

American Civilization

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ABSTRACT: A discernibly American identity, nonetheless real for having been so long obscured by the preponderance of the USA, unites the republics of the Western hemisphere in the modern period. Allowing for variations in capacity and circumstance, this helps delineate the range of their behaviour toward one another and toward states elsewhere. A definition of civilization consistent with this analysis should not be concerned to establish homogeneity within a clearly defined territory, but rather to recognise a particular style of interaction and, above all, distinctive responses to the challenge of cultural difference within confined spaces.

KEYWORDS: America, Civilization, Latin America, Huntington, Western Hemisphere.

Delineating Civilizations

Shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union, Samuel Huntington (1993; 1997) famously suggested that the clash of ideologies which had characterised much of the twentieth century was in danger of being replaced by a clash of civilizations. In the furore that followed, just three of Huntington's seven candidate civilizations attracted particular attention. These were Islam, China and the West. Discussion of Latin America as a separate civilization was not extensive, and tended to concentrate on the position of Mexico as, in Huntington's words, a 'torn nation'. Mexicans were said to be in two minds about whether they belonged in the West or in Latin America, much as Turks appeared to some observers to be uneasily suspended between the West and Islam.

A decade later Huntington (2004) had reached the conclusion that Mexico had failed to meet the challenge. Because of this, the long-established flow of migrants from and through Mexico into the United States must now be regarded as a grave and unprecedented challenge to US national identity. Given the scale of the combined legal and illegal Latino presence, the United States itself began to appear torn, and Huntington counselled the Bush administration to look to its own house, resisting both cosmopolitan liberal and neo-conservative forms of active engagement with the wider world.

Even those who accept Huntington's concept of civilization may take exception to his choice of frontiers. What makes Africa one civilization? Why is Catholic southern Europe part of the West, while Latin America is not? A more serious charge is that Huntington misrepresented what kind of thing civilization is and, consequently, what civilizational boundaries represent. There were two reasons for this. The first was a failure to extend, to his analysis of territoriality, the scrupulous if somewhat inflexible social constructivism with which he had delineated the progressive embedding of core values in United States institutions. The second was that he relied too heavily and uncritically on historical interpretations that were holed beneath the waterline, of which more later.

The argument advanced here is that there is no single Western civilization or, if there is, that it has a fault line separating Western Europe from the Western hemisphere that is every bit as real (or not) as the line that

separates Western Europe from Orthodox Christendom, a line dating back to the division of the Roman Empire in 395CE, made much of by Huntington. There is an American civilization, to be sure, but it embraces the whole hemisphere and, if viewed from Mars, might most succinctly be defined as a distinctive project of modernity consisting in the attempt to develop liberal republics in acutely racialised societies. It has been a project impeded by transplanted empire in Brazil and the widespread institution of slavery, fractured by social revolution in Mexico, pursued in societies of extremely varied racial composition, and pressed forward with widely differing levels of energy from one state and period to another. In recent decades it has been overcast by the global role of the USA and the successive alignments of Latin American republics with a Third World or Global South. Yet at its simplest, and by contrast with Europe, this is what America has meant.

There have been huge variations in the capabilities and success with which this task has been approached by different American states (and when I use that phrase I do not mean Colorado or South Dakota). It is clear that by most measures the United States of America has been among the most successful of more than twenty republics. But what unifies a civilization is not *attainment*, as indicated by indices of development or democracy, still less some arbitrary set of variables relating to urbanization or productivity, which might too easily group together countries with radically different histories and values. More than outcomes, it is the shared project and the typical range of paths by which its realization is attempted that provides the cultural glue of each distinct civilization.

