Civilization

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Abstract It is necessary to distinguish between civilization as a sociocultural complex on the one hand, and civilization as a process, on the other. This is illustrated by invoking the work of Norbert Elias. For Elias, the civilizing process consisted in the way in which what were, historically, constraints on human behaviour became internalized, and is a process that takes different forms in different cultures. On the other hand, at the centre of civilization as sociocultural complex was the question concerning the attributes of a human being, crystallizing as clear-cut criteria for adjudging the degree to which the people occupying a particular territory were or were not civilized. The conception of civilization as a complex has become contemporary via Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' thesis, and is indicative of the way in which the very word 'civilization' now carries with it a considerable ideological baggage. This article argues that the ideological use of civilization and the wider discourse of the war against terror involves the fusion, or conflation, of civilization as process and civilization as complex.

Keywords complex, culture, Elias, Huntington, Islam, modernity, process

Process vs Complex

The concept and idea of civilization is replete with problems of meaning and interpretation. In the first place, it is necessary to distinguish between civilization as a sociocultural complex – more loosely, a bounded way of life – on the one hand, and civilization as a process, on the other. As will be seen, this distinction is, in itself, by no means clearcut. This can be immediately illustrated by invoking the work of Norbert Elias (1978, 1982). While Elias concentrated very explicitly on the processual meaning of the term, his work has some overlap with the notion of civilization as a complex. As will be seen in due course, the overriding difficulty with Elias's work inheres in his apparent failure to recognize that what came by the end of the 19th century to be called *the standard* of civilization was a relatively autonomous, transnational norm (Gong, 1984; Robertson, 1992: 114–28). In other words, over and beyond Elias's *analytic* conception of the civilizing process there had developed a consciously known and recognized, prescriptive denotation of civilization.

For Elias, the civilizing process consisted in the way in which what had been, historically, constraints on human behaviour became internalized. This process makes the conduct of social affairs less a matter of external control and more a matter of individual conduct. Essentially this means that over the long haul there is, in Elias's perspective, a trend toward what we would in everyday terms call civilized behaviour, notwithstanding periodic deviations from this trend. There has been considerable debate as to the degree to which this process has taken different forms in different sociocultural contexts (Mennell, 1992: 227–50). Of particular relevance here is the principle of civility (Cuddihy, 1987; Robertson, 1992: 115–28).

Elias's work was undoubtedly influenced by Sigmund Freud, who had talked in roughly the same terms, but much less elaborately. Freud's ideas in this regard were expressed succinctly in his lateish book, C*ivilization and its Discontents* (1930).

In contrast to the processual conception of civilization, the focus upon civilization as a

sociocultural complex, one which has tended to be territorially bounded, is – at least, in an explicit sense – much older and probably much more familiar, in spite of the great prominence of Elias over the past 50 years or so in some Western academic circles. Having said this, a strong caveat must be stated, in that general ideas about barbarians, savages and so on had permeated much of Western history writing for a number of centuries. At the centre of much of this was the question concerning the attributes of a human being. Different societies have imagined different solutions to this, though the conceptualization of the other, the stranger, has varied from culture to culture, ranging from complete non-recognition to the recognition of a common belonging. Much of Elias's writing on the civilizing process had been published in German at the beginning of the most severe Nazi domination of Germany, which people have sometimes found to be rather ironic, but nonetheless courageous. Clearly, the Nazi conception of the superiority of the Aryan 'race' demonstrates the obvious link between Elias's work and much older and diffuse talk of racial superiority and inferiority.

