

## **The Uncertain Oikoumene. Contested Borders and Imagined Civilizations**

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### **Interpreting Clashes and the Rise of Culturalism**

The end of the Soviet Union inaugurated a period of border redefinition, universalization of particularism and the sole presence of the United States as a world economic and military hyper-power. Ethnic violence in the Balkans and civil wars presented in culture and religion language have held the place of 20<sup>th</sup> Century conflicts formulated in political ideology language. Historical formations such as Islam have become the center of a civilization conflict tale.

In a comment on the book *The Decadence of the West* by Oswald Spengler, a European best-seller in the '20s of the past century, Marcel Mauss, comments that the morphology Spengler's civilization, is "literary." Moral classifications of civilizations and nations in tough and soft, in organics and their philosophy of history only have high value to the great public It is a return without any precision to overcome formulae of "cultural fates," of historical missions, "there was all the jargon of sociology and pseudo-social science of the parties. "Indeed the sociologist finds more ideas and more facts in Guizot" (Mauss II: 278).

If Mauss in the name of sociology and ethnography treats with so much severity Spengler's suggestive and obscure work, the reaction by specialists in view of *The Clash of Civilizations* by Huntington, a book full of errors but that has been successful in all communication media, were predictable. However, paradoxically just like Spengler's cultural relativism, has stimulated historical investigation in the non-European world—in Latin America, for example, in the work of Gilberto Freyre, Fernando Ortiz and the Arab world (Rodinson: 80) an aggressively pro-West conservative study such as Huntington has opened the debate on civilizations in Iran, China, Japan and several international forums. The same Harvard professor openly acknowledges that his book

is not intended to be a work of social science: it is instead meant to be an interpretation of the evolution of global politics after the cold war, it aspires to present a framework, a paradigm, for viewing global politics that will be meaningful to scholars and useful to policy makers. (Huntington: 14.)

In many senses it is worrisome since the social science tradition to read Huntington because it is possible to see in the shape of a stereotype, some of the major problems of categories such as identity and culture that have become commonplace in social sciences and cultural studies.

In the first part of his book Huntington discusses several civilization theories in analytical terms tending toward a plural vision of civilizations and equating culture with civi-

lization, thus keeping a distance from the German interpretation

(...) a civilization is a cultural entity, outside Germany. Nineteenth century German thinkers drew a sharp distinction between civilization, which involved mechanics, technology and material factors, and culture, which involved values, ideals and the higher intellectual artistic moral qualities of a society. This distinction has persisted in German thought but has not been accepted elsewhere. (Huntington: 41.)

When simplifying the stresses and shades of the relation between civilization and culture, Huntington facilitates its political use and opens the way to the journalistic success of his book. Civilizations are transformed into what anthropologists (Fredrik Barth, Abner Cohen) call corporate groups, tribal segments operating in worldwide scale. In addition to religious ties that he considered central, the language of blood and parentage finds wide space in his analysis.

“Civilizations are the ultimate human tribes and the clash of civilizations is tribal conflict on a global scale” (Huntington: 207). This tribal idea, essentialist of civilizing units, leads him to a crude cultural pessimism. “Relations between groups from different civilizations however will be almost never close, usually cool, and often hostile” (Huntington: 207).

Curiously, the American professor succeeds in gathering in a single study the worst traditions of the civilization concept, the cultural particularism of German tradition deprived of their esthetical and spiritual connotations, the stat-

ism of French and Anglo-Saxon tradition as well as the feeling of superiority of national traditions themselves in the clash with the other barbarian or made barbarous. All at once, qualifying rationalism of modernity is present in an outline of contrasts, crude analogies and friend/enemy oppositions. Religion, Culture, and Civilization are categories that are employed without sufficient reflexive distance.

The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power. (Huntington: 217.)

It is the *Muslim Rage* inspired in Bernard Lewis's well-known article, commented as follows by John Esposito (1992: 173-174).