The substantial cultural divide between America and Western Europe has not gone unnoticed. What has generally been overlooked, however, is that when a contrast is drawn between the USA and Europe it is often supported by pointing to differences that, if considered more carefully, would be seen to divide Europe from the Americas as a whole. Religiosity, by various measures, is higher in the USA than in Western Europe. But the same measures suggest that levels of religiosity in Latin America are broadly similar to those in the USA. Murder rates in major cities are a second phenomenon that has been held to distinguish the USA from Europe. Lately Caracas and Ciudad Juarez (both around 130 per 100,000) have far exceeded the murder rates of any US cities, but relatively similar rates in Mexico City (8.0 per 100,000), São Paulo (15.6) Los Angeles (7.5) and Chicago (19.4) provide a clear contrast with Paris (4.4) and London (1.4) (as reported by NBC 2 August 2012). Rates of incarceration, and the ethnic composition of those incarcerated, also suggest comparability throughout much of the hemisphere, with huge over-representation of Afro-American and indigenous populations. Western European states are only now beginning to experience the levels of ethnic diversity that already marked American states even before the mass European migrations of the nineteenth century. American states looked for ways of managing and regulating ethnic diversity; those of Western Europe generally preferred denial.

Such variables, it might be objected, are no less arbitrary than those used to construct the supposed West. Not so; they are symptomatic of a distinctive American path through modernity.

Three Conceptions of Modernity

Modernity used to be thought of as a process of technological diffusion from a generative North Atlantic core. Recent historiography has challenged this model with claims about multiple modernities, arising independently in Asia as well as Europe and interacting in complex ways through increasingly integrated trading and financial systems, especially during the first globalization of the later nineteenth century (Bayly, 2004).

It is well to recall that the dawn of modernity was not always dated to the later eighteenth century, for this has particular implications for the historical significance of America (see, Jones, 2007, chapter three). Earlier

generations still conventionally dated the end of antiquity to the abdication of Romulus Augustus, the Western Emperor, in 476 CE and the end of the medieval period to the fall of Constantinople in 1453 CE. The whole point of retrospectively naming that thousand years the *Middle Ages* was that they extended from the fall of the Western Roman Empire to the fall of its Eastern twin (emphasis added). The modern period in Europe was born out of the finality of this second catastrophe, which broke the last remaining constitutional link, tenuous though it was, with the ancient world. Coming so soon afterwards, the American discoveries upset a Christian worldview in which the three known continents – Europe, Africa and Asia – had been regarded as analogous to the Trinity, together constituting a perfect world, which is to say a complete world. America therefore represented a radical challenge to the cosmology of the time (O’Gorman, 1961).

Discovery of a new world left nothing unchanged. But while Europe set about the creation of modern states and national economies in a landscape where the very tangible remains of universal empire and church still towered precariously over an undergrowth of liberties, customs and charters, America offered a blank sheet. This raised the question of whether it should develop in imitation of Europe or in some wholly new manner. America, then, may be thought of not simply as one among a multiplicity of modernities, but as the archetype of modernity. For while the project of modernity might be an aspiration in Europe – inhibited by customary rights and entrenched institutions – it appeared more realistically achievable in the Americas, which were conceived of, by turns, as a new Eden and a limitless wilderness.

It was in this spirit that Hannah Arendt (1973: 23) argued that the very idea of revolution was American in origin. ‘Symbolically speaking’ – she continued – ‘one may say that the stage was set for revolutions in the modern sense of a complete change of society, when John Adams, more than a decade before the actual outbreak of the American Revolution, could state: “I always consider the settlement of America as the opening of a grand scheme and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth”.’

What this meant in practical terms was that all manner of social experiments that could not easily be undertaken at the time on European territory proved possible during the early modern period in the Americas, including genocide (Europe caught up later!), extensive resort to slavery and other forms of coerced labour, and the creation of isolated sectarian communities, whether of Jesuits in Paraguay or Mormons in Utah. Intertwined with this was a primacy accorded to material culture and human agency: the more deliberate *design* of economies as against their *evolution* in old Europe, an easier association of social status with wealth and consumption, and a readier enthusiasm for what Anthony Trollope (1968: 115 [1862]) nicely termed ‘contrivances’. [1],[#N1]

The result has been that national forms of modernity in the Americas, whether in Argentina or Peru, have borne a strong family resemblance to one another. It is not that American republics have been more protectionist or more liberal than European states, but that the ways in which the environment, labour, and political economy have been perceived, and the discourses flowing from these perceptions, have had a peculiarly American flavour. Again, it is not that Americans, North and South, are any more or less civil or violent than Europeans, but that the complex relations between public violence, political constitution, citizenship and the rule of law that obtain in the Americas have a style of their own, distinguishable from the equally diverse set of relations constituting Western European political life.

