Politics in a World of Civilizations: Long-term Perspectives on Relations between Peoples

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Introduction

It is a truism to say that the discipline of international relations (IR) is primarily concerned with relations between states. That is not to say that IR is only concerned with states, but by definition, relations between states is what the discipline is largely about. One of the criticisms often leveled at IR as a discipline, and often by historians, is that it lacks sufficient historical perspective. This is a generalization that is obviously not true of all members of the discipline. Yet the criticism cannot be summarily dismissed. While plenty of IR textbooks will tell you that Thucydides (c. 460–400 BCE) is the founding father of realism, this is more about the study of historians and their relevance to the discipline than the study of history. [1] [#N1] Thinkers such as Machiavelli (1469–1527) and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) are often treated similarly by the discipline. Perhaps one of the reasons for this shortcoming is that the international states system only emerged following the Peace of Westphalia of 1648, hence IR has its historical limits.

IR's own critics have argued that the discipline's dominant modes of thought privilege 'ahistorical structural theory and abstract, economic models of rationality over historical interpretation and socially embedded conceptions of human agency' (Reus-Smit 2002: 120). The challenge from within the discipline, inspired by historical sociology, sought to rediscover history and resurrect a concept of the state that would produce 'an historically informed "fit between societies, states and geopolitics"' (Reus-Smit 2002: 120). Yet even when calling for a greater recognition of historical processes, IR still imposes certain limits upon itself by insisting that states and state-making remain central to the discipline. Clearly, states are very important actors in world affairs, and since the end of colonialism, states cover and account for much of the Earth's population. But states are not the only collectives to which most of us belong.

As Donald Puchala (1997: 5) notes in reflecting on Adda Bozeman's *Politics & Culture in International History,* 'the strutting and fretting of states, and their heroes, through countless conflicts over several millennia accomplished little more than to intermittently reconstruct political geography, desecrate a sizeable proportion of humankind's artistic and architectural heritage, waste wealth, and extinguish hundreds of millions of lives'. Going a step further, Puchala (1997: 5) adds that 'the history of relations among states—be they city-, imperial-, medieval-, westphalian-, modern-, super- or nation-states—has been rather redundant, typically unpleasant and more often than not devoid of much meaning in the course of human cultural evolution'. He insists that in contrast to relations between states, 'the history of relations among *peoples* has been of much broader human consequence' (Puchala 1997: 5; emphasis in original).

As Bozeman (2010: xv) sought to explain earlier, the 'interplay … of politics and culture has intensified throughout the world', and this has been taking place 'on the plane of international relations as well as on that of intrastate social existence and governance'. She 'concluded that the territorially bounded, law-based

Western-type state is no longer [if it ever was by this reading] the central principle in the actual conduct of international relations, and it should therefore not be treated as the lead norm in the academic universe' (Bozeman 2010: xl). The kinds of relations that both Bozeman and Puchala were referring to are relations between what are commonly known as civilizations. Bozeman (2010: 5-6; emphasis in original) had 'concluded early on that political systems are grounded in cultures, that present day inter*national* relations are therefore by definition inter*cultural* relations'. This in turn led her to argue 'that scholarly analysts and policymakers … would be more successful in their respective callings if they would examine the cultural infrastructures of the nations and political systems they are dealing with'.

In addition to being citizens of states, then, most of us also belong to a range of varying collectives that are all part and parcel of our identity; families, clubs, communities, nations: the list goes on. While many of these collectives are relatively small and intimate, most of us are also thought to belong to much larger collectives commonly referred to as civilizations (Arlt and Daviau 2009; Holton and Nasson 2009). That said, throughout much of civilized human history, it is unlikely that many people have actually thought in terms of civilizational identity, civilizational loyalty or civilizational belonging; our daily circumstances simply do not promote such thinking, we tend to move in far smaller circles and operate on a much lower level of affiliation. Moreover, it would be a relatively rare circumstance in which people thought of their own personal security and wellbeing in relation to or as being immediately dependent upon the security and welfare of the civilization (or civilizations) to which they might belong. But that is not to suggest that such circumstances do not eventuate from time to time (Fagan 2004, 2008; Ahmed 2010; Bowden 2011).

