

Civilisation and empire: A challenging nexus

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Abstract: What is the link between ‘civilisation’ and ‘empire’? This paper analyses such challenging nexus by referring to four scientific points of view: Elias’s paradigm; Marxism; the ‘multiple modernities’ approach; postcolonialism and critical theory. Each approach has specific strengths on which it is possible to draw if one intends to re-assess such important nexus in international affairs. The article ends by suggesting a different and non-imperial understanding of ‘civilisation’, one based in ideas of dialogue and respect, and particularly relevant in an age in which a more balanced international order has become a global political priority.

Keywords: civilisation; empire; civilising process; modernity; imperialism

Introduction

‘Civilisation’ and ‘empire’ are two large-scale phenomena, which have often been seen as connected; they have usually been studied by historians, in particular with reference to the ‘ancient’ ages or in a world-historical perspective [1][#N1]. Why have they become relevant in International Relations (IR)? In what ways can their use contribute to understanding and explaining international and world politics? First of all, both terms refer to comprehensive and all-encompassing manifestations of power, culture, and ideas; ‘empire’ derives from *imperium*, a Latin noun referring to a special military power possessed by high magistrates and, later, emperors; ‘civilisation’ was defined by Huntington as ‘the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species’ (1993: 24). The size of the two phenomena, their connections, and their relations to power in different guises suggest an obvious link between them and the study of international and world politics.

Also, the rise of discourses on the ‘decline of the nation-State’ and ‘globalisation’ in the 1990s (Ohmae 1995; Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, and Perraton 1999; Giddens 1999; Strange 1996; and many others), has run in parallel to renewed interest in so-called ‘trans-’ or ‘supranational’ issues such as ‘civilisations’ and ‘empires’. As to the former, their sudden return to centre stage was heralded by the most famous and controversial piece by Huntington (1993), whereas the latter have re-emerged with both US-led military operations across the globe (Ferguson 2003; Johnson 2004; Wood 2006) and the much-debated appearance of a worldwide ‘imperial’ conglomerate of economic and political power (Hardt and Negri 2000). How useful in understanding contemporary international politics are categories such as civilisation, both in the singular and plural form [2][#N2], and empire? How are they related? Is civilisation an expression of imperial power and culture or are the two concepts mutually exclusive? This paper’s purpose is an assessment of the ongoing debate on the relation – the *intersection* – between these two concepts. What does the literature suggest on the ‘empire/civilisation’ link? It is here proposed that we analyse four main intellectual perspectives, and envisage a common thread running through them.

The first point of view (1) mostly draws on Elias’s hypothesis of the ‘civilising process’ (1982 [1939]), and its recent reappraisal in IR Theory. In general terms, this perspective maintains that civilisation is something

'different' from, and alien to, traditional international politics and its often recurrent imperial or imperialist characteristics. A 'civilising process' of international relations, in current times still in its infancy, would be a slow and gradual phenomenon, and represent a new departure in the qualitative nature of the relations between sovereign entities. Such a point of view rules out connections between empires and international civilising processes, and tends to emphasise legal/institutional factors more than socio-economic ones. It is thus significant to immediately compare and contrast it with a second perspective (2), which draws on Marxist and neo-Marxist paradigms and maintains the essential character of the relation between empire (here mainly understood as imperialism) and civilisation, which would be an ideological instrument of the former. This approach throws light on material, rather than institutional, aspects, and a world-historical North/South divide. But what about *other* aspects? And *other* ways of 'dividing' the world? A third perspective (3) considers both material and non-aspects (by contrast with most Marxist interpretations), and holds that empires and civilisations have usually been related, but according to a range of complex combinations. This perspective broadly coincides with the 'multiple modernities' paradigm, and calls for the necessity to envisage a plurality of civilisations (by contrast with the rather monistic understanding of the first approach), and a plurality of approaches to empire and modernity, which are seen as combinations of various and overlapping dimensions. Such a paradigm has in recent decades increasingly gained recognition within IR and in public debates, too. Issues such as traditional 'North/South' or 'East/West' divides though are here left rather unproblematised, and assume higher relevance in a fourth perspective (4), which we propose to label 'critical'. This last perspective draws on critical and postcolonial theories, and aims at highlighting the inherent and essential link between civilisation and empire. In this sense, it shares some departure points with Marxism, but aims at going beyond its allegedly 'materialistic' and 'Eurocentric' views. This viewpoint is in clear contrast to the first one, which is related to Elias's civilising process, and in a sense it completes the range of the heuristically most significant interpretations. Each of them has weaknesses, but also provides insights on which it is possible to draw in order to establish an intellectual starting-point for re-assessing the 'civilisation-empire' nexus in international politics.

The paper's conclusions will then, first of all, highlight the ambiguity of the connection, and the difficulties in drawing a clear line between the two terms. Second, they will put forward the foundations of a different point of view. This should be based on the understanding that, especially in a 'global' age, the world requires a notion of civilisation based on dialogue and respect, and creative institutional solutions for human beings as such, regardless of their 'imperial' interests or 'civilisational' affiliations. Does it make sense to debate about 'civilising' international politics? What role do empires play there? Are they civilising agents or rather do they need to be 'civilised' and tamed? These are some of the problematic questions the final remarks will consider and engage.

