

The background image is a historical black and white photograph showing a group of men in suits and military uniforms. In the foreground, a man in a suit is looking towards the right. Behind him, several men in military uniforms are visible. In the background, there is a large classical building with columns and a statue on top. A white line-art graphic, resembling a stylized waveform or a map outline, is overlaid on the top half of the image.

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Western Civilization: An American Problem

Western Civilization, or „the West,“ is the concept that most organically binds the United States to Europe. In the United States, this concept was used to organize university teaching starting around time of World War I. It then permeated American intellectual life and American foreign policy, reaching its apex at the time West Germany was founded. From 1945 to the mid-1960s, an ideal of the West encouraged cooperation among American and European elites, cooperation that was as much cultural as political. The Vietnam War alienated both younger Americans and Europeans from the ideal of the West. Then, in the 1980s, American academia removed the West from university teaching. In the 1980s and 1990s, the United States turned inward or it turned to the global economy, while Europe committed itself to the project of East-West and North-South European integration. The Euro-American West remains rhetorically important, as the Ukraine crisis has demonstrated, but it has lost much of its cultural and political substance. This talk will document these transitions and offer an explanation for the relative brevity of the West’s career in American intellectual and political life.

Date: Tuesday, June 24th, 2014, 16:00

Location: Lecture Hall Physics, Hermann-Herder-Str. 3, Freiburg

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