, which insist on the re-instatement of the West as the guarantor of international order - even with, in Gow's argument, additional normative, political and military capabilities - simply end

up omitting the insights of the philosophical critique. To reduce the crisis of the West to the problem of a lower cohesion between its member states, or increasingly diverting ‘threat perceptions’ misses the more fundamental problems of the West’s position in the world, and ultimately simply reproduces the very sources of the current crisis. Here, Gow’s argument in favour of pre-emption further affirms and institutionalises the ‘double standards’ on which the West insists, yet which are identified as symptoms of a by now untenable position of the West in the global system. And Garton Ash’s re-assertion of Western universalism once again reproduces the Western/Liberal insistence on Identity over Difference and its concomitant ontological violence. What we face, then is a situation in which on one hand the relevant critique does not render any viable or ‘vital’ re-affirmation of the West under current circumstances, and in which such a –reaffirmation is based on a deeply flawed and superficial diagnosis.

In order to salvage the possibility of this project, we arguably need to drive the philosophical critique one step further. In the following section, I will draw on Martin Heidegger’s contemplation on the *Weltbild* of the West in order to lay the grounds for a more deeply philosophically informed project of the West.

## ***The Western Weltbild***

The most succinct critique of the epistemic assumptions underlying the continued conflation of Western and global order can be found in Heidegger’s concept of the *Weltbild*. On the face of it, the concept *Weltbild* seems innocuous enough. It suggests an image of the world, a representation of it, to be found in political ideologies, but also in literature, fiction, movies and other aesthetic artefacts. But for Heidegger, it means much more than that.

We mean by it the world itself, the world as such, what is, in its entirety just as it is normative and binding for us. “Picture” here does not mean some imitation, but rather what sounds forth in the colloquial expression “We get the picture” concerning something. [...] Where the world becomes picture, what is, in its entirety, is juxtaposed as that for which man is prepared and which, correspondingly, he therefore intends to bring before himself and have before

himself, and consequently intends in a decisive sense to set in place before himself. Hence world picture, when understood essentially, does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as picture (Heidegger, 1977: 129).

In modernity, Heidegger argues, the world appears and becomes knowable as *Vorstellung*, as ‘re-presentation’.<sup>1</sup> Heidegger emphasises in this context the historically specific nature of the *Weltbild*. There was no ancient or medieval world picture, ‘the fact that the world becomes picture at all is what distinguishes the essence of the modern age’ (Heidegger, 1977: 130). The notion of the world-as-picture therefore denotes a particular epistemology that sets the modern age apart from its precursors and, one might surmise, its successor.

It is therefore only in the modern age, that the monocular gaze of a de-contextualised, indeed transcendental subject becomes the dominant mode of gathering knowledge about the world. This gaze originates in the modern subject –Man, Nation, Race, etc. – that stands in front of this re-presentation, ‘as lord of the earth’. ‘Man’, in Heidegger’s words, ‘becomes that being upon which all that is, is grounded, as regards the manner of its Being and its truth. Man becomes the relational centre of that which is as such’ (Heidegger, 1977: 128). Yet Man himself is therefore no longer of this world. As such he has no (social) existence or identity. He assumes a Cartesian position of a pure mind, with all traces of culture, contingency, indeed world itself eradicated from his image. The very conditions of his being are externalised and rendered a re-presentation, a *Vor-stellung* for him, it becomes something over which he can exert cognitive and practical control. Within this context, ‘security’ takes on a complex and double-sided role. Above all, ‘security’ becomes the constitutive moment of modern thought as such,

security the very grounds of what the political itself is; specifying what the essence of politics is thought to be. The reason is that the thought within which

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<sup>1</sup> As all translators of Heidegger’s work notice, many of his German language concepts are virtually untranslatable, as their English correspondents hardly ever produce the same connotations as the German original. In this case too, ‘re-presentation’ does not connote the ‘putting forth in front of the gazing subject’ that the German ‘*Vorstellung*’ does. In order to remind the reader of this crucial aspect, I will occasionally use the German concept in lieu of the English one.

political thought occurs – metaphysics – and specifically its conception of truth, is itself a security project’ (Dillon, 1996: 13).