It reinforces stereotypes of Islamic revivalism and of Muslims and predisposes the reader to view the relationship of Islam to the West in terms of race, violence, hatred and irrationality.

Characteristically, on the other side of the mirror, are the Islamic neo-fundamentalists claiming to be the representatives of "Islam" in its clash with the West (Kepel, 2000; Roy, 2003).

On the other hand, Huntington assimilates the technical and scientific knowledge of Western civilization, particularly of the United States and considers that

To preserve Western civilization in the face of declining Western power, it is in the interest of the United States and European coun-

tries (...) to maintain Western technological and military superiority over other civilizations. (Huntington, 1996: 310.)

But the quick acceptance of Huntington's ideas and main theses of the book can be considered as symptoms of a growing global uncertainty that has its main dimensions in a crisis of the national States and a growing border redefinition process produced by the impact of communications and technology impact. A feeling of an increase in risk thresholds and anarchy leading to the formation of new imaginary communities capable of providing a holistic meaning of integration and collective identity. Civilization is one of these communities and the civilization clash the imaginary risk rate that one runs when safe borders are trespassed.

But let us see a little more about the invention process of those collective in the troubled origins of modernity.

## **Inventing Civilizations**

The notion of civilization formulated in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century in France and England in the Scottish Enlightenment (Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith, David Hume, etc.) contained since its beginnings the tensions and ambiguities that allowed singling it out, its pluralization and also its self-criticism.

Adam Ferguson, a member of Scottish illuminists, employed the notion of a sociological sense for the first time in 1762 *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (Edinburgh, 1767) and afterwards in his lectures published in 1792. In this text, one can perceive already in the origins of the notion, the

distinction between the material dimension of civilization as a time in the history of a people and civilization as value.

The success of commercial arts, divided into parts requires a certain order to be preserved by those who practice them, and implies a certain security of the person and property to which we give the name of civilization. Although this distinction both in the nature of the thing and deviation of the word belongs rather to the effects of law and political establishment on the forms of society than to any state merely of lucrative possession of wealth. (*Retrospect of Lectures*, cit. en Benveniste: 218.)

Adam Smith writing a few years later employs the notion without the need for clarifications “The invention of fire arms, an invention which at first sight appears to be so pernicious is certainly favorable to the permanency and to the extensions of civilization” (215).

In the case of Ferguson and Adam Smith, the idea of civilization is associated with a certain view of history in terms of progressive stages. It is a type of approach that we will find again in Condorcet and Engels, a sense of social evolution that is identified with a modernization project.

In the French invention that is ascribed to the Marquis of Mirabeau, a very important physiocrat thinker and polygraph of his time and almost forgotten today, the state of civilization is a time of a rise and fall process of societies that they all go through, according to the precedents of the old world. In his 1757 text *L'Ami des Hommes*, Mirabeau keeps considering religion as the first factor of civilization.

These writers, it is worthwhile remembering, are writing in context that the crisis of European conscience in the

classical expression of Paul Hazard. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, there is already a clear idea of Europe as a family of nations that does not preclude international clashes. It refers back to a cultural space and even a political power balance system resulting from European wars. The European conscience crisis restores the idea of a cultural unit. The production of the press has created a European literary and journalistic space with its extensions to the colonial world.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century authors one records, a tension between civilizations as made by the state and as an ideal value, from which according to the point of view one can always dialectically distinguish the barbarian aspects of civilization.

The thought of the Lights as employed in Condorcet's *Esquisse* (1794) condemns colonial conquest and chiefly the proselytism of overseas Christian missions. Traditionally reserved epithets to barbarians ("bloodthirsty," "tyrannical," etc.) are applied to missionaries, "superstition" etc. But a new task appears educating, emancipating, civilizing. The sacredness of civilization takes the relief of the sacredness of religion" (Starobinski: 22). We have here the replacement of religious values with enlightenment values within a salvation project.

The difference of other authors such as Edward Gibbon who considers that the introduction of European civilizing arts would the condition of other peoples to enter civilization without necessarily modifying their traditions. Condorcet reasons in the expansion direction of civilized values.