II. Global civilising processes and empire

'Civilising international relations' is a noble and relevant purpose (Albert, Brock and Wolf, 2000). Even if we do not agree with the Hobbesian depiction of 'international politics' as an arena in a 'perpetual state of war', we have to recognise the normative and analytical centrality of peace and the struggle against violence in the discipline and practice of international relations. A framework of 'civilised' international politics would then imply the disappearance of those features traditionally familiar to the realist tradition, that is, war and large-scale violence, anarchy and power politics; and, of course, empires with their politics of power, exploitation, and oppression. In this sense, civilisation and empire would be at the opposite ends of a spectrum, or at least mutually exclusive concepts.

The issue of 'global civilising processes' has been taken up by Andrew Linklater (2004; 2007; 2010), in the wake of Elias's monumental study of the 'civilising processes' within Western European countries, first of all France. Elias's core reflection, which was originally published in 1939, referred to a long-term dynamic by which the rise of absolutist States with their monopolisation of force, increasing social interconnectedness, and the parallel emergence of emotion-managing psychic structures within early 'court societies', would have all contributed to a significant reduction of violent, aggressive, and in general 'emotional' attitudes in the context of nation-States. Linklater has explored the possibility of 'civilising processes' between and beyond States, at a transnational and supranational level; with this aim, he has critically used concepts such as the English School's 'international society' (2010: 167–71; Bull 1977; Bull and Watson 1984) and cosmopolitan 'transnationalism', and has found instances of 'global civilising processes' in phenomena such as the increasing diffusion of worldwide anti-torture norms (2007). Some considerations could be added on the progressive configuration of a 'cosmopolitan order' (Held 1995; see also Beck 2006; Martell 2008), the paradigmatic character of the European integration process, and the so-called 'new regionalisms' (Laursen 2003): all these movements seem to point into a new direction, one of 'civilisation' and possibly 'constitutionalisation' of international politics. In other words, a sort of world 'civilising process', although slow and gradual, would be ongoing. This hypothesis fits in well with theories such as world federalism, intellectual legacy of which includes Kant's 'perpetual peace' (Levi 2008), Wendt's thesis on the 'inevitability of a world state' (2003), and Carneiro's empirical findings about the long-term trend towards a unified world state or political community [3].[#N3].

Although the idea of a global civilising process is fascinating and inspiring, several aspects of contemporary international politics seem to cast doubts on the nature and even the existence of the process itself. Let us consider the issue from a socio-historical angle, and draw on four critical focal points.

First of all, Elias's and especially Linklater's interpretations rely on visions of 'civilising processes' as phenomena 'from above', 'top-down' movements, that have at times been connected with what we might call civilising 'projects'. Such a reading seems to overlook the combined pulse of 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' movements and struggles. In other words, the civilising force is held to originate in the elite, and in particular in the context of France's and Britain's emerging absolutist States and political/economic ruling classes. Elias recognised the complex 'multilinearity' of civilising processes (Dunning and Hughes 2012: 103–108; Dunning and Mennell 1998) and the possibility of 'decivilising' movements; also, he acknowledged the existence of different patterns in different 'societies', in Europe as well as outside it (Elias, 1996). As a matter of fact, however, both Elias's work and Linklater's application to IR pay little attention to the combined effects of socio-structural dynamics within 'Western' countries and 'colonial' exchanges and encounters with non-European peoples. Moreover, not much is said about the structures that underpin actors' interactions, apart from a rather unspecified and still ambiguous concept of 'interconnectedness' (Linklater 2010: 172). As a result, civilising processes are seen as mainly elite-driven tendencies, in which key roles are played by monopoly mechanisms, (Western European) State actors, and always larger pacified spaces. In this sense, rather than gradually 'erasing' the possibility of empire and imperialism, at least as a general trend, civilisation seems to be somehow co-imbricated with empire, and both would act as expanding forces of pacification and emotional control – at least in the short term. Shall we assume that a global civilising process has to go through an ill-defined 'imperial' phase? Or even that civilisation and empire are somehow co-essential, perhaps in the form of an 'empire of civil society' (Rosenberg 1994) corresponding to modern Western capitalism, in which civilisation and empire would be inextricably interwoven? These 'big' questions, which are central to ideas of civilisation, democracy, and empire, and point to the complex ambiguity of their relations, have so far been left rather unaddressed. If we assumed that a global civilising process was taking place, we then ought to specify its underpinning structures, evolution, and stages; also, we should investigate

its 'two-way' movements, both 'top-down' and 'bottom-up', or, in other words, the ways the 'elite' interacted with other social groupings.