Some fixed point is required; some basis needs to be established for this subjectivity that is supposed to be able to ascertain the world without being part of it. ‘[Security] thereby became the value which modern understandings of the political and modern practices of politics have come to put beyond question, precisely because they derived its very requirement from the requirements of metaphysical truth itself’ (Dillon, 1996: 13).

A number of involved topics bear emphasis. There is, firstly and as mentioned above, the ‘view from nowhere’, the monocular gaze at a world that reveals itself in an objectified and fixed fashion. There is, secondly, the assumption that knowledge about the world is gathered without involvement in the world. Reality is *Vor-stellung*, a re-presentation in front of the detached observer. Indeed, the non-involvement becomes a condition for the objectivity and hence truthfulness of the observer’s account.

Moving into the realm of security, we can now also appreciate how the *Weltbild* constitutes the condition of possibility of agency for the West. To the extent that the world-as-picture creates it as an object to be surveilled, controlled and manipulated, it emerges as a ‘system’ (Heidegger, 1977: 129). The world as picture exhibits ‘a unity of structure’ (Heidegger, 1977: 141). Security becomes strategy and technique to manipulate this system, and the efficacy of this technique is determined and measured in terms of the control exercised over the world. In its most extreme form, security becomes a matter of military-technological capabilities that enable an actor to impose its particular goals and purpose upon any potential adversary. Beyond the technical, however, the ‘cultural’ aspect of security is expressed in the ‘projection’ of Western values and norms into its periphery. Security for the West, above all in the post-Cold War era, becomes a matter of ‘cultural engineering’, of a successful transformation of the other in its own image (Neumann & Williams, 2000). The securitisation of the periphery, the identification of the threats and dangers emanating from there, is conducted according to a civilisational matrix. The absence of Western norms and values defines the other as dangerous. The nature of weapons systems, above all of weapons of mass destruction, is decided by the cultural identity of the weapons’

possessor. Consequently, security has to be produced by the projection and insertion of Western standards of civilisation into the periphery.

The West is, in a manner of speaking, not of this world. Or rather, the West's ontological expression on the map of this *Weltbild* is the projection point and lever from which the management and transformation of the security political global environment can be effected. The double move described above therefore constructs a West that operates 'perpendicularly' to the surface of the *Weltbild*, connecting the detached subject's position with the site on the map of global security.

This transcendent position then defines the condition of possibility for a claim to 'epistemic exceptionalism'<sup>2</sup> that subjects both time and space to its particular metaphysical parameters. Spatially, the world is mapped according to its distance from the centre, i.e., the West itself. Temporally, the difference between the West and the rest is reduced and collapsed into a uni-dimensional time-line, in which the former sets the *telos* for the latter. Located in this world, yet not of this world, the West's engagement with the world, its agency within it, is defined in terms of transformation and intervention.

## **Weltbild and Violence**

It is this *Weltbild* that underpins and explains Christopher Coker's diagnosis that the West has lost its understanding of the existential dimensions of warfare and violence. It no longer comprehends the self-affirming, expressive element in warfare, or terrorism, reducing it instead to an expression of irrationality and barbarism (Coker, 2002: 6). Because it removes the West from the world, because it positions it above and beyond the latter, the West's *ex-istence* is never at stake, never involved in warfare. While the Latin verb *existere* translates as 'come into being', the West is always already there. We can drive this etymological critique further and point to the semantic components of *existere*: *ex-* and *sistere*, i.e., 'out' and 'taking a stand'. To exist, in other words, once meant to come into being through taking a stand against something. Yet with the modern *Weltbild*, thus productive and agonistic notion of existence has given way to a rarified and transcendental concept.

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<sup>2</sup> I adapt this term here from Naeem Inayatullah and David Blaney, 'The Rites of Dispossession', mimeo, 2006.

The *Weltbild* with its peculiar conflation of Western civilisation and global order also supports the call for pre-emptive security outlined above. The use of force and the resort to military violence are from this vantage point always involved in more than the defence of a political space against its enemies. Violence becomes a means to manipulate and control the global ‘system’ in order to maintain its stability.

Epistemically, the *Weltbild* currently produces a number of peculiarities that need to be spelled out in more detail.

