

A Modern View of the West

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Abstract

There are numerous views on how the West should be defined. In addition, there are just as many views on how one should define civilization. Just what is it that we refer to when we use the phrase 'Western Civilization'? This is much more than an exercise in semantics. It is an important question especially if we accept the current war against terrorism as a manifestation of a clash of civilizations. It will be claimed here that there are some major policy implications which flow from the discussion of what the West is.

Introduction

This paper will proceed as follows. First, we will be concerned with a brief review of the literature pertaining to the West and civilization. It should be noted that one of our tasks is to develop coherent political concepts related to the subject. As such, we desire to develop clear notions of some practical use to the political actor. Consequently, it is assumed that the terms 'the West' and its cognates, and 'civilization' are not empty terms. This is assumed in order to focus our attention to the task at hand. Next, some problems will be raised with regard to the various definitions of the above terms. Finally, an attempt will be made to remedy such problems and to draw definitive conclusions about the topic at hand.

Civilization and the West: Framing the Problem

Perhaps as good a start as any is the discussion found in Jackson.¹ The project of Jackson's work includes a demonstration of how the international community's notion of sovereignty has changed dramatically in recent history. The very idea of colonialism was justified in large part upon the grounds that colonized peoples were unfit or unprepared to rule themselves. The two World Wars eventually brought an end to colonialism and ushered in a new standard of sovereignty. Sovereignty came to be recognized according to whether the state in question had demanded recognition of its sovereign status. In other words, nation-state recognition no longer depended upon the viability or legitimacy of the government in question. The question of whether a common group of people were able to govern themselves was foregone in the post-War period due to the vociferous claims of self-determination made by indigenous peoples throughout the world.² In turn, self-determination has been recognized as a universal right of all peoples.

Jackson points out the faults of this relatively new conception of sovereignty. He, for example, observes how this new right of self-determination can be abused by dictatorial regimes that do not uphold human rights within their territory, yet use this alleged right to maintain their power.

It is in this context that the topic of civilization is discussed. Jackson sees a functional role for civilization. It is to provide a "shared discourse and framework of communication."³ According to Jackson, civilization should be viewed as a standard within international relations. Civilization is defined both in terms of modernization that is the level of technological development within a society, and the recognition of human rights. Both modernization and human rights recognition

¹ Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Third World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

² This represents a shift from the positive sovereignty game of the past where sovereignty was recognized according to the rules of international law to sovereignty based on a natural right.

³ Jackson, 1990, p. 141.

are necessary conditions for civilization. As Jackson⁴ states, “Development [modernization] without the rule of law is barbarism.” The benefits of such a definition are that it can be used by the international community to determine when to use the carrot and when to use the stick. The international community should condemn those states, which fail this standard intentionally and support those that are working toward meeting this standard. Much of what Jackson says about civilization is based upon Collingwood’s⁵ analysis.

Before we briefly review what Collingwood says about civilization it is important to realize the context in which his work rests. The New Leviathan was intended to be a response to the Second World War and the concomitant threat to European civilization. Collingwood’s concern was consequently a practical one. His aim is to guide the European mind to an understanding of what civilization is and its underlying causes. Also, Collingwood’s work reflects an attempt to realize a union of philosophy with history. It is the historian not the philosopher who engages in reflective thought. For Collingwood, metaphysics is a historical science that examines human presuppositions.⁶

In this light we can better appreciate Collingwood’s attempt at defining what the term ‘civilization’ means. His analysis is thorough and an attempt to summarize it in its entirety here would lead us too far a field. What is significant is that civilization is identified as the result of a process. It is realized through a transformation of the barbarous original state of mankind to progressively higher levels of development. Although complete civilization should be the goal of every society, it is in fact unreachable. This is because the condition of total civility is an ideal. Just as the condition of total barbarity is an ideal. Every society represents a mixture of barbarity and civility with some societies possessing more of the latter

⁴ 1990, p. 142.

⁵ The New Leviathan: Or Man, Society, Civilization and Barbarism (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942/1992).

⁶ For more on Collingwood’s view on the relationship between history and philosophy, see David Boucher’s introduction to The New Leviathan.

than the former and vice versa. No society can completely overcome barbarism, but clearly some societies can make great strides toward such an end.