A second critical point relates to the English School's concept of 'international society'. Leaving aside its obviously Eurocentric flavour, which is partly acknowledged (2010: 168), Linklater's interpretation of its historical role in spreading a 'standard of civilisation', and contributing to a process of 'ethical learning', seems too optimistic and rather questionable. A more critical stance is necessary. How far does it make sense to talk about a 'slow process of collective learning in the ethical sphere?' (2010: 171)? It might be argued that the 'international society' itself has been an imperial instrument, as is well exemplified by the history of European relations with Africa and Asia (Suzuki 2009). The encounter with the European international society brought about different but somehow equally tragical outcomes, ranging from outright extermination to 'forced socialisation' (Suzuki 2009), which triggered Japanese 'modernisation' and a process of imitation whose 'dark side' in both domestic and international affairs has often been overlooked. The connection between 'international society' and empire has continued well after World War II, and has again instigated different reactions: subordination in some cases, imitation in others; throughout all of them, however, elements of forced, violent, and imperial modernisation can clearly be seen. Also, the links between empire and the civilisational virtues of 'international society' have been questioned, although only to some extent, by the English School's proponents themselves. The so-called 'Vanguardists' (Buzan 2010: 4–10) have reflected on the legacy of inequality between the West and the 'Third World' and some 'Syncretists' (Donnelly 1990) have pointed to the 'imperial' character of international society itself. In other words, the 'civilising' character of the 'international society' is highly arguable, and also, in this perspective, connections can be envisaged between it and empires. Such an observation calls for a historical re-assessment of the rise and diffusion of the international society, which should take into account both its non-European roots (alongside the perspective laid out by the 'Syncretists' and Hobson 2004) and the 'combined' character of its development, which was characterised by constant exchange and borrowing between different polities and world regions.

If civilisations are phenomena 'from above' and somehow tied to empires, it becomes then plausible to raise a third point, that is, the possibility to see civilisation as a 'project', instead of a 'process'. The idea of a 'civilising project' has been applied to circumscribed cases such as Australia and her Aborigines or Gypsies in Europe (Rowse 2009), and in a broader sense to Britain, France and America's imperial ambitions. But what about the global scale? At the twenty-first century's dawn, scholars and decision-makers often debate global civilising *questions*, that is, phenomena and problems that have worldwide scope and seem to demand 'global' policies and solutions (see at least Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, and Perraton 1999). Given the 'global' character of the questions, such 'macro' issues as 'empire' and 'globalisation' come to the fore almost naturally.

'Questions' usually imply some attempt at answering them, and several competing answers in the form of civilising 'projects' seem to be currently underway. The United States even proposed the highly controversial 'Project for a New American Century' (2002) with the aim to 'promote global American leadership' inspired by neoconservative values. The European Union has usually styled itself as an evolving project aiming at peace, democracy and welfare. China has put forward a range of pragmatic policies with ambitions of a 'Chinese global order' (Rodrik 2010). These various possibilities of 'world order' are distinctively framed in terms of values and civilisation, and at the same time are combined with projects of power, hegemony and sometimes empire at a global level. This 'planned' and instrumental dimension of civilisation, and its often evident imperial character, has been studied by Elias, in particular in relation to the German State and French absolutism (Elias 1996); however, neither Elias nor Linklater insisted on its imperial roots and purposes. To summarise, their position (and that of their followers) did not fully consider the elitist, Eurocentric, and 'dirigist' aspects of 'civilising processes', in which the imperial dimension is embedded; moreover, it is not clear whether such aspects and their dark sides can be seen as temporary – a kind of 'transition period' – or are rather a distinctive and recurrent feature of supposedly elite-driven and Eurocentric tendencies.

A final point, which is clearly related to the previous ones, is the absence of references to structural conflicts, in particular from the perspective of social classes. Such an aspect though has been emphasised by the Marxist paradigm, to which we now turn our attention.

III. Marxist and neo-Marxist perspectives

The main Marxist contribution to issues of empire and civilisation has been a strong emphasis on their *material bases*. At the same time, classical Marxist theories of imperialism have illustrated the instrumental role 'civilisation' has performed in relation to colonial and imperialist ventures. It must also be considered that, while early writers such as Engels, Marx and Gramsci themselves allowed some room for an autonomous theory of 'civilisation', in recent times a rather flattened materialistic approach has characteristically prevailed.

Marx and Engels attributed to the term 'civilisation' different meanings in different contexts, according to the evolution of their social and political thought. In general, they associated it to the 'bourgeois order', with its usual corollary of repression and violence (Marx 1871, with reference to the re-establishment of order after the Paris Commune). While in some writings, the term is used to refer to more conventional and traditional meanings ('The Hindoo civilization', 1853), in the 1848 Manifesto it unmistakably means 'Western' and 'capitalistic' civilisation. Let us consider the following excerpt:

[The bourgeoisie] compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves (Marx and Engels 1848)

Although Marx and Engels did not formulate any theory of imperialism, their words clearly point to the expansive and compelling drive of bourgeois civilisation. 'Civilisation' is regarded as a dynamic and complex entity whose social relations, practices and values find their roots in the Western bourgeoisie, and dynamism of which can reach as far as the entire globe. The authors of the Manifesto have been charged with more-or-less explicit Orientalist attitudes (Frank 2007; Bush 2004), but, unlike some of their followers, also attempted to overcome it and propose a more refined theory of civilisation. They formulated it in 'The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State' (1884), famously written by Engels, who relied on both Marx and the American evolutionist anthropologist, Lewis Morgan. 'Civilisation' here stands for the third socio-economic stage of human history, after savagery and barbarism, and incarnates a step characterised by the rise of a class of merchants, division of labour, industry and art (see especially Chapter IX); for all its 'Eurocentric' flavour, Engels' view represented an attempt to connect historical materialist arguments with early anthropological findings on peoples from various continents. Furthermore, Marx and Engels's alleged 'Eurocentrism' and 'Orientalism' have been challenged on many grounds. Recent scholarship has highlighted how their thought underwent a clear turn after the 1850s (Lindner 2010); moreover, colonised peoples came to be seen as possible allies of European proletarians (Anderson 2010).