If IR is to concern itself more with the study of longer-term processes, then an increasing concern with the study of civilizations or civilizing processes and the nature of relations between what Puchala termed peoples might be an appropriate way of going about this. The celebrated historian, Arnold Toynbee, featured on the cover of *Time* magazine on March 17, 1947, insisted that 'the intelligible unit of historical study is neither a nation state nor (at the other end of the scale) mankind as a whole but a certain grouping of humanity which we have called a society' or civilization (Toynbee 1946: 11). Taking a long view of history and its impact on the contemporary world, Toynbee argued that the study of nations, states, or even epochs or periods of time are inclined to lead one to ill-considered or incomplete conclusions (Toynbee, 1934-1961). Prior to the mid-twentieth century, it was largely historians and anthropologists that led the way in making detailed studies of civilizations, their respective civilizing processes, and the nature of relations between civilizations.

Sociology also took up the cause when Pitrim Sorokin issued the challenge: 'whether sociology wants it or not, if it aspires to grow as a science, it has to enter an intensive study of vast, empirical, sociocultural "continents" called "civilizations", vast cultural and social systems and supersystems. Their intensive investigation is already on today's agenda of history, and sociology is equipped as well as any other science for such a study' (Sorokin 1966: 492). Sociology and Sorokin (1957) took to the task. As had another prominent sociologist with an enduring interest in long-term processes, Norbert Elias, who in *The Civilizing Process* ([1939] 2000) provided a detailed sociological account of the advance of civilization and the process of state formation in Europe. IR has been a little more reluctant to take up the challenge with greater enthusiasm than the infrequent dabbling that has generally been the case to date. Yet it too is well-equipped for the study, and it would be mutually beneficial to both the discipline of IR and the extant study of civilizations and civilizing process, including on the global level, if it did so with more relish (e.g. Linklater 2010).

What is a Civilization?

The concept of civilization is a rather complex idea and ideal that I have explored at length elsewhere (Bowden 2004; 2009a; 2009b), particularly the normative demands of civilization. While they are not readily separated or distinguished, the normative ideal of civilization is accompanied by what is described as the ethnographic or anthropological account of civilization; sometimes termed civilization as 'fact'. More generally, civilization refers to both a civilizing process and a destination. It describes the process of a social collective becoming civilized, or progressing from a state of nature, savagery or barbarism to a state of civilization. Civilization is used to describe a state of human society marked by significant urbanization, social and professional stratification, the luxury of leisure time and corresponding advancements in arts and sciences. The capacity for reasonably complex socio-political organization and self-government according to prevailing standards has long been thought of as a central requirement of civilization; that is, a standard of civilization (see Gong 1984).

As Raymond Williams (1983: 59; emphasis in original) notes, there 'was a critical moment when civilization was used in the plural'. This happened later with the term 'civilization than with *cultures*; its first clear use is in French ([Pierre-Simon] Ballanche [1776–1847]) in 1819. It is preceded in English by implicit uses to refer to an earlier civilization, but it is not common anywhere until the 1860s'. The French historian, Fernand Braudel (1993: 6-7; emphasis in original), similarly noted that 'in about 1819 the word "civilization", hitherto singular, began to be used in the plural'. After that time 'it "tended to assume a new *and quite different* meaning: i.e., that characteristics common to the collective life of a period or a group". Thus one might speak of the civilization of fifth-century Athens or French civilization in the century of Louis XIV'.

Another French historian, Lucien Febvre, in referring to the plural use of the term, notes that 'civilization simply refers to all the features that can be observed in the collective life of one human group, embracing their material, intellectual, moral and political life and, there is unfortunately no other word for it, their social life. It has been suggested', he adds, 'that this should be called the "ethnographical" conception of civilization … It is above all a conception which refers to a group' (Febvre 1973: 220). The French sociologists, Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss (1971: 811), similarly note that 'a civilization constitutes a kind of moral milieu encompassing a certain number of nations, each national culture being only a particular form of the whole'. For Braudel (1993: 6), it can be said 'that a civilization (or a culture) is the sum total of its cultural assets, that its geographical area is its cultural domain, that its history is cultural history, and that what one civilization transmits to another is a cultural legacy or a case of cultural borrowing, whether material or intellectual'.