Civilization as a Complex

It is necessary to explore the idea of civilization as a complex, as an 'entity' (Kavolis, 1986, 1987; Nelson, 1981) before coming more directly to its processual connotations, repeating that, in announcing this procedure, it will be essential later to bring the problems of the relationship between the two semantic tendencies into sharper focus. The conception of civilization as a complex with particular attention to its cultural content and associated practices has been brought into very sharp, and politicized, contemporary terms by the publication of Samuel Huntington's polemical book, *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996). This book was a much extended version of an article previously published in the American journal, *Foreign Affairs* (Huntington, 1993). The fact that it was published in such a context, devoted to world politics and foreign policy, notably US American foreign policy, is indicative of the way in which the very word 'civilization' now carries with it a considerable ideological and perspectival baggage (Crockatt, 2006; Harris, 2004; Toynbee, 1948). Moreover, it is more than worth saying at this point that for many living in the oft-called Third World, 'civilization' has for quite some time been considered as an aspect of the Western imperial gaze (Mignollo, 1998), related to the subjectivizing project of the 'mission civilisatrice'. The word civilization has been so inflated in political terms that much of its analytic purchase has been lost. However, this should by no means be taken as a rejection of the term, particularly since the more analytical use of this concept has never completely succumbed to ideological pressure and has in recent years been the subject of growing analytic concern, Huntington notwithstanding. It is worth noting that for quite some time there has been an American conception that the USA represents a particularly advanced form of civilization. This idea has been especially prominent during the last 15 years or so among American Republicans (cf. Beard and Beard, 1930).

At this point, it may be helpful to turn to the contested meaning of the term civilization in a more historical perspective, thereby assisting us in understanding – at least, skeletally – its spatiotemporal location in the late 20th century and the early 21st century. With the proclaimed end of the Cold War in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Huntington, among many others, considered that the Western world, and the USA in particular, would think it necessary to 'find' another Other (cf. Fukuyama, 1992). In other words, opposition and resistance to the seeming threat of the old Soviet Union – more accurately, the Russian empire and, indeed, civilization – had become the basis of quite a large degree of the solidarity that existed within and among Western nations. In addition, Huntington proclaimed that Islam, in particular, could and probably would come to be a threat to the Western world (at least in the Northern hemisphere), regardless of its Otherness. Particularly since the early 1970s, the oil boom in the Middle East, coupled with the resurgence of the more 'radical' types of Islam, had already emerged in opposition to both Soviet communism and the 'democratic capitalism' of the West. So, even without the collapse of Soviet communism, Islam would almost certainly have become a formidable factor in the world. Indeed, in its extreme caliphate form, some Muslims have envisaged that Islam could and should become the apex of a globewide

Islamic civilization. In this regard it should be said that one of the contributing factors to the demise of the Soviet Union was, in fact, its unsuccessful venture into (Islamic) Afghanistan in the late 1970s and the 1980s, as well as the increasing signs of resistance to Soviet domination in the southern Islamic republics of the USSR. Here it should be kept carefully in mind that over the long historical haul, Islam had represented much more of a challenge to the Western 'way of life' than had the relatively brief period of Russian, Marxist-Leninist expansionism from the time of the Russian revolutions of 1917 until the declining years of the 20th century.

While the notion of civilization, both as a verb and as a noun, had been around for many centuries, notably in what we now call the West, extensive use of the term did not really begin until the later part of the 19th century. This occurred in close connection with the beginnings of academic anthropology in two overlapping branches: the comparative and the evolutionary. It should be quickly added, however, that it had significant, but highly complex, continuities with ideas propagated during the European Enlightenment of the second half of the 18th century, in spite of presentations of the negative side of the Enlightenment in Western and Central Europe.

As the imperial ventures of the most powerful Western countries gained momentum and reached their peak with the so-called scramble for Africa and the crowning of Queen Victoria as the empress of India at the end of the century, so the view in political circles grew that areas of imperial expansion were uncivilized in terms of the ways of life of the 'natives'. This process resulted in the crystallization of rather clear-cut ideas as to the criteria for adjudging the degree to which the people occupying a particular territory were or were not civilized. Quite frequently the term 'barbarian' was used as a synonym for the latter. This development impinged a great deal on the work of religious missionaries, many of whom saw their task as being the civilization (note the calculative processual use of the term here) of the indigenous, 'primitive' inhabitants of colonized or to-be-colonized areas.