Gramsci, for his part, dedicated a few lines to non-Western civilisations, and expressed his belief in the possibility of an encounter and a combination between Western capitalism and Asian religions, for instance Islam (1975: 246–8). Although he tended to see civilisations as 'blocks' based on social and economic conditions, he was convinced of the possibility of change and the importance of cultural factors and envisaged

in Islam's lack of a strong hierarchical organisation the seeds of a relatively smooth adaptation to modern Western civilisation (1975: 247).

More contemporary authors, by contrast, have tended to dismiss the usefulness of the concept of 'civilisation' and interpret international politics in more strictly imperialist and materialist terms. A straightforward rejection of the existence and analytical strength of any idea of 'civilisation' was endorsed by the dependency theorist, Andre Gunder Frank (1929–2005). Frank combined the paradigms of Marxism, World System Theory and World History, and put forward an original synthesis, with the aim of deeply reinvigorating historiography and social theory. In his own words:

My thesis was that there are *no* distinct or even pristine civilizations (plural), nor have there ever been. These terms are confusing, even dangerous, particularly since the events of September 11, 2001.[...] To claim that different civilizations did and still do exist is not only historically and scientifically confusing but also dangerous...All were historically shaped and are today reshaped, not by any imagined original pristine existence or derivation, but by their mutual relations with each other (1967: 225–27).

In Frank's view, civilisations have never existed as separate or primitive units; by contrast, human history has been shaped by interactions and exchanges. His crucial unit of analysis is the 'world system', that is, the fundamental unity of world history, which is seen as an ever-changing process of unequal exchange between developed metropolises and underdeveloped peripheries (Frank 1967). Within such a system there clearly is room for colonialism and imperialist domination, hardly any for civilisation.

Frank's World System Theory heavily relies on a materialistic interpretation of history whereby trade and capital accumulation play a major role. Also, the World System itself is understood as a gigantic mechanism whose functioning is not much detailed. While there is evidence of long-distance trade patterns in the ancient world, too, the existence of a 5,000-year-old 'global' economic and commercial system seems to be at the very least questionable. What matters here, however, is that Frank pointed to the role of a larger and overarching unit of analysis whose importance would be far higher than that of its single components, be they civilisations or nation-States as traditional IR paradigms would assume.

Arguably the most representative World System Theory scholar, Immanuel Wallerstein, provides us with similar arguments, even if he recognises the role, though instrumental, played by the idea of civilisation. His World System is premised on capital accumulation, centre/semi-periphery/periphery distinctions, and a hierarchy of actors and places. Such an imperialist structure is supported and maintained by the 'moral defense' (2004: 510) that is provided by the ideas of civilisation and 'civilising mission', *mission civilisatrice*, which shaped nineteenth century colonialism and is still a barely concealed reality under the cover of universalist discourses of rights, democracy and freedom. Wallerstein offers a definition of civilisation closer to the more traditional 'historical materialist' position on ideology and culture, and understands it mainly as an instrument. 'Civilisation' would be hardly more than an imperialist ideology. While the importance of this link (civilisation-imperialism) can hardly be disregarded, far more light could be cast on the contexts and contents of civilisational discourses. Why do such discourses enter into the political arena? How is their content selected? Who inspires and actually shapes them? Civilisation might well have been a set of values and norms whose main purpose, in particular in the nineteenth century, was to support imperial ventures, but all other remarks seem to be worth further development.

A more far-reaching attempt to formulate a theory of civilisations within International Relations, and propose a model of world order based on their co-existence, has been put forward by the neo Gramscian scholar,

Robert W. Cox (2000). His understanding of civilisation as ‘a fit between material conditions of existence and intersubjective meanings’ (2000: 220), however, sounds as comprehensive as it is unspecific. While civilisations are seen as based on some sort of widespread *common sense* (2000: 219) on issues of space, time, cosmology and the role of the individual, little is left of any ideas of empires and/or imperialism. Cox points to the ‘imperialism/civilisation’ link in the nineteenth century (2000: 218), but doesn’t explore its more contemporary evolution. His proposals for a better world order seem to neglect existent inequalities in economic and political power; he advocates for human and environment rights, and the suppression of violence and crime; nothing, however, is added on the ways of addressing the overwhelming power of US economic and military might, let alone globalisation’s shortcomings in both developed and developing countries. In an attempt to keep together Marxist, Gramscian and liberal points of view, Cox tends to dilute the potential inherent in a more accurately defined historical materialist position.

To summarise, the authors who recognise themselves in World System Theory tend to dismiss the importance of civilisation, while they highlight the role played by imperialism, which they conceive in a rather materialistic sense. Neo Gramscians, by contrast, have worked out a more refined definition of civilisation but have hardly developed arguments on domination, empire and imperialism. A sound Marxist approach could perhaps concentrate on the combination between the diffusion of capitalist social relations and different modes of production, social practices and values. Such an approach might also cast light on the various combinations of different modes of production and social formations that have always co-existed in world history and across different ‘cultural’ experiences.