Americans, North and South, have been acutely conscious of the republican tradition, and their constitutional failures as much as their occasional successes bear witness to this. Americans, North and South, have come up against the ineradicably exclusionary character of liberalism more sharply and more often than liberals in Western Europe. But Americans, North and South, have also demonstrated, above all during the period when self-destructive European militarism and expansionism were at their dismal worst, between 1870 and the

mid-twentieth century, far greater consciousness than Europeans of the Kantian vision of law-governed relations between law-governed states. During this troubled period they had fewer wars with one another and went further in their experiments with peaceful methods of conflict resolution and in the development of a body of regional international law than did any other continent or region. Perhaps they were moved by the extreme levels of destruction and savagery that marked the Civil War in the North (1861–5) and the near-contemporaneous War of the Triple Alliance in the South (1864–70). Be this as it may, their armed forces looked inward as often as they looked outward and practiced the annihilation of indigenous peoples, the construction of physical infrastructure, regime change and social engineering more often than they engaged in conventional inter-state warfare. These and other commonalities underpin and often help explain the superficial commonalities of levels of religiosity, urban murder rates, and the like, to which attention was drawn earlier.

It will be objected that the elephant in this room is the long history of United States imperialism and militarism, to which the answer has to be that the United States may indeed have slipped its leash, but that even when it runs amok it does so in recognizably American style. The reason it behaves as it does is not that it is *sui generis*, as is so often claimed, but that it is American, with all that this implies about understandings of law, constitution, economy and society. It was out of a distinctive tradition of American law, conceived of as a progressive model for international law more generally, that United States' championing of the criminalization of aggression emerged (Boyle 1999; Rossi 1998). Once this was established, two corollaries emerged, as Robert W. Tucker (1961) observed in his lucid critique of US mid-century official just war doctrine. The first was that few restraints need apply to a state combating aggression; the second, that the objectives of the justified party in such a war need not be restricted to restoration of the *status quo ante* but might – perhaps should – extend to attainment of a moral peace through radical transformation of the international system or regime change. Such restraint as was to be seen in early United States Cold War policy, Tucker suggested, stemmed less from principled aversion to the use of force than from fear of retaliation following the development of atomic weapons and long-range delivery systems. Unconditional approval of defensive war had led the United States to fight the Second World War 'with almost utter lack of restraint' (Tucker 1960: 21-2, 30, 74). At the heart of the American doctrine lay a ruthlessness without which deterrence could never have succeeded. Tucker (1960: 75) quoted the grimly consequentialist claim of Harvard President James B. Conant (1893-1978) that 'while liberty has repeatedly been gained by war, once won it can be protected only by adherence to those moral principles which were repudiated in its achievement'. [2],[#N2]Anything goes. As for the aims of war, Lynn Miller (1961: 264-66) noted how United States doctrine restricted resort to force but, once at war, felt wholly justified in adopting extreme measures in its longing 'for infinite goals and ultimate achievements through war'. US military doctrine during the Cold War, based as it was in a substitution of idealism and legality for prudence and morality, was neither more nor less than to be expected from an American state once powerful. To understand the history of the hemisphere as a whole is to acquire a measuring rod with which to gauge the nature and extent of US deviance and perhaps even chastise it.

A Common American History

Why does all this not seem more obvious? Why, on the contrary, does it seem so natural to distinguish between a Catholic, corporatist and less economically developed South and a Protestant, liberal and ingenious North? The answer is that several centuries of careful ideological construction have made the division between Anglo- and Latin America part of that bedrock of common sense that we take for granted but should constantly be interrogating.