Braudel goes on to assert that the study of civilizations involves all of the social sciences, which for him includes history, geography, sociology, economics and collective psychology. He writes of civilizations as geographical areas, noting that 'civilizations, vast or otherwise, can always be located on a map'. He adds that 'an essential part of their character depends on the constraints or advantages of their geographical situation' (Braudel 1993: 9). In referring to civilizations as societies, Braudel posits that 'there can be no civilizations without the societies that support them and inspire their tensions and their progress' (Braudel 1993: 15). However, he notes that 'we should not simply confuse societies with civilizations … in terms of the time-scale, civilization implies and embraces much longer periods than any given social phenomenon' (Braudel 1993: 18). In respect to civilizations as economies, Braudel points out that 'every society, every civilization depends on economic, technological, biological and demographic circumstances'. As others have noted in regard to various collectives, 'material and biological conditions always help determine the destiny of civilizations' (Braudel 1993: 18).

Finally, Braudel refers to civilizations as ways of thought, noting that 'in every period, a certain view of the world, a collective mentality, dominates the whole mass of society. Dictating a society's attitudes, guiding its choices, confirming its prejudices and directing its actions, this is very much a fact of civilization'. Moreover, 'far more than the accidents or the historical and social circumstances of a period, it derives from the distant

past, from ancient beliefs, fears and anxieties which are almost unconscious—an immense contamination whose germs are lost to memory but transmitted from generation to generation' (Braudel 1993: 22). In short, Braudel is arguing that the collective unconscious is an essential characteristic of any civilization.

Puchala (1997: 8) summarises this general line of thinking noting that 'most analysts agree … that civilizations are particular modes of human society centred in urban-dwelling, and based upon economic resources and divisions of labour that (1) make urban-dwelling feasible and sustainable, and (2) liberate elites from the imperatives of producing daily subsistence and thereby establish contexts for intellectually and artistically creative activities'. Furthermore, 'civilizations exist in space, inasmuch as they have flourished in identifiable places and typically have had geographic centres and roughly traceable cultural frontiers'. They 'also exist in time, though usually in very extended time'. Significantly, Puchala (1997: 12-13) insists that 'civilizations are not political entities'; rather 'they have political organisations within them which serve both to protect their cultures from alien penetration and to project them outward when motivation and opportunity converge'. More recently, Peter Katzenstein (2010b) has similarly protested that civilizations are not united and unitary political actors (Katzenstein 2010b).

Matthew Melko (1969: 1) noted some time ago that the schemas of Spengler, Toynbee and Sorokin have been the subject of considerable questioning: 'Do these civilizations, ranging over thousands of miles and years, really have meaningful internal relationships? Should anyone attempt to characterize them as if they were historical personalities?' He writes that the answers to these questions were 'overwhelmingly negative', in large part because the 'civilizations of Spengler and Toynbee behaved themselves so beautifully because they were fictitious creations' (Melko, 1969: 1-2). Despite the rejection of the 'system builders' and their 'dogmatic periodization', he argues that the 'basic concepts have stood. Civilizations do have meaningful inner relationships, they can be characterized, they can be distinguished from one another' (Melko 1969: 2).

Not all analysts of civilization conform to the views more or less shared by Toynbee, Spengler, Braudel and others as outlined above. Inspired in part by an alternative reading of Toynbee, David Wilkinson (2003: 82-83) refers to 'civilizations as networks of relations'. More specifically, 'a civilization is a species of society, a network of relations of a distinct nature and pattern; and the network of external relations linking coexistent civilizations with each other is significantly more tenuous than the network of internal relations between the participants in any one of them'. In essence, 'civilizations so conceived are rich, multiple, multilevel embedded networks' (Wilkinson 2003: 83).