IV. ‘Multiple modernities’ and its discontents

Shmuel N. Eisenstadt in Sociology and Peter J. Katzenstein in International Relations are the main representatives of the paradigm Eisenstadt himself labelled ‘multiple modernities’ (2007). Both have investigated empire and civilisation and have laid the foundation for a new approach to ‘civilisational analysis’ in which modernity is understood in different ways in different civilisational experiences; it is seen as a plural, diverse and ‘multiple’ phenomenon (Arnason 2003; 2005).

After early inroads into the study of premodern bureaucratic empires (1963), Eisenstadt has subsequently focussed his research on comparing civilisations and cultures (1987; 1999; 2002). His interpretation of history is evolutionary, and a key aspect of his work is the distinction between Axial and modern civilisations (1986), the latter having emerged at different times in different parts of the world, and with different characteristics. Following Eisenstadt’s work and in reaction to Huntington’s, Katzenstein introduced ‘multiple modernities’ in International Relations (2008; 2010) and analysed the role of empires in relation to civilisations. Territorial empires have usually been linked to them (2008: 24–26), but Katzenstein’s focus is mostly on contemporary American *Imperium* (2005). A combination of imperialist economic practices and territorial *Empire*, the American Imperium has shaped a global political and cultural regime. It is a complex conglomerate of political, economic and cultural forces, which cannot be reduced to a single dimension (2005). Apart from Katzenstein, however, students of ‘multiple modernities’ have hardly provided a theory of empires and their links to civilisation. Some sketchy remarks by Spohn (2010) illustrate the importance of empires in civilisational analysis, but say little about their historical evolution and geographic distribution. Here they are understood in institutional/political terms, but what is then ‘the institutional’? How could we, for instance, keep under the same category complexes as different as the early Mongol and the British empires?

This point leads us to raise a range of critical remarks which highlight how this approach has hardly explained the relations between civilisations, empires and modernity, and has not overcome traditional Eurocentric, urban and ‘culturalist/religious’ biases in the study of world history. Let us consider them one by one.

A. Empires, civilisations, and modernity/ies

How do empires and civilisations relate to premodernity, modernity, and history in general? Björn Wittrock, a collaborator of Eisenstadt and Arnason (2005), described the rise of imperial orders in the Axial age, but did not write about ‘modern’ empires. The links between modernity/ies and empires remain unexplored and under theorised. Does it make scientific sense to write about empires of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? Katzenstein’s remarks on the United States and a passing reference to Osterhammel (Spohn 2010) seem to imply that empires still play an important political role, but why, and in what ways? How has the relation between empire and civilisation evolved overtime, and in relation to different historical experiences – be they Axial, premodern or modern? The literature on ‘multiple modernities’, despite its efforts to understand civilisations in a historical sense, remains unfortunately on the very surface of historical phenomena.

B. Eurocentrism

Despite their claim to understand modernity in the plural, the authors in the tradition of ‘multiple modernities’ have not abandoned a Eurocentric point of view (Bhambra 2010: especially 133–35). In other words, ‘multiple’ modernities are generally understood against the parameters of ‘Western’ modernity, which spread its institutions and values worldwide and combined with local traditions. In this sense, European empires would be seen as ‘vehicles’ of modern Western civilisation, which they brought into interacting with other and non-modern civilisations. By contrast, historiography and social theory have demonstrated the composite, ‘amalgamated’, nature of imperial complexes, and the ‘connected’ aspects of their histories (Subrahmanyam 2004; Bhambra 2010). Especially in a *longue-durée* perspective, empires and civilisations are characterised by the sedimentation of economic, social and cultural elements of different origin, and their nature can be seen as constantly changing and adapting. The history of the British Empire, for example, has been one of Scottish officials, English capitalists and Dutch merchants as well as of black slaves, Indian soldiers and African tribal allies. At the same time, scholars such as John M. Hobson (2004) have pointed to the high number of innovations and discoveries, mostly of Chinese origin; the ‘Western world’ has drawn on. The so-called ‘rise of the West’ (McNeill 1963) would have been nurtured by exchange and contacts with technologically and economically more advanced ‘Eastern’ civilisations, such as India and above all China. Furthermore, we can also highlight the Western origin of concepts such as ‘civilisation’ and ‘empire’. ‘Civilisation’ has roots in eighteenth-century France and Britain (Williams 1976) and etymologically refers to urban life in contrast with rural customs. Its diffusion as a concept has famously found opposition within Europe itself (namely, German’s idea of *Kultur*) and entered Korea, Japan and China only in the late nineteenth century. ‘Empire’, too, has ‘Western’ connotations, given its etymological origins in ancient Rome, where *imperium* referred to a power to command, especially in military terms, which was held by some specific magistrates and later by ‘emperors’ themselves. Other world regions, though, tended to use concepts with different meanings. The Islamic world has often recognised the necessity of establishing a universal community of believers, the *Ummah*, led by a caliph whose authority would be less hierarchical and more dynamic than that of Roman emperors and their successors. Also, the leading Tunisian social thinker and historian, Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), praised the idea and practice of *asabyiyya* (‘social cohesion’, ‘sense of community’) of earlier Arab tribes in contrast with the comforts of subsequent ‘civilised’ urban life. China, for her part, embraced an idea of empire and civilisation in which a complex fabric of philosophical, theological and legal practices (mostly, though not exclusively, referred to as ‘Confucianism’) blend together and define the parameters of just behaviour and legitimate imperial rule. In other words, only a part of world history can be understood by resorting to discourses of ‘empire’ and ‘civilisation’, if we intend to use such terms in a culturally sensitive way. In this sense, and according to

