

NOT HAVING NEUTRAL TERMS DOES NOT EQUAL HAVING NO TERMS AT ALL

Interview with Manuela Boatcă ([Professor of the sociology of global inequalities, Institute for Latin American Studies, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany](#))

Tobias Schwarz: In your work you have frequently commented on the term “The West”, criticizing – very correctly, I think – the “idealized distinction between Western (modern) cultures and non-Western (pre- or non-modern) cultures” ([M. Boatcă, Grenzsetzende Macht. Berl. J. f. Soz. 20 \(1\) 2010, p. 23–44](#)). On the other hand, you seem to take the “global North-South divide” for granted. To my understanding, there is a commonly shared understanding of “The West” that does not significantly differ from the “Global North”.

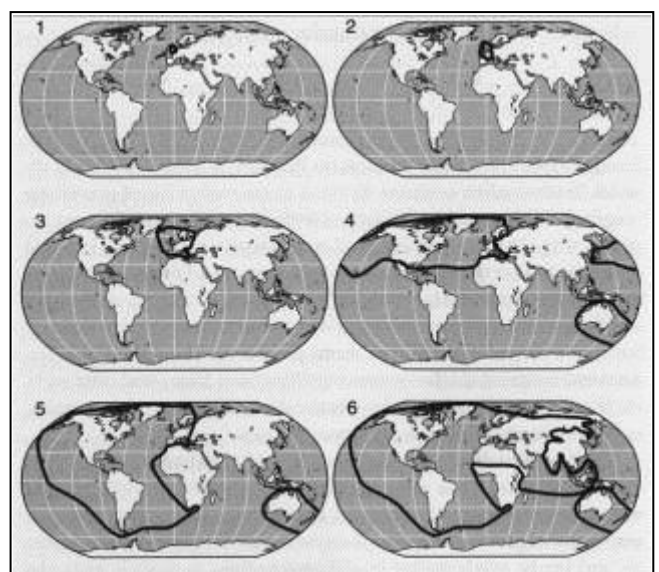
Manuela Boatcă: I disagree. There are many different understandings of “The West” depending on the time period on which we focus when referring to it and the criteria used as a basis for defining “Westernness”. In their 1997 book “The Myth of Continents. A Critique of Metageography”, Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen distinguish no less than seven versions of the West, from a standard minimal West limited to Britain, France, the Low Countries, and Switzerland, through the historical West of medieval Christendom around the mid 13th century (where the criterion of belonging is religion) or the Cold War Atlantic alliance formed by Europe and its settler colonies in the twentieth century, and up to the greater “cultural West”, which groups the criteria of language, religion, and “high culture” together into a version of the West that also includes Latin America and South Africa (see maps below). By contrast, there are not nearly as many different understandings of “Global North”, which points to its much more recent history.

TS: My first question referred to the current use of the terms North and West, and to me it seems that both are taken as basically meaning the same in everyday speech. Did I understand correctly: You argue this is a misunderstanding and that instead there is an important conceptual difference between the “North-South” and the “West-Rest” divide?

MB: Rather than a misunderstanding, this is a conflation of two distinct, yet related geopolitical strategies of naming and mapping, operating at different moments in time. Both the conceptual difference between the “North-South” and the “West-Rest” divide and the analytical uses we make of these terms become clear once we historicize and contextualize the moments of their emergence and the time span to which they most likely apply.

TS: What do you think is the main advantage of using “the North” (and “South”) instead of talking about “the West”? Is it primarily that “North/South” connotes significantly less of a dichotomy between “modern/traditional” and “civilized/primitive” than did “the West”?

MB: The “West vs. Rest” is by far the older divide, going back to the 15th century expansion of Europe into the Americas and operating mainly on cultural criteria. By contrast, the “North-South” divide comes into play at the end of World War II and uses primarily socioeconomic criteria. The “North-South” distinction emerged in close connection to another classificatory scheme: The First, the Second and the Third Worlds. With the virtual disappearance of the socioeconomic and political reality of the Second World, as well as with the proclaimed “end of history” of opposing political conflicts after 1990, the North-South dichotomy resurfaced even more forcefully – all the more so, as it was precisely the socioeconomic disparities it



Versions of the “West” (in Lewis & Wigen 1997, [The myth of continents. A critique of metageography](#). Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 50)

expressed that were and have been growing worldwide since the 1990s. In other words, whereas at the basis of the “West vs. Rest” divide lies the “civilized vs. barbarian” binary opposition, “North-South” is one that distinguishes rich vs. poor (regions and countries, rather than individuals). So this is less about advantages and disadvantages and more about the fact that the terms refer to different, though partly overlapping disparities.