Making a leap to the present and towards imperial policy: In its National Security Strategy published in September 2002, it is reasoned that the purpose of American foreign policy is “to extend the benefits of freedom across the globe.” “We will actively work” the document declares

to bring the hope of democracy, development, free markets and free trade to every corner of the world (...). America must stand firmly for the nonnegotiable demands of human dignity, the rule of law; limits on the absolute power of the State; free speech; freedom of worship; equal justice; respect for women; religious and ethnic tolerance; and respect for private property.

Similar speeches are previously found in Winston Churchill. As senator J. William Fullbright observed in 1968.

The British called in the white man’s burden; the French called it their ‘civilizing missions’ Nineteenth Century Americans called it ‘manifest destiny.’ It is now being called the responsibilities of power. (Ferguson: 23.)

This civilizing discourse present in contemporary American political discourse, which is summarized in advertising American values, a set of values having the right to impose itself on other populations by violence in last instance, may be considered in the extreme a political theology (Derrida, 2003). Somewhat secular religion it is a reification of civilizing ideology already denounced by the same Spengler:

Expansionism is a conviction, something demoniac and intense that dominates, puts at its service and exhausts whatever remains of

humankind in the world city. (...) Imperialism (...) is civilization in pure state. (Spengler: 534.)

From Ferguson to Spengler, passing through Condorcet and Guizot what we have in relation to the idea of culture and civilization is the process of intellecction reinvention of modernity in formation. The intellectual reconstruction process results from the collapse of the religious universe that occurred in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century and that can be summarized in the dialectic between Faith and Doubt inaugurated by Pascal. Indeed, as a result of the collapse of European intellectual conscience Christian cosmology will be found between an uncertain, insecure universe, with progressive absence of meaning. A rational classification and reification effort of the order, production or invention of abstract categories that allow redefining man's position in the cosmos. Reinhard Koselleck has shown that

older, Christian attitudes toward historical time (salvational expectation) were combined with newer, secular practices rational prediction to give us our modern idea of progress. The new conceptions of progress and simultaneity did not replace the older conceptions but were transformations of them. (...) It is fascinating to see how, in the nineteenth century, protestant conceptions of guilt and atonement, of the “few elect,” of God’s grace were transformed in conceptions of progress, of grace extended to all inhabitants of the world, of the “white man’s burden.” (Van der Veer, 2001: 25.)

The people concept is employed for the first time by Rousseau in his *Confessions* written between 1765 and 1770. The civilization notion is employed in French for the

first time in 1760 by the Marquis of Mirabeau and by Adam Ferguson in English more or less at the same time. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, it is going to be a prevailing notion of usage in Europe from where it will be exported by the intellectual elites in the colonial and semi-colonial world until entering the 19<sup>th</sup> Century until merging with the idea of modernization and progress.

But the kind of expressing the idea of civilization considerably varies from one European Nation to the other and among several authors.

Ferguson as we have already seen emphasizes the virtue of the personal and property safety. From original barbarity to man's current condition in society a gradual universal change was discovered, a slow education and finishing process in one word, constant progress in the order in which civility, static conclusion, was not enough to express and that it was not more than calling civilization to define together the meaning of continuity (213).

Edward Tylor, the English anthropologist indistinctly employs both notions:

culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.

In this manner, keeping the dual purpose of notions as synonymous, allows accommodating distinct degrees of expansion in a progressive scale starting with primitive societ-

ies and projecting itself over Italians, Chine, until climaxing with Victorian imperial England.

In England, particularly in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the place of religion in the definition of civilization varied in relation to France. The moral state such as defined by Gladstone, has a strong evangelical character. Missionarism is part of the duties and propagation means of the Empire and Anglican religion in this case is confused with the national and imperial project Culture becomes the central category of the distinction.