There is, firstly, the tendency to subsume the multifaceted forms of political (and often violent) resistance under the overall concept of Terrorism. Historically and culturally contingent factors that would account for a more complex and deeper understanding of these forms of violent resistance are eliminated by the imperial ‘look from nowhere’, cast upon a world-as image. To this monocular eye, the world is turned into a surface image, with the complexities of history and culture reduced to a spatialised presence (O’Tuathail, 1996). Within this world-as-picture, the binary codes of logocentrism apply, with resistance to the Western imposition of Reason, Democracy, and Market coded as ‘Terrorism’ (Vatikiotis, 2006).

From this perspective, then, it becomes possible to reduce the different expressions of violent resistance to epiphenomena of a ‘deeper rooted’ struggle. In the words of Tony Blair:

Whatever the outward manifestation at any one time - in Lebanon, in Gaza, in Iraq and add to that in Afghanistan, in Kashmir, in a host of other nations including now some in Africa - it is a global fight about global values; it is about modernization, within Islam and outside of it; it is about whether our value system can be shown to be sufficiently robust, true, principled and appealing that it beats theirs (Blair, 2006).

Yet at the same time, this argument for a ‘deeper’ reading of the conflict beyond its ‘outward manifestation’ in fact turns out to be nothing but superficial, as it omits and silences the different historical and cultural conditions of the various conflicts mentioned. To the monocular eye, conflict appears as a surface phenomenon, defining the contemporaneity of spaces that offer resistance to the Western defined global order.

Secondly, given the Manichean logic of this confrontation, and the conflation of Western civilisation with global order and mankind as such, the ‘war on terror’ inherently de-humanises the Other. The enemy here becomes the foe, to be abolished rather than just defeated. As this foe is fighting History and Civilisation itself, rather than the oppressive forms of Western hegemony, he can claim no political standing or sovereign equality. As such he becomes the enemy of mankind itself. As William Rasch has argued, it is precisely the appropriation of the concept of humanity as the referent subject of that violence that makes possible the ontological and empirical extermination of the other.

If humanity is both the horizon and the positive pole of the distinction that that horizon enables, then the negative pole can only be something that lies *beyond* that horizon, can only be something completely antithetical to horizon and positive pole alike – can only, in other words, be *inhuman*’ (Rasch, 2003: 136).

The Foe, in other words, has no humanity left in him, he cannot claim even a modicum of respect and recognition. War against this Foe cannot accept any limits, morally charged with a decision on good and evil, it therefore tends towards ‘total war’ (Rasch, 2003: 136). *Homo Sacer*, man reduced to bare life and deprived of any political status, is therefore more than a metaphor or a myth (Agamben, 1998).

This does not mean that *homo sacer* is a creature standing outside of order. As an excluded figure, it is included via this exclusion. That is to say, in order for him to be put onto the outside, into the camp, he has had to be taken in by the norm, the law, in the first place. Chief amongst these procedures ranks the deployment of the concept of ‘enemy combatant’ for alleged al Qaeda members, detained in Guantanamo Bay. The concept includes within itself the perverse logic of imperial sovereignty and the reversal between order and exception. A legal concept in itself, it is deployed to deprive its objects of any recourse to the rule of law. As such, the designation takes place unilaterally, as an act of imperial sovereignty, and cannot be appealed by the detainee. It is thus a symptomatic expression of the Western arrogation of a position outside and beyond the world, from which to surveille and define the identity and purpose of actors. To assume this position thus enables the West to deny the particular, political, and contingent nature of these definitions. Given the Western *Weltbild*, the Difference that characterises global politics can always be reduced to the

Identity provided by the detached, de-contextualised imperial gaze it produces. Difference, in other words, is *identifiable*.

With History and Mankind on its side, security from ‘Terrorism’ then becomes a matter of strategic technology and its effectiveness, rather than political practice and its ethical implications. In the name of universal morals, the West ‘demoralises’ its practices in the ‘war on terror’ by removing legal, political, and moral constraints. In the words of Representative Peter T. King, Republican of New York and chairman of the Homeland Security Committee, ‘If we capture bin Laden tomorrow and we have to hold his head under water to find out when the next attack is going to happen, we ought to be able to do it’ (quoted in Hulse, 2006).