all the above-raised issues, 'civilisation' and 'empire' are still 'Eurocentric' concepts, despite the claim of 'multiple modernities' scholars to move beyond traditional Western bias.

C. Urban bias

'Civilisation' derives from *civis* and *civitas*, the Latin words for 'citizen' and 'city'. This etymology unveils an urban bias. As Katzenstein put it, 'Civilizations are based on urban forms of life and a division of labor by which *urban* elites extract resources from peasants' (2010: 12). In this view, civilisation is associated with urban and sedentary life. But how should we consider nomadic peoples and those living in the countryside? As we have seen, their importance (and, for that matter, their 'superior' morality and skills) was emphasised by Ibn Khaldun in his *Muqaddima*. In an attempt to lay down a universal history, the Tunisian scholar illustrated how society would be made up of sedentary and nomadic encounters, and the latter would represent the most valuable legacy of Arab history. The role of this combination, often in frontier areas, has subsequently been emphasised by historians and social scientists such as Lattimore (1950), McNeill (1963), and van der Pijl (2008; 2010), and with reference to both civilisations and empires. Van der Pijl has re-interpreted the evolution of international relations in the framework of the modes of relation with 'foreignness'; for most of human history such a relationship has been embodied by the 'sedentary/nomadic' encounter. This hypothesis reminds us of the role played by nomads in actually building world civilisations and of the nomadic roots (or 'genesis') of most civilisational and imperial experiences. Civilisations, in other words, can hardly be confined within 'urban walls'. Throughout history, they have dialectically combined sedentary and nomadic life.

D. Religious bias

Despite the commitment to highlight the plurality of civilisational complexes, religions and traditions are still held to be their 'centres' (Katzenstein 2010: 12). In this sense, this paradigm remains distinctively reductionist and 'culturalist'. Provided that we could in some way 'essentialise' a civilisation, why should such factors lie at its heart? Also, if civilisations are seen as dynamic processes, why should they be centred on *traditions*? Some religions (among them, Buddhism) have repeatedly crossed different civilisational experiences (in Buddhism's case, from India to China, Tibet and Japan). Moreover, one might consider the commonalities between Christendom, Judaism and Islam, that is, three religions which are usually supposed to incarnate three different civilisations. 'Religions' are complex phenomena, and they should be understood against the background of larger historical experiences. As the Italian philosopher, Croce, put it in 1942; 'We cannot but call ourselves Christians', that is, the values and institutions of European civilisation (which he mostly understood in the terms of literary and philosophical ideas) cannot be understood without reference to the moral and cultural aspects of the Christian legacy. In a similar vein, Marshall G. Hodgson distinguished between 'Islamic' and 'Islamicate' phenomena (1974); with the latter, he meant those phenomena which are not religious in a narrow sense, but are anyway related to distinctive religious experiences. In other words, religious experiences would be inter-connected with larger social and historical contexts, and their interpretation as essential civilisational cores seems to be at the very least problematic. While discarding religions and traditions as mere epiphenomena would be misleading, the centrality of their position can clearly be challenged.

Contemporary relevance

What is then the political relevance of civilisations and their related 'empires' in contemporary international affairs? A key argument here is that the truly profound cleavage in current world politics is that between democracies and non-democracies or rather between capitalist and non- or partly capitalist economies. Russett, Oneal, and Cox (2000) have demonstrated that, during the period 1950–1992, liberal and realist aspects were far more important conflict predictors than any civilisational 'affiliation'. Van der Pijl (1998; 2006) has repeatedly illustrated the centrality of the fracture between liberal 'heartland' and Hobbesian 'contender states'. Other commentators and authors have focussed on the rise of a possible counterbalancing (and 'cross civilisational') coalition, constituted by Brazil, Russia, India and China (the 'BRICs'). While there

are big disparities among the BRICs themselves, and it seems fair to say that they will hardly challenge the existent world order (Glosny 2010), they can still co-operate on selected issues and operate a 'division of labour' among them, with the more democratic Brazil and India playing the role of possible mediators with the United States (Roberts 2010; Armijo and Burges 2010). In other words, the main fault line in twenty-first-century international politics could be that between democracies and autocracies, or developed and developing countries, or the one between a contested hegemon and its contenders. The centrality of civilisational cleavages has yet to be demonstrated.