Elias is another who brings a rather different approach to the topic, concerning himself more with civilizing processes among particular peoples during significant time spans rather than the civilizations described above. In essence, *The Civilizing Process* is a highly detailed account of patterns and processes of individual refinement, social progress and political development in Europe from the late Middle Ages through to the twentieth century. The first volume, *The History of Manners*, is primarily concerned with changing social mores, ranging from the suppression of violence to sexual behavior to table manners, with court elites taking a leading role. The second volume, *State Formation and Civilization*, focuses on processes of state formation in Europe, including the role this played in the aforementioned development of the quintessentially modern citizens of the evolving states of Europe. Elias's program of studying civilizing processes instead of civilizations has been extended to the United States by Stephen Mennell (2007), while the same general principles have also been applied to the global level (Linklater 2010; 2011). While this body of work might not concern itself explicitly with civilizations, like other studies noted herein it too is concerned with exploring long-term historical processes in an endeavour to better understand both the past and the present.

The Study of Civilizations

Puchala (1997: 8) makes the point that much of the significant work explicitly dedicated to the comparative study of civilizations took place in the 1950s and '60s, which makes it 'rather old'. Even older is Giambattista Vico's *La Scienza Nuova* (or *The New Science*) of 1725, described as an early 'classic in the field' in which Vico describes civilization as developing through three distinct ages or stages in a recurring cyclical fashion. Another classic is Toynbee's *A Study of History*, in which he traces the origins and the rise and fall of what he considers to be the world's major civilizations. Toynbee (1946: 11) identified 'five such societies in existence to-day, together with sundry fossilized evidences of societies dead and gone'. The five civilizations thought to be alive and well are Western Christendom, Orthodox Christian, Islamic, Hindu and Far-Eastern. In all he initially identified nineteen distinct societies or civilizations: 'namely the Western, the Orthodox, the Iranic, the Arabic (these last two now being united in the Islamic), the Hindu, the Far eastern, the Hellenic, the Syriac, the Indic, the Sinic, the Minoan, the Sumeric, the Hittite, the Babylonic, the Egyptiac, the Andean, the Mexic, the Yucatec and the Mayan' (Toynbee 1946: 34). Toynbee adds, however, that 'it is probably desirable to divide the orthodox Christian Society into an Orthodox-Byzantine and Orthodox Russian Society, and the Far Eastern into a Chinese and a Korean-Japanese Society', raising the total number of civilizations to twenty-one (Toynbee 1946: 34).

As suggested, one of the key criticisms of Toynbee's scheme of history was where he drew the lines between civilizations, both geographically and temporally; the idea of using civilizations as the key unit of analysis did not attract much in the way of objections. For instance, as David Wilkinson (2010a: 168) notes, Carroll Quigley (1961) similarly identified sixteen different civilizations, only two of which continue to survive, Western, Orthodox and possibly Japanese. Philip Bagby (1959) distinguishes between distinct and secondary, dependent and peripheral civilizations to come up with an extensive list, of which only Western civilization and three peripheral civilizations survive, Eastern, Chinese and Indian. Rushton Coulborn (1959) likewise noted the resilience of five living civilizations, Chinese, Indian, Islamic, Byzantine and Western. Samuel Huntington (1996: 45-46) later indentified seven or eight living civilizations, Sinic, Japanese, Hindu, Islamic, Orthodox, Western, Latin American and possibly African.

The two possible objections to his schema that Toynbee identified were: 1) that the civilizations in question have so little in common that they are largely incomparable; and 2) that there are not twenty-one distinct civilizations but only one—Western civilization. In response to the first possible criticism, Toynbee asserts that, as 'intelligible fields of study', the twenty-one civilizations are one species within the genus and 'have one specific feature in common in the fact that they alone are in the process of civilization' (Toynbee 1946: 35). He further points out that 'it goes without saying that some civilizations go back to 'the dawn of history' because what we call history is the history of man in a 'civilized' society, but if by history we meant the whole period of man's life on Earth we should find that the period producing civilizations, far from being coeval with human history, covers only two per cent of it, one-fiftieth part of the lifetime of mankind'. That being the case, 'our civilizations may, then, be granted to be sufficiently contemporaneous with one another for our purpose' of comparative study (Toynbee 1946: 42).