It should also be said that a rough distinction has to be made between colonial expansion in the Northern hemisphere and areas south of the equator. The notion of civilization was bound up in certain parts of the world – notably East Asia – with the principle of extraterritoriality. This refers to the ways in which imperial nations attempted to enforce the laws of the intrusive nation within certain regions of the threatened territories. Such was the case particularly on the eastern seaboard of China and in the central parts of Japan towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries.

Stated all too briefly, it can be said that in the areas of colonial expansion, or at least intrusion, there was much more a perceived promise of becoming civilized than in other areas. In this regard we should mention such regions as India, China and other parts of the East and, to some degree, South East Asia. But, it should be said that much of what we now call Latin America was an exception to this rule, in that by the end of the 19th century a considerable number of countries in South and Central America (including Mexico) had by virtue of a long-standing and dominating Spanish or Portuguese presence been largely 'civilized'. Nevertheless, the Spanish or Portuguese prevailed over the indigenous peoples, notwithstanding varying degrees of inter-marriage between conquerors and 'natives', this being particularly true of Portuguese Brazil. Overall, this can be characterized as a period during which the Western imperial powers – including to some extent the USA – attempted not so much to conquer new territory, but to open up new markets for their products and gain access to valuable and 'exotic' raw materials, such as silk and other fabrics as well as spices, tea and coffee.

The challenge posed to these areas was resisted with various degrees of success during the late 19th and the early 20th centuries. Indeed, the idea grew in some of these countries that if they could become 'civilized' they would not be so much at the mercy of such nation-states as Britain, France, Germany, the USA and others. This meant that among political and intellectual elites in the threatened areas it was not at all uncommon for them to declare that they should calculatedly engage in projects of civilization. Notwithstanding a superficial similarity with Elias's conception of civilization as a process, it is not fully consonant with his

perspective, for Elias tended to neglect the reflexive and purposeful, not to say strategic, significance of what should be called *projects* of civilization. This latter phenomenon is to be seen vividly in the case of Japan, where the aspiration to become a civilized nation-state grew rapidly in the Meiji period (1868–1912). Indeed the very notion of a bounded territory becoming a nation-state was in itself taken to be a hallmark of civilization. Moreover, the Japanese conception of civilization included such ideas as that a truly civilized and modern nation should have its own empire, in imitation of the most advanced European powers. This aspiration grew steadily in the first half of the 20th century and, in the case of Japan, its leaders saw it as their mission to protect the entirety of Asian civilization from Western intrusion by creating its own racially conceived empire. Even in the case of a relatively 'advanced' and rapidly expanding nation/empire such as Russia, the concern to be recognized as civilized was closely associated with the ambition to become politically, economically and militarily powerful. Indeed, Lenin proclaimed, soon after the successful Russian revolution of 1917, that in order to be accepted as a major power Russia/the Soviet Union had to be recognized as being civilized, notwithstanding the fact that, in the entitive sense of the word, Russia had been for many centuries at the very centre of a distinctive civilization!

This enables us to see with particular clarity why it was that the Standard of Civilization (Gong, 1984) came to be a feature of international law during the period in question. The fact of the matter is that whereas there has been a lot of resistance to the ideological term civilization in recent decades among the peoples of less developed societies, the aspiration to become civilized was conspicuous in those same regions at the beginning of the 20th century. This is why, in spite of many attempts to do otherwise, the concept of civilization cannot, when all is said and done, be entirely divorced from the theme of imperialism. Nor can it be divorced from the themes of race and racism. This partly explains why it was that the explicit, if a little reluctant, strategy to become civilized was to be found much more in the Northern hemisphere than in the South.

For it was in the latter part of the world that 'true natives' or 'savages' were to be found. Indeed, there was considerable debate among Western intellectuals as to whether the black or red peoples of Africa and the Americas should be regarded as human at all. In fact, the debate about the distinction between human and non-human is at the heart of more normative traditional discussions of civilization. In any case, the French novelist-philosopher Arthur de Gobineau argued in his 'An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races' (1853–55[1970]) that civilization in the normative sense basically revolved around the question of racial superiority and inferiority, claiming that this was the only way in which we could explain why European societies had constituted the site of the production of a superior way of life. At the heart of Gobineau's ideas on race was the belief that some races were destined to remain incapable of mixing sociably with others, while superior races had a proclivity to produce such peoples (Harris, 2004: 76–77). It is noteworthy that Gobineau considered that this theorem could explain the rise and fall of civilizations.