V. Critical and postcolonial perspectives.

'Critical' and postcolonial authors have attacked the Eurocentric character of most 'Western' theories and emphasised the inherent and profound connections between the 'Western' discourses of 'civilisation' and 'empire'. Drawing on a range of writers such as Fanon, Foucault, Bourdieu and others, postcolonial scholars have pointed to the Western roots of the whole discourse of civilisation, its instrumental use in the imperial subjugation and oppression of non-European peoples (in this sense, similarly to Marxists), and its lasting effects in terms of physical and symbolic violence, not to mention the problem of its devastating economic consequences. In this view, civilisation is a Western construction, and a Foucauldian discourse; while Marxist authors have tended to highlight the links between the economic base, or 'infrastructure', and its more superficial 'ideological' manifestations, critical scholars think that the cultural dimension is in itself an expression of power, as the Foucauldian 'power-knowledge' nexus makes clear. Such a dimension would have paralleled the rise of Western colonial empires, and would have served their purposes also by fostering a stereotypical and stylised understanding of non-European peoples. Edward Said (1978) famously showed the ties between imperialism and ('Orientalist') cultural depictions of non-Western worlds, and attacked 'civilisation' as an ideological, politicised and Western construction (1993), which in the current international order would be flagged by US superpower, while in the past it was an instrument of European colonial empires, especially France and Britain. Representations of 'non-Western' worlds, in particular Middle Eastern and Muslim countries, would have reproduced and justified 'Western' military and economic superiority, and thrived on the 'othering' and 'inferiorising' of what they perceived as *essentially* different cultures. Said's perspective has become a cornerstone of different strands of critical and postcolonial studies, in relation to the Middle East, South Asia, Africa and elsewhere. A postcolonial writer in a broad sense, the African, Achille Mbembe, has gone further and highlighted how colonies, as areas populated by 'savages', were the 'laboratory' of the political violence which would have later been used between 'civilised' peoples, for instance, in World War II and the Holocaust (2003). 'Civilisation' was utilised as a justification for colonial occupation and atrocities and remains a (mainly Western) instrument of oppression and imperialist domination, together with the entire architecture of 'Eurocentric' international law (Zolo 2001; 2002).

While it seems safe to assume that 'civilisation' has been a Western European construction (as has been said, the word's origins are to be located in France and Britain during the eighteenth century), and there are no doubts as to its use in colonial and imperial contexts, the issue of the 'Othering of the East' (notably, Asian and African peoples) lends itself to a range of critical arguments. What do we mean by 'West', in the first place? Does it make sense to write about a 'Western' history or civilisation unless we use such terms in an ideological and politicised way? In debating Orientalism, Halliday (1993: 160) points out that the socio-historical origins of some knowledge do not necessarily imply its lack of validity. Braudel adds (1966: 30) that it is plausible to conceive of a 'Western' civilisation, but also of a 'European', a 'Polish', 'German', 'English', etc. one, and possibly of even smaller 'units' of civilisation (regions such as Scotland, Castile, Sicily, etc.). In a more 'economistic' vein, van der Pijl (1998) has broadly equated the 'West' to the 'Lockean heartland' of

Atlantic capitalism. Conceiving of the ‘West’ as a political project shouldn’t prevent us from recognising the existence, might and trends of expansion of some form of primordial core of ‘Western’ history and ‘civilisation’. In a broader sense, however, we cannot but question the essentialisation and even the existence of such thing as a ‘Western civilisation’. The ‘West’ has also been seen as partly constructed by non-Western authors (Bonnett 2004), who in various ‘Asian’ contexts (Japan, China, India), in Turkey and Russia, have often imagined ideal, typical ‘Western’ worlds, and urged technical and social modernisation, according to their own subjective interpretation of a stereotypical and essentialised ‘West’. In this case, too, we can read the ‘West’ as a political project, even when it is endorsed by representatives of colonised peoples. Orientalism itself might have reproduced a binary way of thinking, in which ‘Western’ civilisation has been opposed to ‘non-Western’ peoples, an interpretation that implies a reductionist understanding of the ‘West’ as ‘colonial powers’. Aijaz Ahmad profoundly criticised Said’s paradigm and its alleged ‘essentialising of the West’ (Ahmad 1992: 166), and discarded the heuristic potential of an ‘Aeschylus-to-Kissinger narrative’ (1992: 183). In other words, it would be extremely difficult to find a *fil rouge* connecting ancient, modern, and contemporary histories of a largely imagined and fictional ‘West’, and of its relations with a fictitious ‘Eastern’ counterpart. What would the links be between ancient Greece, Rome, Christianity, capitalism, the modern State, etc.? Paul Veyne (in Ariès, Veyne and Duby 1987: 2), who in other respects is clear about the ontological connections between Christianity and modern Europe, clearly disregards the commonalities between ancient Rome and modernity:

The Romans were very different from us – no less exotic than the Indians of North America or the Japanese. That is one reason for beginning with them: to bring out the contrast, not to sketch the future of Western Europe in embryo. The Roman ‘family,’ to take just one example, has little in common with its legendary image or with what we would call a family (Veyne, in Ariès, Veyne and Duby 1987: 2).