TS: Do you think there is a sufficiently precise understanding of “Global South/North”, which can be used in a meaningful way? (And is this widely shared?) Could you give a brief definition of the way you use it?

MB: Again, a historically contextualized understanding of “Global South/North” is quite precise, but it is not widely shared, because there is an insufficient engagement with history, i.e., with the *longue durée* of the current world-system, in many of today's social scientific works.

TS: You also refer to “The South” as a metaphor for the “global periphery”. I agree that we need terms that point to very general, very broad global power relations, somehow as shorthand for the diversity of current relationships and the long history of colonization and of Western dominance. But, at the same time I feel uneasy with the generalizing tendency of terms like the “Global South”, “global periphery” or “Western dominance”. With a container concept like the “the South” we group very different historical experiences and current realities together into one homogenizing category. Do you have good arguments for using such a generalizing category, as “the global periphery” or “the global South”? What do you think are the pros (and cons) of such broad categories?

MB: Historical patterns (as well as their absence) are in the eye of the beholder. If we never ask ourselves the question of whether or not the countries and regions formerly colonized by Western Europe retain economic, cultural and political commonalities that relate to the experience of colonization, as well as a position in today's global power structures that reflects that experience, we will not receive an answer to such a question. We might thus miss one of

the most important common denominators shared by many countries and regions of the world today. Economically, and despite the much-hailed (but overrated) examples of successful growth as in the BRICS, yesterday's colonies have tended to become today's peripheries. This is not to say that there is a simple line linking Europe's colonial expansion to the colonized countries' economic, political or cultural condition today. But situations of military, economic, political, and cultural domination can and have been enforced in the absence of colonial administrations, and they have historically tended to outlive formal colonial rule. This is what Aníbal Quijano has termed “coloniality” ([A. Quijano, Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America, Nepantla: Views from South 1 \(3\) 2000](#)) – a set of political, economic, and sociocultural hierarchies between colonizers and colonized emerged with the conquest of the Americas in the sixteenth century that is distinct from pre-modern forms of colonial rule in that it translates administrative hierarchies into a racial/ethnic division of labor; and it is more encompassing than modern European colonialism alone, in that it transfers both the racial/ethnic hierarchies and the international division of labor produced during the time of direct or indirect colonial rule into post-independence times. The problem therefore is not having excessively general concepts, since concepts can always be refined and debated, but rather relinquishing the possibility of assessing historical trends and perceiving broadly shared patterns.

TS: I sympathize with Heriberto Cairos' attempt to promote the “Decolonization of Area Studies”, published in a volume that you edited in cooperation with E. Gutiérrez Rodríguez and S. Costa ([“Decolonizing European sociology. Transdisciplinary approaches. Farnham: Ashgate, 2010](#)). My reading is that he suggests a rethinking of all geographical labels that we come up with when we describe the world system, because they emerged together with (or were the results of) concrete geopolitical strategies – military, imperial. But his decolonization critique leaves us with no terms at all. Is there a way out of this dilemma?

MB: The problem lies in the fact that the very gesture of classification (whether of humans, the animal realm, or regions) as well as the

emergence of modern European cartography were intimately linked to Western Europe's colonial and imperial expansion. So it is true that there are no “innocent” geographical labels, as well as no neutral ones. But not having neutral terms does not equal having no terms at all. As explained before, as long as we historicize and contextualize our concepts and our geographical labels, they are (imperfect) analytical tools that further the debate and locate our knowledge production within a particular cultural geopolitical space. Understanding that the European name for the “West Indies”, which has now become a general geographical reference, comes from Columbus’ wrong belief that he had reached India and that the name “Latin Ameri-

ca” was linked to France's geopolitical project of promoting *latinité* in the Americas in the eighteenth century against the growing influence of the United States does not leave us with no terms. It leaves us with precise, but unsatisfactory terms on the one hand, and with the need and duty to excavate, discuss and hone more precise ones, on the other.

Manuela Boatcă is author of [of Global Inequalities Beyond Occidentalism](#), Ashgate Publishing, 2015.

The interview was conducted by Tobias Schwarz.