The second possible criticism concerns the 'unity of civilization' and is based on the notion that 'Western Civilization has cast the net of its economic system all round the world', and that this 'economic unification' is accompanied by 'a political unification on the same basis which has gone almost as far', therefore we can conclude 'that all the states of the contemporary world form part of a single political system of Western origin' (Toynbee 1946: 36). This is an issue that IR scholars have had some things to say about and have debated (e.g. Bull and Watson 1984; Watson 1992; Suzuki 2009; Zarakol 2011). While the states-system might be of European or Western origins, it does not necessarily follow that its constituent parts are uniform, especially

culturally uniform. That is to say, the multitude of states that make up the international system of states are not economically, politically or culturally homogenous; some do have economic and political systems that originate in the West, many do not.

Toynbee (1946: 37) insisted that the unity of civilization thesis was a misconception based on the 'assumption that there is only one river of civilization, our own [Western], and that all others are either tributary to it or else lost in the desert sands'. This misconception is in turn based on three illusions: 'the egocentric illusion, the illusion of the "unchanging East", and the illusion of progress as movement that proceeds in a straight line' (Toynbee 1946: 37). The egocentric illusion is a sin that many peoples have been guilty of, not just Westerners. The illusion of the unchanging East 'is so obviously a popular illusion without foundation in serious study that a search for its causes has no great interest or importance'. Finally, the illusion of progress as linear is an example of the human tendency to over-simplify all manner of things, including the periodization of history 'in a single series end to end, like the sections of a bamboo' (Toynbee 1946: 37-38). This is a critique (and analogy) that a number of thinkers have taken up in discussions of the Enlightenment and its intellectual descendants in the West. For instance, John Gray (2007: 187-88) argues that 'the core Enlightenment project of a rational and universal civilization in which cultural difference has been politically marginalized informs Enlightenment philosophies of history at every point'. Moreover, 'distinctive cultural identities, along with their constitutive histories, were like streams, whose destiny was to flow irresistibly into the great ocean of universal humanity'.

A more recent concern about using civilizations as a unit of analysis is the objection that they are not the united and unitary actors that some people believe them to be; it is more helpful, rather, to think of most civilizations as internally pluralist with some measure of diversity (Katzenstein 2010a). Nevertheless, despite their internal diversity, civilizations as defined above have neatly lent themselves to the comparative process, for the very idea of a civilization is widely-accepted as referring to a large and complex socio-political collective with a common cultural identity, a shared history and an agreed system of values and beliefs (Durkheim and Mauss 1971; Toynbee 1972; Febvre 1973; Eckhardt 1992). As many of the scholars associated with the early days of the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations highlighted in their own work, the fact that any given civilization is recognized as a civilization because of shared values and common identifiable traits means that it is possible to outline a general account of that civilization (e.g. Melko 1969; Nelson 2012).

The fact that Braudel does not mention the political sciences when he asserts that the study of civilizations involves all of the social sciences is probably something of an oversight. As Puchala (1997: 10) highlights, 'fully developed civilizations have literary languages, scripts and literatures, styles of art and architecture, systems of philosophy, codes of morality, and higher religions affirmed in sacred texts and elaborated in formal theologies. They also have writers, artists, architects, philosophers, jurists and theologians. They have academics, universities, amphitheaters, theatres, galleries, museums and libraries. Civilizations have histories written by their own historians'. These are some of the important tools with which social and political scientists have to work. The discipline of International Relations seems particularly well-placed to make a valuable contribution in terms of analyzing and debating the nature of relations between civilizations or incongruent overlapping civilizing processes. As noted, IR is more than just about states; it also concerns itself with regions, non-state actors, international and intergovernmental organizations, and more. But these concerns are still in large part about their relations to states or the role of states within them. Nevertheless, on occasions, IR has also concerned itself with civilizations and civilizing processes (e.g. Bozeman [1960] 2010; Puchala 1997; Mozaffari 2002; Hall and Jackson 2007; Katzenstein 2010; Linklater 2011).