The casualness of this remark hides a significant shift in the role that moral and legal constraints play in the making of Western identity. As the critiques of this support for torture have noted, these constraints no longer constitute the West. However regularly honoured only in their breach, the identity of the West has been defined in contradistinction to ‘barbaric’ practices found in ‘inferior’ cultures. Without denying the violence exercised by Western states on behalf of ‘standards of civilisation’ and the convenient neglect of such standards for strategic, economic or other concerns, discourses in the West have usually condemned such practices, not least in view of the atrocities committed by the Nazis and other regimes in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

With this discourse disintegrating and torture becoming an acceptable practice of violence in the name of a transcendental Truth about History and Mankind, the West becomes ‘unrecognisable’. There are two ways to utilise this concept for the present analysis. Firstly, with the ‘war on terror’ becoming a struggle of fundamentalisms, reminiscent of the medieval conflict between the Pope and the Mongol Khan over who had the proper divine authority to rule over Mankind, and with ‘barbaric’ practices now entering the Western discourse, sanction by such transcendental authority, the West now increasingly emulates, rather than opposes, its foe. With the constraints of the rule of law giving way to a politics of morals that draw their authority from a transcendental and therefore pre-political position, and with paradoxically sanction ‘immoral’ practices, the very core of the West’s self-understanding is at stake.

Secondly, the insistence on these practices as necessary in the war on terror, with the pursuit of security now including de-humanising practice such as extra-legal detention

and torture, the West has become unrecognisable in terms of its appellation as a force of civilisation. While the power of the West is recognised, it no longer can claim any moral or civilising authority.<sup>3</sup> As such, recognition of its civilisatory role is no longer forthcoming. This does not necessarily mean that the West is fading from the imagination of those cultures opposed to it. On the contrary, one might these days instead observe that the West is 'alive and kicking'

Overall then, the West is facing a severe ontological crisis. The question is how to respond to this. It is at this point that the conventional critics fall short. To define this crisis as a moral one only reiterates the assumptions build into the *Weltbild*. Once double standards are abolished, once the West does live up to its own standards, it can then automatically reclaim the authority of the *Weltbild* again.

So instead of a moral critique, in the following I will offer an aesthetic critique. If indeed the *Weltbild* is the constitutive feature behind the current crisis, then we need to start with such a critique as it enables us to address the particular position and perspective the West assumes towards the world. Moreover, as Jane Bennett has argued, a focus on the aesthetics of political practices, far from evading ethical concerns, is actually necessary for a proper appreciation of the role of ethics in politics. It is only through aesthetic concerns, that ethics can gain any traction in politics (Bennett, 1996). Moreover, by focusing on the aesthetic dimensions of the Western Self, we can lead over to a Foucauldian analysis of the care of the Self.

### ***Throwing the West into the World***

How to solve the conundrum of a Western identity that currently produces the conditions of its own demise? Following Heidegger, Foucault, and Prozorov, I suggest a move away from 'identity' to the 'Self', from 'authenticity' to 'play', and from 'truth' to 'creation'. In other words, I will suggest that the West to remain the West, it has to give up its pretence of an authentic identity, that expresses the universal truth for a pluralistic world, and to approach the question of its Self in a playful, creative, and 'dangerous' fashion.<sup>4</sup> In order for this project to be conceivable, however, we need to embark on a Heideggerian gesture and 'throw' the West into the

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<sup>3</sup> The (somewhat clumsy) debate on Soft Power is an indication that mainstream IR is becoming aware of the interrelationship between power and authority.

<sup>4</sup> This builds on Prozorov (2004a: 443ff).

in-between, into the *inter*-national, of global politics. I should emphasize here that with *inter*-national I do not refer to the conventional synonym for inter-state politics. This conventional notion has become increasingly obsolete. What I refer to with *inter*-national is in a sense the anarchical setting of the global system, and the absence of any position from which to speak truth to the world. All entities and communities are ‘within’, and ‘in-between’. (Heidegger, 2006: 113ff.) Moreover, I do not privilege any particular entity or community here; hence the ‘national’ is meant to designate a generic sense of belonging, such as the concept of ‘nation’ used to do.<sup>5</sup> The *inter*-national in a sense then denotes the existential condition of being, or rather the condition under which beings come into ‘ex-istence’, for the production of a recognizable Self.

Throwing the West back into the world, re-immersing it into the *inter*-national, I argue, is the necessary condition for its own survival as a civilisational, and perhaps civilisatory entity. The *inter*-national becomes the constitutive condition of possibility for a re-valorisation of the West, and its notion of security.