One much-overlooked aspect of the notion that the world could be divided essentialistically into superiors and inferiors is that this was a rather strong feature of Enlightenment thought, most strikingly in the work of none other than Immanuel Kant. In fact there was a considerable amount of what we would now call, very pejoratively, racism among Enlightenment thinkers, including such late-Enlightenment figures as Hegel. This was not simply implicit, it was quite open and unembarrassed, this being well exampled by Kant's statement that 'This fellow was quite black . . . a clear proof that what he said was stupid' (Eze, 1997: 38–64). Kant's pupil, Johann Herder, was one of the few exceptions among Enlightenment thinkers to resist the general consensus that the world could and should be divided in terms of different racial characteristics (Eze, 1997: 65–78), although Herder was seemingly guilty of what some would nowadays call Orientalism. Gobineau's claim that the incapacity for some races to mix sociably with others was a sign of their racial inferiority facilitates our returning directly to the theme of the rise and fall of civilizations, thus implying that there was a racial foundation of cosmopolitanism.

Another Enlightenment thinker, Edward Gibbon, must also be mentioned here. Gibbon authored the highly influential book *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. He attributed the formal introduction of Christianity into the empire as having been the primary cause of its downfall. This theme of the negative effects of religion was a rather common feature of Enlightenment thinking, although this tendency has been greatly exaggerated, as Cassirer (1944) cogently argued. Moreover, it should be said, Cassirer contributed considerably to the study of world history, with considerable attention to the concept of civilizations.

Perhaps the most well-known example of the revival of interest in the rise and fall of civilizations was Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1965[1996]). This book was partly based upon a very pessimistic and what we would now call a highly negative view of the rise of European modernity, particularly with regard to changes wrought in the ways of life to be seen in such cities as London, Paris, Vienna and Berlin. In this respect Spengler's pessimism and negativism rested a lot on the new forms of life detected in a 'tragic' way by such sociologists as Georg Simmel, who had a direct, if unintended, influence on Spengler (Hughes, 1952). Spengler was also much affected by what he perceived to be the increasing power and global impact of such 'inferior' areas of the world as East Asia, most notably to be seen in the meteoric rise of Japan from an isolated, more or less feudal, society in the mid-19th century to a rapidly changing, 'modernizing' one by the beginning of the second decade of the 20th century. One should say here that the problem of the rise and fall of civilizations came into even sharper focus when the relationship between Spengler's work and that of the English historian Arnold Toynbee is explored. The crucial difference between the two writers was that whereas the German, Spengler, paid little or no attention to the relationships between different civilizations – indeed, he considered this as a sign of civilizational degeneration – Toynbee, in direct criticism of Spengler, insisted on regarding world history in terms of the *mixing* of different ideas and different peoples. Indeed it is worth emphasizing that it has been rather common for German historians and social theorists to neglect mixing – specifically the issue of inter-civilizational relationships and encounters – in comparison with their British and American counterparts. This is to be evidenced in the recent past in the rather neglected work of Benjamin Nelson (e.g. Nelson, 1981), with respect to what he called the new civilizational analysis. Nelson was central to the reinvigoration of the Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations, along with Vytautas Kavolis (some of whose work is discussed in Robertson, 1992: 129–45). Whereas Nelson was particularly concerned to produce an enriched version of Max Weber's brilliant and highly influential work on the differences between Western and Eastern civilizations, Kavolis was more interested in mapping the uniqueness and singularity of extant civilizational complexes. In fact he identified the continuing vitality of what he called the five living civilizations: the East Asian, the South East Asian Buddhist, the Indian, the Islamic and the Western (Huntington, 1996).