To date, the most significant intervention from political science or IR in the study of civilizations is Samuel Huntington's (1993a; 1998) provocative and influential 'clash of civilizations' thesis in which he argues that

the fundamental source of conflict in the post-Cold War world will be cultural. As he put it, the 'fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future'. Moreover, he asserts that the 'clash of civilizations will dominate global politics' (Huntington 1993a: 22). Violent conflict in the former Yugoslavia between 1991 and 2001 was offered as evidence in support of the clash thesis, as was conflict in the former Soviet Union, both within Russia and between Russia and its former satellite states. Even the vote that awarded Sydney the 2000 Olympic Games over Beijing was characterized as being won on the back of voting along civilizational lines (Huntington 1993b).

The terrorist attacks of 11 September, 2001 and the subsequent global war on terrorism, including the United States-led wars against insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, are said to add further legitimacy to the clash thesis (Goldstone 2002; Scruton 2002). This is especially the case when it comes to the nature of relations between the Western and Islamic worlds, with some observers seeing their history of relations as defined by a recurring or ongoing series of confrontations and clashes; from the eleventh-century Crusades (1095-1291) through to current events being played out in the Middle East and Afghanistan (Lewis 1993; 2003; cf. Saikal 2003; Cook 2008). This in turn has given rise to claims and arguments about how or why one side or the other might ultimately prevail in a potentially deadly competition between civilizations (Roberts 1985; Keegan 2001; Hanson 2002; cf. Morris 2010).

Underlying the clash of civilizations thesis is the assumption that different civilizations or cultural groups have significantly different ways of life underpinned by what are thought to be largely incompatible values and belief-systems. The publication of Huntington's clash thesis generated much interest, debate and criticism from a wide range of locations and perspectives (see Huntington et al. 2010). It has been dismissed on a variety of grounds, including that it is based on anecdotal evidence and misrepresents the actual state of world affairs, among others (O'Hagan 1995; Gray 1998; Connolly 1999; Shapiro 1999; Said 2001; Sen 2006). It has been argued that the real clash is going on within civilizations (Senghaas 2002). Some have sought to prove this by classifying and quantifying both wars of the past and post-Cold War conflicts, concluding that clashes within civilizations are as common, if not more so, than those between civilizations (Fox 2002; Tusicisny 2004; Henderson 2005). While these studies are important in that they tell us whether or not clashes and conflicts have taken place, they do not necessarily tell us anything about why they might have clashed. Is it because of fundamental differences and incompatible ways of life, or is it because of the myriad of other reasons that individuals, societies, states and civilizations sometimes clash?

Prior to Huntington reinvigorating the clash of civilizations thesis following the end of the Cold War, Lester B. Pearson, a Canadian scholar, diplomat and political leader, had earlier warned: 'We are now emerging into an age when different civilizations will have to learn to live side by side in peaceful interchange, learning from each other, studying each other's history and ideals and art and culture, mutually enriching each other's lives. The alternative, in this crowded little world, is misunderstanding, tension, clash, and catastrophe' (Pearson 1955: 83-4). With the end of the Cold War leading to the bitter breakup of the Soviet Union and the even more violent fragmentation of the former Yugoslavia, Huntington's account of the future of world politics forcefully sought to suggest that clashes and catastrophes rather than peaceful interchanges and mutual enrichment would likely be the order of the day.

Civilizational Relations

Speculation about clashing civilizations is directly responsible for the United Nations declaring 2001 the Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations, which evolved in 2005 into the ongoing United Nations Alliance of Civilizations initiative (United Nations 2006). In a similar vein, as the first president of a reunified Germany,

Roman Herzog (1999) took the thesis and its influence seriously enough to explicitly devise a strategy on how it might be prevented, as did Rabbi Jonathan Sachs (2003). Whether or not one agrees with the clash of civilizations thesis, or even the merits of civilizations as a unit of analysis, Huntington is not alone in focusing on the significance of values. Bagby (1959: 191) had earlier noted that 'ideas and values' are 'the most inclusive of cultural phenomena … they embrace aspects of the largest number of individual culture-traits and … it is these same ideas and values which serve to integrate and differentiate our civilizations'. Similarly, Bozeman (2010: 6) wrote that 'since thought can be assumed to precede action in all human societies, I concluded that inquiry and analysis should focus on mental and moral persuasions, be they religious, philosophical, or ideological; on basic values and norms within each society, and on the time-transcendent perceptions of the outer world'. Puchala (1997: 10) is also of the view that 'differences in cultural content are the most important differences among civilizations. When civilizations come together it is the artifacts, institutions, ideas, symbols, myths and rituals of their respective cultures, along with their meanings, that are bandied.'