What is more, Collingwood seems to identify civilization more in terms of human rights recognition than in terms of technological achievement. For example, he writes, “The ideal of civil behaviour in one’s dealings with one’s fellowmen, therefore, is the ideal of refraining from the use of force towards them.”⁷ This strongly implies that the grounds of civilization rest in a recognition of the natural, inalienable rights that all men possess. However, Collingwood does recognize that part of civilization consists in a refinement in the quality of life within society. He expresses this by stating that the members of a society should be civil toward nature as well as toward man. Despite this, it is evident that for Collingwood civilization is more strongly tied to human rights recognition than it is to the level of modernization within society.

Gerrit W. Gong⁸ is yet another able commentator upon the topic of a standard of civilization. His concern is with the way civilization has been defined throughout history. Not only does he observe a shift in the way civilization has been defined analogous to that found in Jackson’s analysis of sovereignty. He also documents how the old standard of civilization, the civilization based on international law, has given way to a new standard. This new standard is one that is based on a universal right of self-determination, which is a right above all others. This new standard is represented by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and is embodied by the United Nations. These developments have profound effects within international politics. First, and by no means trivially, it has forced a substantial change in the terms used in our political discourse. For example, the term civilization has become an anachronism. We no longer speak in terms of a standard of civilization, but we speak of standards of human rights instead. Secondly, Gong demonstrates how these changes have affected the entrance of developing nations into the

⁷ Collingwood, 1942/1992, p. 292.

⁸ The Standard of ‘Civilization’ in International Society (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

international community. Developing nations may be recognized internationally even though they have not demonstrated an ability for self-government. Further, once this recognition has taken place, it is hard to undo. A politically immature society may take advantage of the new, diluted standard of civilization, if it could be called that, to maintain their status in the international community. There are two further points Gong makes, which are worthy of comment.

Gong recognizes the fact that the old standard of civilization placed a premium on human rights recognition over the level of technological development within a society. On this he is in agreement with Jackson and Collingwood. He does see a parallel between the old standard of civilization and the modern standard of human rights. He writes, "They share a common concern for fundamental rights of life, liberty, property, and individual dignity, though in various forms depending on one's politics."⁹ There are two significant differences between the two, however. First is the major role accorded to the right to self-determination within the standard of human rights. Second, and more importantly, the current standard of civilization, however cloaked it is in talk of rights and duties, is committed to a particular model of development.

The prescription as set forth for societies by organizations such as the U.N. is reflective of the premium placed on human rights. Often access to investment capital depends upon holding free elections or enforcing the rule of law. This policy is supported by the claim that the only way to initiate private investment in a particular society of any substance is to demonstrate to potential investors that there are institutions in place to protect their investments. Modernization is thus held out as a carrot, a reward for those regimes, which act benevolently towards its citizens. There are significant problems with this model, which developing countries are supposed to follow. Huntington sets the stage for an examination of such problems.

⁹ Gong, 1984, p. 91.

The aim behind Huntington's work¹⁰ is to identify the next major geopolitical clash to follow the end of the Cold War. It is important to note that in light of this overarching goal, Huntington speaks of civilization in different terms than the theorists we have discussed above. First, civilization is considered on a grand scale. In other words, it is used not so much in a context of international relations among particular states or regimes. Consequently, the pursuit is most decidedly not to uncover the standard of civilization. Rather, civilization is defined in terms of cultural norms or beliefs that unite aggregates of societies/states/and or regimes. This is civilization with a capital 'C'.

The upshot of this is that there are many Civilizations, which inhabit the world. Examples include, Islamic Civilization and Western Civilization. Such Civilizations are separated by their respective cultural values. Western Civilization is distinguished from others on the basis of its commitment to Western values. These include liberty, equality, the rule of law, democracy, the separation of church and state, and human rights to mention just a few. So, it is quite obvious that the standard of civilization spoken of earlier is an inherently Western one. Two things need to be emphasized with regard to Huntington's discussion.