To an extent that ought not to be as surprising as it is, this work turns out to have been an unintended consequence of European rivalries. The very word 'Latin,' that has been used since the 1880s to label Spanish and Portuguese speaking America, was first given currency beyond South America by French propagandists as their masters squared up to Britain and an emergent Germany in the later nineteenth century. The Black Legend of Catholic intolerance and Hapsburg absolutism had been developed by the English during two long centuries of intermittent warfare with Spain and readily took root in vulnerable Anglophone colonies where the threat of Spanish and French arms was for many years immediate and unremitting. Its nineteenth-century romanticization by New England historians may in part have been a response to Catholic migrations in their own day. These, in their turn, were motivated partly by sheer need but also reflected war, revolution and oppressive systems of labour and land tenure in old Europe. Indeed, the Romantic movement, within which James Fennimore Cooper, Washington Irving and their contemporaries positioned themselves, was in part a conservative response to the French Revolution and the shock it had administered to hereditary privilege and faith.

The Protestant work ethic, so often appealed to by United States conservatives, turns out to be implicated in highly contestable Prussian claims about the centrality of Protestantism in German national identity. Besides, capitalism has flourished in too many and different soils for Weber's theory to retain much plausibility, while the researches of Heinz Schilling (1995) and the German confessionalist school of historians have cast doubt on any sharp distinction between state formation in the Catholic and Protestant worlds. Indeed, recent work by Regina Grafe and Maria Alejandra Irigoin suggests that the core of the Spanish realm in America was just as wealthy as the fledgling United States in the 1780s, implying that sharp divergence over the next eighty years – after which Latin American growth rates once again matched those in the North – must have been a consequence of the dismantling of the imperial fiscal system, the length and destructiveness of the Wars of Independence against Spain, and subsequent struggles of national consolidation, rather than of the longstanding religious difference between North and South. And if this is even half true then one has to ask why the ill effects of Catholicism and poor institutions should have taken so long to kick in?

Finally, the discourse of the Monroe Doctrine and of the USA as a distinctively post-colonial and anti-imperialist state, liberating Spain's last American dependencies, may also be attributed to power politics as, firstly, neither the European powers nor the larger American states managed to balance effectively against a rapidly growing United States in the first half of the nineteenth century and then, from 1880, Europeans failed adequately to reassure the USA that their 'New Imperialism' posed no threat to the hemisphere.

So the common-sense view that the United States and Latin America are worlds apart turns out to have arisen pretty much in the half-century between 1840 and 1890 and to have rested substantially on a series of propagandist claims, many of them European. To discover how this came about and to appreciate the ways in which recent historiographic revisions have lately eaten away at long-established beliefs about the economic implications of the Reformation or the rapacity of the Spanish Crown is to realise how far from natural or obvious it is to mark off the United States from the rest of the Continent and how odd it is to link it with Europe in a supposedly homogeneous Western civilization.

American Civilization

This is not a study of contemporary foreign policy; it is left to the reader to draw out detailed implications. Yet it offers one suggestion for scholars of international relations. When the United States acts unilaterally, when it uses force, when it breaches the law, when it offends half of humankind, it is not acting as any other country with similar military and material advantages would act. If the development of an American civilization

means anything, it means that the muddle of oil interests and idealism, religiosity and republicanism, civility and violence, out of which United States grand strategy has customarily been distilled, is symptomatic not simply of supremacy but of a national character that can best be understood within an American hemispheric context. Given an equally free hand, Russia would have acted differently; there is reason to believe that China will. One conclusion that might be drawn from all this is that Huntington was mistaken in his final lurch into nationalism and isolationism. People constantly speak of China or India as the powers of the future. Perhaps the clever money should be on America: not the United States of America, but America. As Felipe Fernández-Armesto (2003: 132) has put it: 'If the twentieth century was "American" by virtue of US predominance, the twenty-first may be American too, in a fuller sense of the word.' Neo-conservatism, cosmopolitanism and nationalism do not exhaust the US foreign policy repertoire. A more balanced engagement between the USA and its neighbours could provide the foundation of a continuing global role for the western hemisphere. This is not impossible even though it has appeared to be, lately, because of the obsessions and negligence of successive administrations.