Despite the influence and appeal of the clash of civilizations thesis in what are often described as troubled times, when taking a longer-term view of history, Braudel (1993: 8) makes the point that the 'history of civilizations, in fact, is the history of continual mutual borrowings over many centuries, despite which each civilization has kept its own original character'. Puchala (1997: 26) seems to agree, noting 'that the most frequent outcome of inter-civilizational encounters is inter-cultural borrowing that results in either the cultural enrichment of the borrower's civilization, or hybridization'. He argues that the primary reason for such an outcome is that the most common 'encounters tend to be between civilizations at different levels of maturity' (Puchala 1997: 26). For those less comfortable with using civilizations as units of analysis, these encounters are the equivalent of what Elias would describe as meetings between peoples or societies at different stages of the civilizing process. Puchala (1997: 27) goes on to assert that 'historically, the most consequential inter-civilizational encounters have resulted from imperial behavior'. He further argues that the role of associated empires 'has had a great deal to do with the fates of civilizations'. This, he contends, is 'not merely another way to 'bring the state back' into inter-civilizational relations'. Rather, what 'it suggests is that only certain states, and rather few of them, have had impacts on human cultural history' by protecting or extending 'the civilizations with which they were associated, or failed at this' (Puchala 1997: 28).

This line of argument does not necessarily rule out violent conflict between civilizations or large cultural collectives, for war, particularly wars of conquest, are one way that ideas and technologies are spread from group to group. The historian, William H. McNeill, has shown other ways in which such exchanges take place; in *The Rise of the West* (1992) he 'followed Toynbee and his predecessors by treating separate civilizations as the primary actors of world history' and sought to emphasize the 'sporadic changes in transportation and communication that spread crops, ideas, techniques, and diseases from place to place within a given civilization and across civilizational borders as well' (McNeill 2011: 44). Others have similarly sought to demonstrate how the transfer of 'resource portfolios' (ideas, institutions and technologies) from the East, particularly China and the Islamic world, have been important factors in the rise Europe after the so-called 'Dark Ages' (Hobson 2007; Nelson 2012).

Later, McNeill and his son Robert went further in *The Human Web* (2003) to demonstrate 'that human beings are, from earliest infancy, enmeshed in a web of communication that governs our consciousness and coordinates group behavior at every level'. Moreover, they argued that 'since communication can be achieved by gesture as well as by language, and since every human group has neighbors and encounters them at least occasionally, the web of human communication has always embraced the whole of humankind, even if geographical barriers might interdict all but trifling contacts across ocean barriers for centuries and even millennia'. They further point to the fact that, 'unlike Darwin's Galapagos finches, humans remained a single species even after their worldwide dispersion proves that contacts and intermingling of genes was never

interrupted for long' (McNeill 2011: 47). In their study, the McNeill's identify 'a plurality of webs, existing at different levels—in local village or hunting band, in individual cities embracing differentiated occupational subgroups, each with a variant web of its own; and thinner long-distance webs uniting clusters of cities into civilizations, and civilizations into a Eurasian and an American cosmopolis until they merged into a single, and much tightened, worldwide cosmopolitan web after 1500' (McNeill 2011: 47).

This theory of web-like relationships has much in common with Elias's account of the civilizing of domestic societies when he writes of the expanding web of 'human relationships' and consequent impact of 'the lengthening of the chains of social action and interdependence. It is a "civilizing" change of behaviour' (Elias 2000: 370). Later in his life, this same line of inquiry, the expanding and increasingly complex domain of human connections and interdependencies was central to Elias's attempts to understand very long-term patterns and processes of human development that take in the entire species (Elias 1991; 2007; Mennel 1990)

Despite the peaceful exchanges and mutually beneficial trade, as history shows, large groups marked by cultural differences have clashed from time to time, but as to whether it is because of fundamental cultural differences and incompatible values and ways of life remains less clear. As IR has clearly demonstrated, there are many reasons why competing groups come together in violent conflict: competition for resources, fear of a rising powerful neighbour, among many others. Political science and IR seem particularly well-equipped in terms of methodologies and theoretical frameworks to engage more deeply in studying the nature of relations between civilizing processes and civilizations or large socio-cultural collectives.