The move I suggest encompasses the ‘secularisation’ of Western epistemology, the rejection of the *Weltbild*, and the articulation in its stead of an *episteme* that operates within the world, rather than outside and above it. In other words, the move entails the replacement of the world-as-picture with a world-as-experience. We are throwing the West back into the world, re-endowing it with historicity and location. As such a ‘being’, the West as a collective experience of the world becomes suspended between past and future, and located in-between otherness. It does no longer encounter the world as its author, as a detached subject in front of whom the world is on display. It becomes part of an authorless and on-going performance. The re-location of the West within the world also means that its identity no longer precedes the encounter with the other. Both temporally and spatially the West is a product of a constant play that engages its own history and its future within the encounter with the other.

Dasein is essentially in the world, not simply in the sense that it occupies a place in the world, but in the sense that it continually interprets and engages with other entities and the context in which they lie, the “environment” or the “world around us” (Inwood, 1997: 22).

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<sup>5</sup> This old concept of nation still survives in Swedish with an academic ‘nation’ designating the region or landscape a student called home.

Whatever the West brings to these engagements, it reflects and draws upon its historical experiences and encounters. The historicity of being therefore always poses the question to what extent we face the consequences of previous encounters and conflicts between the West and the rest. Thus, rather than to reify the other in terms of ‘fundamentalism’ and ‘irrationality’, the question informing such an encounter becomes to what extent prior interactions have at least contributed to the emergence of such forms of identity. Finally, a critical reflection of the past always informs the choices for the future encounters.

As the West can no longer assume an epistemic and normative exceptional status, the ‘inclusive’ orientation towards the other, the desire to intervene and assimilate, is replaced with a ‘pathos of distance’,<sup>6</sup> an aesthetic inclination towards the other, which accepts and appreciates the radical plurality of the world. Included in this orientation is the recognition that the plurality of the world is not just a matter of ontic difference, but that it also encompasses different *epistemes*, within which difference always appears different. In the absence of universally agreed upon epistemic and normative standards, in a world without a cultural or temporal median, communication does not necessarily bear the promise of a merging of horizons. As William Connolly has emphasised, communication between radically different entities becomes possible and potentially productive, if it refrains from the unilateral proclamation of universal standards, and acknowledges the contingent and contestable nature of all identities, normative commitments, and regulative ideas. For him, universalities are an obstacle to, rather than a pre-condition for, inter-cultural conversation (Connolly, 2000). For Connolly, this ‘ethos of pluralisation’ finds its expression in ‘practices of reciprocal forbearance, presumptive generosity and possible connection’ (Connolly, 2001: 352). Yet arguably, even Connolly’s ethos remains too close to liberal desires to overcome conflict and to avoid confrontation. The ethos he offers seeks to find an ‘element of compassion in each perspective’, thus already insinuating the existence of a background sense of community between the participants of this encounter. Moreover, forbearance and generosity are defensive rather than assertive strategies, and not all that far removed from tolerance. Also, they seem to suggest a certain stability of identity preceding the respective encounter. A forbearing and generous

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<sup>6</sup> This concept draws on Nietzsche (1988): 205).

attitude towards the other does not sufficiently acknowledge the role of the latter in the constitution of ‘our’ identity. What Connolly seems to underestimate is the productive nature such encounters, the ‘taking a stand’ in the Latin meaning of *existere*. So while he offers a first step towards the development of an aesthetics of security, this project remains stymied by a continued preponderance of ethical concerns and demands. We might therefore radicalise the above insights even further by returning once more to Heidegger and argue for a mode of being that seeks to make enemies in order to bring itself into existence (Shinko, 2006). For Heidegger, being as such is *polemos*, an *Auseinandersetzung*, a productive confrontation with otherness in which the self and its identity emerge in the first place.<sup>7</sup>

The *polemos* named here is a strife [Streit] that holds sway before everything divine and human, not war [Krieg] in the human sense. As Heraklitus thinks it, struggle [Kampf] first and foremost allows essences to step apart [auseinandertreten] into opposition, first allows position and stance and rank in their presence to come into a relation. In such a stepping apart, clefts, intervals, distances and joints open themselves up. In con-frontation [Auseinandersetzung], a world comes to be. [...] *Polemos* and *logos* are the same (Heidegger, quoted in Fried [1990/1991: 165-66]).