Religion says: The Kingdom of God is within you and culture is like manner, places human projection in its internal condition, in the growth and predominance of our humanity proper, as a distinguished from our rivalry (...). Not a having and a resting, but a growing and a becoming; is the character of perfection as culture conceives it, and here too it coincides with religion. (Mathew Arnold, cit. by Van der Veer, 2001: 40.)

The French in turn enter modern times with a powerfully constituted National State capable of overcoming religious wars and unifying the country. France incorporates the Roman imaginary. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, a national awareness is consolidated in France and to express its objectives, a universal formula appears, civilization. Napoleon disseminates the ideal of French civilization during the Egypt campaign. In his case, this expression possesses the considerable advantage of expressing the spirit of the French Revolution without directly alluding to his political objectives.

A few decades later the formulation of a philosophy of history that will have as leitmotif the idea of civilization,

will correspond to Guizot the theorist of bourgeois liberalism in his *Histoire de la Civilisation en Europe* (1828) and his *Histoire de la Civilisation en France* (1830). The philosophy of history underlying these books is that humanity's history is the history of civilization; this coincides with the development of freedom. Ernst Robert Curtius (1930) comments that the vocabulary ("pontificat de la civilisation," Michelet and other authors) reveals the influence of religious passions, which nourish the enthusiasm aroused by the idea of civilization (Curtius: 42). Summing up, to French intellectual tradition is a religious truth that links the national to the universal.

Analyzing sociological bases and state power structures behind these processes Norbert Elias writes that the French concept of civilization reflects the specific social fortunes of the French bourgeoisie to exactly the same degree that the concept of culture reflects the German. The concept of civilization is first like *Kultur*, an instrument of middle-class circles. "Above all the middle classes intelligentzia in the internal social conflict. With the rise of the bourgeoisie, it too comes to epitomize the nation, to express the national self-image" (Elias: 49).

In Germany, separated in the political and political plan, culture differentiates it from France does not seem provided with a political dimension if not mainly esthetic content. In Herder, we find a conception at the same time communal, the nearness of the people—particularly the peasantry—linguistic and artistic of culture whose core is found in the

*Geist*, a principle of merging with the world. It is a conception of culture, opposed to the State somewhat in principle outer, oriented towards the territory and the roots, hostile to the artificiality of urban world. It is the nostalgia and a wish for integration, overcoming the separation of the nature impregnated with religious components. Novalis in full German romanticism draws up the idea of a Christian Europe. A way of resuming the new ripped modern subjectivity with collective solidarities.

In his installation conference in the College de France, *De la Part des Peuples Sémitiques dans l'Histoire de la Civilisation* (21 février 1862) which is sustained in the impetuous development of philosophic and historic science a, Ernest Renan presents a large picture of plurality based on a linguistic/cultural criterion.

With displaced religious passion of a former priest converted to scientific positivism Ernest Renan examines the contribution from Semitic peoples to human history. The East, chiefly the Semitic East writes Renan, has not known a midpoint between complete “anarchy of nomad Arabs and bloodthirsty despotism and its compensation.” The idea of the public house, public welfare, is absent in these peoples. Complete freedom and such as “Anglo-Saxon” peoples have accomplished and large State organization such as the Roman Empire and France have created were equally foreign. Theocracy, anarchy and despotism are the summary of Semite policy.

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in the context of European colonial expansion toward the East and Africa,

Renan writes that “the essential condition for European civilization to expand is the destruction of the Semitic thing par excellence, the destruction of Islam’s theocratic power, by consequence the destruction of Islam” that Renan admits may have had a beneficial civilizing action in Africa in Southern Sahara.

Renan’s conclusion is that the future belongs to Europe. “Europe will conquer the world and will extend its religion that is the right, freedom, respect for men, the belief of possessing something divine as provided by humanity” (Renan, 1862).