First of all, it should be noted that Huntington draws a sharp distinction between modernization and Westernization. It could very well be the case that a regime and/or society seeks to modernize without adopting Western values. A prime example of this is Japan, the citizens of which enjoy a thoroughly modern society without subscribing entirely to Western values. Huntington further makes some very insightful comments upon the conflict between modernization and fundamentalism. He writes:

[T]he processes of economic modernization and social change throughout the world are separating people from longstanding

¹⁰ "The Clash of Civilizations?" reprinted in Salim Rashid, Ed., "The Clash of Civilizations?" Asian Responses (Bangladesh: The University Press Limited, 1997).

local identities. They also weaken the nation state as a source of identity. In much of the world religion has moved to fill this gap, often in the form of movements that are labeled “fundamentalist.”¹¹

In addition, it is the cultural values peculiar to different Civilizations which are possible causes of conflict. The claim is not that such differences in values represent the only cause of conflict. However, the conflicts they bring about are especially bloody, exceptionally long, and appear to be intractable. According to Huntington, he is describing how the vacuum left in the wake of the Cold War is going to be filled. The geopolitical battle lines will be drawn according to the division between Western and non-Western values. Moreover, these battle lines are deeply rooted in history. In a sense, they have long since been drawn.

A Defense of Modernization

Given our now broad perspective on the issues presented with regard to civilization and the West, we can set ourselves upon a different task. We can ask a practical question. Namely, what criteria should be used to determine what regimes are to receive U.S. political and financial support? This assumes that there are indeed regimes in the world that are worthy of U.S. backing. It also implies that we recognize the fact that those developing countries that seek to enter into Western Civilization must undergo a long and challenging process. Becoming a Western state is not something that is accomplished overnight. This is the way it should be, however.

We can begin by noticing a major flaw within what I refer to as the Collingwood model of development. There are significant problems to giving preference to human rights recognition over modernization. This preference strongly implies that the road map to becoming a civilized nation-state is through human rights recognition first and modernization second. However, if we apply Huntington’s

¹¹ Rashid (Ed.), 1997, pp. 4-5.

analysis to this model, a number of problematic questions arise. First, why would a society abandon its traditional values, which operate not according to what are normally included under the heading of human rights such as the rule of law? Indeed, if there is any truth at all in Huntington's analysis, then we should expect that non-Western Civilizations are just as intransigent and insistent about the correctness of their values as we are of our own. Second, there is a problem with this prescription if a particular society is inhabited by groups who have made a point of denying other groups their right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Such groups do not recognize the existence of universal, inalienable human rights. Enforcing the rule of law in such a scenario will not only be unsuccessful in stopping the groups in question, but it will be even less effective if the regime seeks an entrance into the West.

The point to be made here is that we should not expect societies that adhere to different values than our own to simply embrace Western values because we say that they should. Rather, the benefits of recognizing universal human rights must be demonstrated. In my view, this demonstration should begin with technological development or modernization. Building roads, telecommunication networks, and television stations has the potential to bring humanity closer to one another. It can help warring parties to realize that their respective constituencies have the same dreams for a better material life for themselves, and generally share the same circumstances. It gives people the ability to recognize that they are a part of a larger whole, the global community.

Further, I want to suggest that we use the issue of whether a regime is committed to modernizing society as the principal criterion to determine which regimes receive U.S. support. This is because modernization best embodies the spirit of human progress and altruism, that is essential to the West, than does the recognition of human rights. This is based on the recognition of the fact that human rights recognition is often greeted with incentives from the international community. These incentives can come in the form of diplomatic praise or World

Bank loans. Such incentives, for example, are held out to those regimes, which hold free and fair elections. The political leaders of developing countries are aware of these incentives and consequently can make half-hearted attempts to reap the benefits of such incentives. While the placation of the international community's desire to see human rights upheld is of short-term concern for developing regimes, consider the long-term goal of modernization. The latter is meant to benefit generations of citizens. This is especially true if we contemplate the challenges of modernizing a society. Modernization comes at a tremendous cost to society as a whole. In the short-term, the idea of change most probably will be met with resistance from those who see no need to change. The change within the society most probably will have a greater negative impact on a certain class within that society. Usually, the peasants bear the brunt of modernization, although all levels within society undoubtedly feel the short-term pain. As a result a whole group of people may be displaced from their land and/or jobs. And this all for the sake of a better life for future generations. An excellent example of such a phenomenon is in Russia in its move from Communism to Capitalism. In addition, there is no more compelling example that illustrates how important it is for the U.S. to support modernization at all costs.