In fact the inattention to civilizational encounters and cross-fertilization among civilizational complexes is something of a hallmark of the German approach to the study of civilization and civilizations. This may well be why German historiography and social and cultural theory have, for the most part, been resistant to the thematization of the idea of globalization. There is, in any case, something of a tension between the civilizational perspective and the globalization standpoint – although this is certainly not necessary (Robertson, 1992: 129–37; Barkawi, 2006). Indeed, increasingly the study of processes of globalization in long-historical perspective involves emphasis upon the centrality of civilization analysis (Sanderson, 1995; cf. Brotton, 2002; Goody, 1996; Gunn, 2003; Hobson, 2004; Jardine and Brotton, 2000; Mozaffari, 2002).

The Future of the Concept of Civilization

Clearly, the so-called war against terror has brought the notion of civilization in the sense of a *condition* into ever-sharper focus. This development has in fact involved the fusion, or conflation, of civilization as process and civilization as complex. Now we are witnesses to a fateful, apocalyptic explosion of ideas concerning the future of humankind (Jurgensmeyer, 2003). This development is not at all incompatible with the globalization perspective (Robertson, 1992;

Osterhammel and Petersson, 2003). Indeed, the present phase in the overall globalization process may well be described as the human-conditional one. This certainly does not, by any stretch of the imagination, involve any kind of utopianism. Quite the contrary. For the so-called war against terror turns primarily on the axis of what has been described as the West-against-the-rest (Scruton, 2002; cf. Ferguson, 2005); more specifically and controversially the war is centred upon the clash between 'global America' and caliphate Islam. This clash involves nothing less than wars for the right to 'define' the human condition (Arendt, 1959) and its *raison d'être*.

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Civilizationalism

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Civilizationalism is the ultimate level of expression of ethnic nationalism. One of the most powerfully dangerous articulations emerging in the historical scene is civilizationalism. It is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that, in the 1990s, the most influential academic essay on earth was Samuel Huntington's (1993) 'The Clash of Civilizations?'. For better or worse, the US right wing imperialist stand taken by Huntington has drawn responses from all over the place; essays, conferences, books, policy consultations, etc. have been generated within (rather than outside) the Huntington problematic. His simple and easy cutting up of the globe into seven or eight spaces has in effect constructed a new civilizational identification forcing everyone on earth to take one on. The Huntington proposal to the US state power, at the end of the essay, seeks to exploit conflicts so as to maintain world hegemony, which will no doubt, if state machines are bought into the Huntington problematic (which seems to be the case in practice), generate global racism, nationalism and regionalism, not to mention a reactionary form of civilizationalism. Unfortunately, the US foreign policy after the September 11th incident has indeed echoed Huntington's proposal, treating the Islamic civilization as the target enemy.

In sharp contrast to the colonizer's strategic mapping, the most articulate form of civilizationalism formulated by intellectuals in the (ex)colonized societies comes from the Delhi-based, prominent social psychologist Ashis Nandy. In *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self* (1994), Nandy argues that nationalism is a by-product of western colonialism, and hence illegitimate. According to his reading of Tagore and Gandhi, if Indian nationalism works on the level of the nation-state, civilizationalism operates in the larger historical space of Hindu civilization, which functions to resist being trapped into the colonial system of the nation-state. One has to be reminded that Nandy's formulation was grounded in his earlier seminal work, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (1983), which was a self-conscious theoretical undertaking in the tradition of Fanon and Memmi. For him, unlike the Huntington aggression, the importance of Indian civilization is for the colonized subject to hold onto their own traditions in order to create new traditions. Tradition, and its reinterpretation, then becomes the empowering ground on which the long lasting cultural impacts of western colonialism can be combated, because the West has deeply penetrated not just our social structure but also our culture and mind.

Although the differences between the offensive colonialist Huntington and the postcolonial populist Nandy are clear enough, the civilizationalist interpellation has to be carefully cautioned. The Huntington–Nandy clash on civilization discloses a wider structure of feeling, a cultural imaginary, not limited to the Indian or the US case. It perhaps projects an emerging realization in the so-called postcolonial context. That is, for the (ex)colonized, nationalism is no longer the panacea, once magnified into global capitalism; the hierarchical structure of the nation-state more or less continues the established order of colonialism,