

Western World and the Occident

The West, the Western World and the Occident

The west is the cardinal point indicated by the setting sun. In French, the word Occident (from the Latin going down, falling) is at once an alternative to Ouest, and also commonly used to refer to the Western world, while in English it is used only to refer to the west, cardinal point, setting sun etc, although it is today fairly rare outside literary or poetic contexts. The Occident (the West) is opposed to the Orient (the «East»), or the Levant (i.e. the rising sun). French also has another word, the opposite of the Levant, which is the Ponant (from the Latin ponere, for the setting sun), which is now archaic. It is found in the Iles du Ponant in the Western part of the English Channel.

The word Occident in French, and to some extent "West" and "Western" in English, have had quite varied semantic and geopolitical careers. The word Occident has ideological overtones, so that there has been a tendency merely refer to "l'Ouest" (the West – it can be noted that when capitalised the word "west" in English no longer refers to the cardinal point, but to a region envisaged in terms of its location to the west of a given reference point).

The division of the Roman Empire between two, and then four Emperors led to the creation of an Eastern Empire (the capital of which was Constantinople) and the Western Empire (of which Rome remained the capital. This was taken up by Charlemagne, who was crowned Emperor of the Occident in Rome. We also find Western (Catholic and Protestant) and Eastern (Orthodox) Christianity, and the confusion resulting from the representations of the Orient as being Orthodox but also Moslem. This assimilated the Occident to part of Europe, which came to be known as Western Europe, and was to dominate the [world](#) in the imperialist 19th century. Western civilisation is sometimes seen as that of Christianity with the calling to evangelise the world, and sometimes as that of Enlightenment, supposed to usher in the reign of liberty and fraternity, whatever the actual truth of the matter. But the notion of the Western World or The West (and l'Occident in French) came into its own after the Second World War, when the West was assimilated to the "free" countries as opposed to the Communist bloc. In reference to the Communist world, however, it is not the word "Orient" that is used in French to mirror "Occident", but rather "les Pays de l'Est" (Eastern countries, or the Eastern bloc, as in English), while orient is found in Proche-Orient, Moyen-Orient, and Extrême-Orient to refer to the Near, Middle, or Far-East – possibly in French to avoid placing them with the Eastern Bloc? It is also curious to note another dissymmetry in French, since Western Germany is not referred to as Allemagne Occidentale, but as Allemagne de l'Ouest, mirroring Allemagne de l'Est. In all events the word "occident" in French had lost its meaning as a cardinal point, and had come to refer to the "free world", while in English only the capitalisation of west and western is a fairly reliable indicator of the way in which the words are viewed.

Thus the USA is viewed as being to the west of the USSR, which it is in fact rather to the east, as the Bering Straits are not very wide! And during the Cold War the various Russian and American missiles were all pointed north targeting the south across the Pole. To add to this, Australia and New Zealand are also part of the West or the Western World, while countries such as Pakistan or Egypt can swing from West to East with geopolitical developments, while remaining part of the Orient. In colonial times, French West Africa was known in French as Afrique Occidentale Française, perhaps merely because it was in the west, and west of Afrique Equatoriale Française. Thus French has considerably more ambivalence in its use of ouest, Ouest and Occident, but English is also somewhat ambivalent in its distinctions between west, West and Western (not forgetting the usage of Western in the context of the "Wild West" pioneer front in the USA!) but it has more or less done away with "Occident".

Bibliographie