In the *inter-national*, in the absence of any universal or foundational knowledge, in the absence of a *Weltbild*, identity has to define itself as a ‘polemic’ project rather than by reference to a pre-political truth, or through a commitment to transcendental values and norms. Rather than to *include* the other, as Habermas and other Liberals intend to do, the other is to be *excluded*, made an enemy against which our own existence can emerge and stand apart from. To the extent that this confrontation *creates* an opening in which entities, identities, and relations emerge it cannot itself be circumscribed by a prior ethical charge. Rather, such an ontogenetic move requires an aesthetic and stylised attitude that can fashion the self out of this confrontation. In Hayden White’s words, ‘What is required is an aesthetic attitude in which the

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<sup>7</sup> There is no good translation for the German *Auseinandersetzung* in English. ‘A purely literal translation of *Auseinandersetzung* would render it as a separating-out-and setting-apart-from-one-another. The best English translation is usually “confrontation” – though this word captures neither the sense of mutual extrication, the *auseinander*, nor the placement and establishing, the *Setzung*, evident in the German word’; cf. Fried (1990/91: 165).

cultivation of a style takes precedence over any curiosity about the *true* nature of the experience being stylised' (White, 1994: 75). This does not mean that the West's identity dissolves within this agonistic game, as White suggests. Yet the commitment to particular values and norms is never a reflection of a pre-political truth. Instead it emerges out of a 'care for the self', and the impetus to maintain 'mastery over the self'. To the extent that an ethical commitment emerges out of this agonistic encounter, it will resemble what Foucault describes as 'the kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself, *rapport à soi*, which I call ethics, and which determines how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject of his own actions' (Foucault, 1991: 52).

This particular form of ethics does not refer back to a prior moral code. Or rather, it defines the relationship between subject and universal moral codes in an antagonistic fashion. As much as it rejects the imposition of such codes upon the other, it refused to subject itself to such transcendental morals itself. To the extent that moral codes become part of the subject's self-fashioning, this is done out of the latter's desire for mastery and self-disciplining. Writing about moral conceptions in Greco-Roman antiquity, Foucault states that

Although the necessity of respecting the law and the customs – the *nomoi* – was very often underscored, more important than the content of the law and its conditions of application was the attitude that caused one to respect them. The accent was placed on the relationship with the self that enabled a person to [...] achieve a mode of being that could be defined by the full enjoyment of oneself, or the perfect supremacy of oneself over oneself (Foucault, 1990: 31).

Foucault's ethics are ironically enough *inter*-national ethics par excellence, as they articulate the possibility of ethics as part of an aesthetic project to fashion an identity out of a 'baseless' *Auseinandersetzung*, or, to re-introduced Schmitt here, out of a genuinely political decision. It reflects the sovereignty of the relevant actors and puts the responsibility for ethical conduct onto the actors themselves. Most significantly, ethical conduct becomes a constitutive part of the identity of the particular subject, rather than a (merely regulatory) constraint upon him.

Finally, as Sergei Prozorov has pointed out, the self-fashioning that Foucault has in mind is a 'dangerous and open-ended encounter with the outside, the 'folding' of the

forces of the outside inside the self, whereby subjectivity is formed as “the inside of the outside” (Prozorov, 2004a: 447). As the *Auseinandersetzung* is a constitutive move, it necessarily establishes an internal rather than accidental relationship between the antagonists. Our identity is always ‘contaminated’ by the trace of the other. The process of differentiation that is encompassed in this confrontation endows our identity with ‘a non-identical double’ (Prozorov, 2004a: 447).. So instead of the Liberal move, which includes the other in a universalising gesture, only to exclude it as the monstrous, dangerous, inferior, or deviant, the ‘Realist’ move suggested here excludes the other in order to include it in the constitution of our self.

