

East

East is one of the cardinal points. But its usage in everyday language goes well beyond this simple, short definition. It does in fact prove to be a point that is rather more cardinal than the others. As the sun rises to the east, it has had importance in numerous symbolic universes at different times in history, from the Empire of the Rising Sun to sun worship in ancient Egypt. It is in relation to the sun that we take our bearings. The east is a fundamental direction in feng shui. The east has a particular religious meaning in all of Europe and the Mediterranean basin, since for religions of the Book it indicates the direction of Jerusalem or Mecca. It conditions the orientation of churches in European Christendom, in which the choir is always to the east. In middle and upper «latitudes», the dominant atmospheric circulation is from west to east, which has consequences for the orientation of houses, and for the distribution of rainfall over a mountain range or a continent, with the eastern façades or slopes receiving less rainfall than the western sides.

-Place: while a place cannot, in the absolute, be considered as being "in the east" the phrase is nevertheless widely used to refer to geographical ensembles on all scales. The reference is of course, within a system of relative localisation, to areas to the east of a place considered as being central.

-Boundaries: The eastern boundaries of an eastern localisation are sometime quite clear (Eastern France, East Africa) and sometime indeterminate (what are the boundaries of the eastern Paris or London areas?).

-Political acceptations: in the specific setting of the Cold War, the word East was widely used, and the East-West contrast was part of international relations for decades. From Moscow and Washington, Europe was the central focus, leading very soon to the widespread use of "Eastern Bloc" in everyday language in western Europe and the USA to refer to the European countries belonging to the Soviet Bloc. This contrast was embodied clearly in Berlin, on the «scale» of a single city, where the division between a liberal West and a Communist East was played out. However there was not so much reference to the "Western Bloc" as to "Western Europe". The "Eastern" or "Soviet" Bloc foundered and has been replaced by Central and Eastern Europe, which are terms that are less reminiscent of the East-West confrontation. We have also seen the arrival of the equivocal phrase "countries from the former Soviet Union".

The East has many particular connotations in the Russian sphere. It has the symbolic role of the pioneer front, mirroring the Western frontier in the USA, and this has been so since the 16th century. The Vladimir Highway leading out of Moscow to the east has been known since the Soviet period as the "Enthusiasts' highway", referring to those prepared to travel far to the east to develop the vast spaces between the Urals and the Pacific. It is also, seen from central Russia, the symbolic direction of deportation and relegation, from the time of the Tsars into the 20th century. The geographical reality of the Soviet concentration camp system was in fact rather more complex, and the Goulag was not so far to the east as was imagined (Brunet 1981), but the most emblematic and most dreaded camps were indeed those in the distant East (in particular Kolyma described by V. Chalamov).

In the Middle East conflicts, the 1948 war led to the formation of an Arab East Jerusalem that was apart from the rest of the city, falling successively under Jordanian and then Israeli control. The east of the city is the scene of tensions and violent confrontation, against a backdrop of major religious issues, since it is there that the Wailing Wall, Temple Mount, and the Holy Sepulchre are located.

East and Orient: While in English "the Orient" is mainly literary and poetic, but has roughly the same meaning as "the East" (referring either to the cardinal point (the east) or to the world to the east in European representations (the East)), in French (Est and Orient) the two meanings are distinct. The Orient has aroused curiosity and fascination for centuries. This has generated specific discipline, Orientalism (analysed by E. Said), and it can concern spaces ranging from Morocco to Far-East Asia. The Orient carries strong connotations in the Western world, more linked to representations of otherness of a complex and unfathomable world than to a rationally defined geographical space.

Bibliographie

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