This allows us to make a finer point with respect to Huntington's analysis. Namely, the frontline of the clash of Civilizations is drawn between modernization and fundamentalism. Iraq provides a rather dramatic illustration of this in the time period immediately preceding the Iran-Iraq War.¹² The Iraqi regime during this period leading up to the war, lead by Saddam Hussein, sought to modernize the southern region of Iraq by building roads and television stations. The secular model of development that Iraq pursued brought it into conflict with fundamentalist forces within the south itself and with its fundamentalist neighbor, Iran. The point to be underscored is that the frontline of the clash of Civilizations is more dynamic than Huntington hints at. So, Iraq, favored by the West while it displayed modernizing

¹² The politics of Iraq during this period are well documented in Pelletiere (1992).

aims, and fought Iran, can fall precipitously out of favor in a very short period of time. And, this is the way it should be.

The case of Iraq allows us to make a simple distinction with regard to modernization. Quite simply, there is bad modernization and good modernization. The difference is that found between a nuclear reactor and a nuclear power plant. This is a difference that the U.S. has readily employed in its diplomatic relations with North Korea. Regimes that pursue the former are putting their citizens squarely in harms way. For this, they deserve to be ostracized by the international community.

It should be clear that emphasis is placed here on technology, the practical use of scientific principles, rather than on science itself. This is what separates the theory of modernization expressed here from the nineteenth-century standard of modernity. Gong¹³ writes that the main tenet of this nineteenth-century standard was that “the laws of science, being universal, undergirded a rational cosmology which would bring the ‘blessings of civilization’ to all.” We can say here that there is no peculiar magic in the scientific principles from which technology draws. That is to say that it is not scientific principles that will transform societies and cause them to renounce their traditional values in order to adopt Western ones. In addition, there is no inherent goodness in fiber optic cables or in the asphalt in newly built roads. Rather, and this is the main point, goodness rests in the hearts of those who seek a better material existence for those they govern. It also has a firmer place in those that aim to extend this promise of a better life to future generations. This, I claim, is the essence of the West.

It should also be clear that technology is not offered as a silver bullet. Rather, the claim is that the presence of modernization efforts within a society could indicate best what the true intentions of the regime in question are. Of course, modernization could be used for purposes that are other than good. Perhaps more

¹³ 1984, p. 92.

problematically, it can be used as political cover. For example, a regime that embarks upon one or several development projects may seek to undo some human rights advances, such as free elections. Such a regime may cite the importance of the projects and the need to keep the same administration to oversee them to their completion. This is especially likely if the endeavors have caused major changes within society. From a policy perspective, the question is which value, democracy or modernization, should one support?

My inclination is indicated in the view I have expressed above. I would support modernization with certain conditions. Namely, such conditions would include judgments made with respect to the level of corruption of the regime, its history as an honest broker, the importance of the projects in helping the local economy, etc. The scenario notices the fact that there is often a trade-off between human rights recognition and modernization that is played out in developing countries. The U.S. has generally supported modernizing regimes financially and militarily and has tried to advance human rights recognition through diplomatic channels.¹⁴ This draws the criticism from human rights groups that the U.S. is committed to supporting unsavory regimes. I think that the U.S. foreign policy is generally the correct one. This is especially true if we consider the fact that the battle line between modernization and fundamentalism is where the current war against terror is being fought.

To conclude, we have considered many conceptions on what the West and what civilizations are. We have seen how these different conceptions include different models of the development of the state. Ultimately, we placed more emphasis on modernization than human rights recognition in our definition of the West. This represents a break from Collingwood's definition of civilization.

¹⁴ A good example of this is U.S. support of Uzbekistan, which came on the heels of the invasion of Afghanistan after 9/11. A more controversial example is found in recent U.S. policy toward China.

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