While tensions and clashes cannot be ignored, particularly their root causes, there is a danger that a preoccupation with clashes and confrontations obscures what many civilizations or socio-cultural groups share in common and also sidelines centuries of migration and mingling, peaceful cooperation, cultural borrowing and exchanges of ideas (see Reichwein 1925; Maverick 1946; Cobb 1963; Pullapilly and Van Kley 1986; Black 2008; Michael and Petito 2009). Promisingly, while much of the recent work in IR or world politics has focused on clashes and conflicts and debates about what sets the different peoples of our world apart, some scholars have begun to direct greater attention toward the history of cooperation and exchange between civilizations and what they share in common (Euben 1999; Hobson 2007; Bowden 2007; Black 2008; Shogimen and Nederman 2008).

Conclusion

Amidst heated speculation about whether or not we are in the midst of a 'clash of civilizations', particularly between the Western and Islamic worlds, there exists a widespread and growing general curiosity about the nature of civilizations and the state of relations between them. For instance, the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Cambridge has recently established the Civilizations in Contact Research Project with funding from the Golden Web Foundation. There is an International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations, based at Western Michigan University in the United States, which runs an annual conference dedicated to the field and twice a year publishes the journal, *Comparative Civilizations Review*. As yet IR does not appear to have much of a presence in either, but it would be to the benefit of both IR and the fields of history and area studies that tend to dominate the study of civilizations if there was to be more cross- and inter-disciplinary dialogue and collaboration.

Beyond academe the BBC has recently launched the interactive Web tool, *Civilizations*, which it describes as 'a multi-dimensional picture of human history' that allows users to explore 'the rise and fall of great empires and ideas over 5000 years in a way that no book could ever do'. The computer game, *Sid Meier's Civilization V*—a turn-based game of strategy involving conquest, coexistence and cooperation that was launched the year

the Soviet Union collapsed—has become one of the most popular and influential games of all time and in doing so has done a great deal to expand the general level of interest in the history and interactions of our world's different civilizations (see Fogu 2009).

The discipline of International Relations is not immune to this spike in interest; with the end of the Cold War and with it the superpower-dominated bipolar world order, in part in response to Huntington's provocative work, the study of civilizations and or civilizing processes and their growing role in global affairs has gathered considerable momentum and taken on new significance (e.g. Iriye 1997; Cox 2000; 2001; Jones 2002; Mozaffari 2002; United Nations 2006; Hall and Jackson 2007; Bowden 2009a, esp. vols. 2 & 4; Katzenstein 2010a; Linklater 2011). If Arnold Toynbee is correct in that civilizations are the most appropriate unit of analysis in trying to make sense of history and politics over the longer-term, then this can only be a positive development for the ongoing evolution of IR as a discipline. As Quentin Skinner has poignantly observed, history and the understanding of history are important not so much 'because crude 'lessons' can be picked out of them, but because the history itself provides a lesson in self-knowledge' (Skinner 1969: 53).

The value of this self-knowledge and historical understanding became all too evident to Richard Mayne while he was working on translating and 'adapting' Braudel's *A History of Civilizations* thirty years after it was first published. He emphasizes that he was continually struck by 'how little updating it really needed'. As he was working on the 'chapter on the Soviet Union and its centrifugal tendencies', events were rapidly unfolding in Moscow in real time, making him feel 'as if Braudel were looking on. Not to say "I told you so",' but to remind the reader that, 'in those dangerous moments, how *la longue durée*, in the hands of a master, can help explain the most dramatic convulsions in the past, the present, and the future' (Mayne 1993: xxix). No doubt a greater understanding of history, and with it, greater self-understanding, can also be quite a valuable asset to those of us who fall short of the status of master.

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Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. See for instance the chapter on realism by Dunne and Schmidt (2008) in one of the discipline's most popular text books, or Boucher (1998). ⬆ [#N1-ptr1]