If our identity in fact depends on the art of making enemies, of fashioning and re-fashioning our selves within continuous *Auseinandersetzungen*, the standard valorisation of security and insecurity has to be recast. Instead of attempting to secure identity by ‘including’, transforming, or erasing the other, identity now becomes a matter of exclusion, exposure, and affirmation. Confrontation, and therefore *insecurity* becomes the ontological condition for identity as a project within this world. Security on the other hand must be de-valued as an ascetic illusion of purity and stability. Moreover, inasmuch as the presupposition of a pure and self-identical identity calls forth the acts of intervention and violence against the other, thus undermining the very presupposition in at least two ways. Firstly, it engenders the resistance of others upon against whom this violence is directed. Secondly, the relationship between a pure identity and the need to produce it through technologies of violence is contradictory in itself: ‘The more passionate the quest for the originary, the more violent the effort of its constitution and the more frustrating the manifest artificiality of the final outcome’ (Prozorov, 2004a: 449).

### **Making Enemies: Re-producing the West within the *Inter-national***

Above I pointed towards the increasing un-recognisability of the West as it encounters fundamentalism with its own fundamentalism. As I argued, this paradox can only be accounted for if we understand the peculiar epistemic position of the West, which establishes it as a transcendental entity and the source of pre-political truth.

Yet, if ‘fundamentalism’ is the new constitutive enemy, within the context of the *inter-national* the recourse to ‘fundamentalism’ as a response cannot distinguish a Self

from an Other. For the West to remain recognisable, it has to forego exactly the temptations inherent in this epistemic mode. Ironically, at this point then, if the constitutive enemy of the West is indeed political ‘fundamentalism’, it is precisely the recourse to ‘due process’, to international and domestic rules, laws, and conventions that produces a ‘distinguished’ Self. It is the stylised adherence to formalities and conventions that regulate the anarchical international society and which reflect the absence of any ontological or moral prerogative, rather than the insistence on the fundamental morality of immoral practices through which a sense of Self can be maintained. Much like in the case of manners, the production of a Self works through the imposition of discipline on itself, rather than on the Other. This process then expresses the interstices between the aesthetic and the ethical. From an aesthetic point of view, we stick to rules, laws, conventions not in order to protect the other, but our Selves. The concern here is to produce a recognisable and distinguished entity rather than to realise a transcendental self-identical entity. Yet the aesthetic concern obviously incorporates an ethical purpose in that it militates against the dehumanising practices that accompany the current ‘war on terror’. This does not render ethics secondary. In the absence of transcendental sources of moral truths, an aesthetic concern might be its only imperative.

We might have to accept the protests of the proponents of moral politics that we thereby do too little to fight ‘terrorism’ and that we thereby expose ourselves to more danger. The veracity of this accusation is ultimately hard to establish. One might point to the counter-argument that current practices have done little in the way of reducing the force of ‘terrorism’ and are themselves highly counterproductive and dangerous. Yet we do have to acknowledge that ontological security is a paradoxical concept, in as much as it requires existential insecurity, a constant challenge to identity that necessitates the production of a Self out of a creative engagement with the Other.

### ***In Lieu of a Conclusion***

What this paper offers is a wager about the effects of the re-valorisation of insecurity as described above. It bets that the recognition of its productive and creative force will actually lead, firstly, to a stronger sense of cultural identity within the West as it engages rather than deters the rest. And secondly, it lays a wager on the reduced level

of violence between the West and its others, as their difference no longer spurns a desire to intervene, transform, or eradicate. In an increasingly globalised world, in which the other is always already within our presence, such a pathos of distance has to replace the incendiary logic of the *Weltbild* by de-linking security and identity.

Yet the question remains who likely such a shift from identity to Self, from violence to play, from security to a productive engagement with insecurity, really is. One might point to the politics of fear that permeate our societies, propagated by governments all too keen on expanding their powers and by media inherently incapable of critical reflection.

Yet even addressing these issues does not go very far. Many critics of the ‘war on terror’ are ultimately still indebted to the *Weltbild*. They might deplore the unilateral exercise of power by the USA on behalf of Mankind, yet the reality of a West defining the moral, political, and legal matrix for the rest of the world itself is never questioned. The identity of the West is therefore only a problem to the extent that it does not live up to its own standards.

With proponents and liberal critics of the ‘war on terror’ united in a particular *Weltbild* as well as the identification of ‘terrorism’ as an anti-civilisational affront outside the perimeters of politics, the *inter*-national remains unacknowledged. The localisation of the West outside the world still constitutes the core of its self-understanding and imagery. Yet as long as the West exempts itself from the immersion in the world, it will continue to produce the very conditions of its demise.

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