The idea of different civilizations evolving in different regions is now theorized in a philosophical manner that influences the time of European nationalist claims. Each civilization possesses an essential, singular core. Orientalists tip over toward the origins to find purer manners. This orientation is found accentuated by human sciences that the 19<sup>th</sup> Century cultivates with predilection: the history of religions and compared linguistics (Rodinson, 1980; Said, 1978). This is what we have seen in Renan ‘s case and is also present in Huntington’s theory of civilization. The history of religions originated from the struggle of pluralist and relativist bourgeois liberalism against the Christian ideological monopoly dedicates its efforts to the study of eastern religions as past and present alternatives to Christianity. It is understood that the fundamental knot of each civilization is found in the dominion of religion. Civilization units conceived in this manner pass by in parallel lines or crossing each other

from different origins. This approach reaches the 20<sup>th</sup> Century with Max Weber's comparative studies. The values of each civilization are thought about in Weber en in parallel lines, not in terms of historical interactions.

Clearly European colonial and imperial experience and soon American is present in the definition of identities that we call culture or civilization as well as the competition among several national state formations for splitting the world. Indeed an essential phase of the civilizing process was concluded at exactly the time when the consciousness of civilization, the consciousness of the superiority of their own behavior and its embodiments, its science, technology or art began to spread over whole nations of the West (Elias: 50).

But, the notions of civilization and culture are at the same time symbolic orientation processes in replacement or transfiguration of progressive collapse of the religious universe among European leading classes that soon extended to the world. A secularization process that means the search for new fundaments and in which modernity laboriously redefines its system of beliefs. Nation, People, Culture, civilization are new key symbols of this new semantic universe that will be transformed into central metaphors of new secular religions.

## **Global Modernity and the Uncertain Oikoumene**

Modernity has been defined as a movement, a creating destruction in which Schumpeter defines capitalism (Toussaint, 1992). This vertiginous movement has experienced an accelerated situation in the last decades not only in terms

of speed, but also of scale. Contrasted with incessant flows of images, people and capitals that circulate through the most varied networks, the world cultural mosaic presented by Huntington consisting of large cultural sets but the least coinciding with territories, curiously appears static and sedentary. Twenty million Hindus live outside India today, of which more than 1 million in the United Sates, 90% of the inhabitants living in the Arab Emirates are foreign, there are 11 and a half million Muslims in Europe, 7.5% of French population and 4.5% of the German. The West is in the “East” and Islam is on the other side of mobile borders if not in the hear of western capitals. After having writing in *The Clash of Civilizations* that the cultural difference between Americans and Mexicans is smaller than between Turks and Europeans, considering these populations in relation to foreignness, he dedicated a book to the danger represented by Latin Diaspora to American national identity (Huntington, 2004). Rather what seems to be happening is that the world is being “resegmented, refounded and reformatted in the space of a few decades. It was clearly, some sort of revolution. But what sort what it was that was turned around, and in which directions was and still is imperfectly understood,” as writes American anthropologist Clifford Geertz. We are found in the midst of a global modernity, which crosses national spaces and cultural areas, a worldwide technical-scientific civilization in the words of Alfred Weber and Robert Merton (Weber, 1922; Merton, 1932). An unequally distributed oikoumene, with power centers that implode on cultural areas and peripheral national spaces that in turn fall

on certain circumstances on metropolitan spaces. Local conflicts in progress, may be defined as struggles for appropriating this modernity, in which States, social movements and local cultures participate. At the same time, many of these movements resort to local cultural repertoires to face challenges, sometimes felt as global ecumene characterized by complexity and uncertainty. The principle of nationality established in Europe in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century has given place to a world formed by 191 national States arising from several imperial dissolutions as of the second half of the past century. Precisely this conference is taking place in one of these new national States harassed by several conflicts of border definition and incorporation of populations into the polity. Networks of historical interactions more than fixed cultural identities is what we should pay attention to if we want to understand cultural reinventions and conflicts in progress. From the ethical point of view the great challenge of our time is the recognition of the contingency of our condition opening us to the recognition of the foreigner as another without merely purporting to eliminate him or assimilate him to our “culture” or “religion” considered as homogenous and everlasting sets, closed on themselves.

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