It is time to return to where this argument began, with the question of civilization. A discernibly American identity, nonetheless real for having been so long obscured by the preponderance of the USA in recent decades, unites the republics of the Western hemisphere in the modern period. Together with variations in capacity and circumstance, this helps delineate the range of their behaviour toward one another and toward states elsewhere. A definition of civilization consistent with this analysis should not principally be concerned to establish homogeneity within a territory with clearly defined borders, but instead to recognise diversity, particular styles of interaction (or lack of it) and, above all, distinctive solutions to the challenge of cultural difference.

The attempt that has been made in this essay to suggest that hemispheric commonality is at least as plausible as Huntington's suggestion of a homogeneous Western civilization is close to being a *reductio ad absurdum*. Arguable at the highest level of abstraction, it succumbs to qualification as soon as it is approached, as any such argument is bound to do. Its purpose has been to expose the difficulty of a territorial or containment approach to civilization and to clear the way for the adoption of a relational view, grounded in a critique of the modernist concept of territoriality too often assumed in the debate about clashing civilizations. Territoriality used to be conceived in terms of consistency, containment and contiguity. From the start, the Americas have been the site of territorially defined segregation in the countryside – between lowland and highland, pastoral and agricultural areas, indigenous and settler zones, *latifundia* and peasant communities. But post-modern concepts of territoriality have been more concerned with nodes, networks, projects and processes than with the metaphor of space as container. The problem of difference now assumes its most acute form in metropolitan cities, because that is where different religions, distinct ethnic groups and contrasting life styles characteristically live cheek by jowl, straining any form of segregation to the limit and forcing re-formulation of civilization out into the public sphere. The general style of a civilization is therefore now most often dictated by the solutions found in its major cities: in Peking, in Rome, in London, in New York or São Paulo. Huntington forgot that civil, civilization, civility and citizen all find their Latin root in *civis*, meaning someone who lives in a city.

The problem of difference exists in every major city, and we speak properly of a civilization when a distinctive solution, first developed in one city, spreads throughout the whole of an extensive culture, often but not necessarily as a consequence of imperial rule. Viewed this way, empire is most itself in its cities and at its core; it reaches the frontiers a mite dishevelled and weary. This, surely, is the burden of Nobel laureate Ivo Andrić's fictional epic of Bosnian provincial life under Ottomans and Austrians, *Bridge Over the Drina*. Viewed Huntington's way, civilization was most itself at the frontier, to be defined by contrast with what lay beyond. [3][#N3]. This is not helpful, because no frontier can be drawn around Islam or Christianity or any other

world religion, let alone around the powerful process of material acculturation we call globalization. The question posed by this paper has not been a parody of Ghandi's celebrated response when asked what he thought about western civilization. He thought for a moment before suggesting that it would be a good idea. Here, it has been accepted that there is a distinctive American civilization, but this has been only a preliminary step to the more fundamental question of whether this civilization is best captured in extended territory or in the major cities of the hemisphere. The hypothesis that emerges is that they share distinctive features that mark them off from those of the Old World and its rising powers. The city rather than the frontier is the emblem of American civilization.

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Biography

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Notes

1. Trollope himself was decidedly unimpressed by many of these contrivances and most of all by central heating. Of the young ladies of Fifth Avenue, New York City, he wrote: 'The very pith and marrow of life is baked out of their young bodies by the hot-air chambers to which they are accustomed. Hot air is the great destroyer of American beauty'. ♣.[#N1-ptri]
2. Conant's article appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Jan. 1949, p.19-21. ♣.[#N2-ptri]
3. Münkler's nicely drawn distinction between boundaries between modern states and boundaries within empires is consistent with my position. ♣.[#N3-ptri]

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