The fictitious and instrumental character of the discourse of a ‘Western civilisation’ – in ‘Western’, ‘non-Western’, Orientalist and critical accounts – has been illustrated by Norman Davies, too (1996). A leading historian of Poland and Europe, Davies has criticised the way US political and intellectual circles have constructed the idea of a ‘Western canon’ in the twentieth century, and selectively included in it the history and culture of few big countries such as the US, Britain, France and Germany; while by contrast they would have totally neglected the historical experiences of other lands, among which all of ‘Eastern Europe’, whose contribution to the continent’s civilisation has been profound and lasting. In a more political vein, GoGwilt (1995) has interpreted the ‘invention of the West’ as a phenomenon related to the last phase of British imperialism, the rise of the US to world hegemony, and the dangers embodied by Bolshevik Russia. Western identity would have partly compensated for the decline of a ‘white’ race connotation, and would have represented the ideology of a re-trenching Anglo-American political, economic and cultural sphere.

The essentialisation of the West, sometimes referred to as ‘Occidentalism’ (Buruma and Margalit 2004), is not the only critical argument that can be raised at postcolonial and critical literature on these issues.

Not all nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship on ‘non-Western’ topics can in fact be seen as related to imperialist politics. The ambiguities of German Orientalism, whose links to a colonial empire are less obvious, have been explored (Jenkins 2004), and evidence actually suggests that a number of German scholars were in various ways linked to imperial projects. However, lumping together all intellectual relations between ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ countries and labelling them as ‘Orientalist’ and imperialist seems superficial and inaccurate. Several scholars, writers, artists, musicians, who may have offered rather exotic and Orientalist depictions of ‘non-Western’ worlds, did not have any clear connection to imperial politics. In other

words, Orientalism might have often been an intellectual fashion rather than expression or instrument of imperialist purposes; intellectuals and artists often drew on other artists' experience. Mozart's Orientalism has been studied and debated, and different interpretations have been provided (Hammond 2006), but links between his music and Vienna's politics towards the Ottoman Empire or other 'non-European' regions seem to be hardly imaginable. Musicians and artists might have subscribed to some East-related clichés, but this is a far cry from saying that they more or less intentionally served imperial purposes. Furthermore, some depictions of 'Eastern' worlds have in general been rather benign: the Enlightenment's interest in, and appreciation of, Chinese culture and politics seems to be a case in point (Davies 1996). To summarise, not all Orientalist production has been linked to imperial politics; and some scholars were probably not Orientalist at all, if by this term we mean a superficial, stereotypical and inferiorising representation of 'non-Western' peoples and countries. Sincere intellectual curiosity might have played a role, too, at least in some cases.

Critical and postcolonial approaches deserve attention because they highlight the ties between empires and civilisation, especially in the so-called 'West', and understand culture in a more flexible way than their Marxist counterparts. However, one risk inherent in this paradigm is the reproduction of an East/West divide which has never clearly existed in human history, as the arguments of 'combined history' show (Subrahmanyam 2004). By considering this approach, in a sense we come full circle: we started by analysing the idea of 'global civilising processes', which assumes an ontological separation between civilisation and empires, while we conclude with the observation that, at least in a 'Western' world, empire and civilisation have usually coincided. What does the investigation of these four paradigms tell us? What conclusions can we draw?

VI. Towards a conclusion

This paper has illustrated several ways in which the relationship between civilisation and empire has been explained by different scholars and approaches, and the ambivalences inherent in many definitions. Civilisation and empire can be seen as either complementing or opposing each other and it is difficult to envisage a middle way between extremely divergent positions.

The analysis of the four paradigms has highlighted how each stance has strong and weak points, and a sound theory of the 'empire/civilisation' relationship ought to draw on the key strengths of each. To begin with, the concept of 'global civilising processes' can be criticised for its elitist, Eurocentric, and at times 'imperial' overtones, but draws our attention to the *normative* dimension; that is, what civilisation ought to be, in particular in terms of non-violence and self-restraint. The idea of 'civilisation' has always two sides, a descriptive/analytical, and a prescriptive/normative one; and apart from the analytical aspect of the historical 'rise' of 'emotional management' and self-restraint, Elias's theory understands civilisation as an ideal state, or condition, in which violence and harm would be overcome in international as well as domestic politics. In order to anchor it to 'real' historical processes, however, and overcome Elias's relative pessimism, we have to consider the evolution of socio-economic and cultural variables and in particular the Marxist ideas of 'classes' and social conflicts, which are introduced in the second perspective. In a different sense, however, reducing civilisation to its economic or material aspect risks being misleading and short-sighted. From the 'multiple modernities' paradigm, we thus borrow valuable ideas such as those of 'multiplicity', 'variety' and 'combination', and the necessity to avoid forcing the interpretation of phenomena into any 'reductionist' analytical straitjacket. Critical and postcolonial theorists, for their part, despite contributing to unintentionally reproducing the 'East/West' dichotomy they had attempted to delete, have provided a deep critique of the flaws of Eurocentrism and clarified the strong historical links between civilisation and empire.

This final observation leads us back to the initial point, that is, the remark that any normative interpretation has to be embedded into world-historical and socio-historical processes.

While acknowledging the specific contribution of each approach, this paper ends by suggesting a potentially fruitful vision of the 'civilisation/empire' nexus in normative terms, and in our current age of worldwide economic and social transactions. Essentialised ideas of civilisation have traditionally contributed to support and promote imperial policies and projects, in the so-called 'West' and other world regions as well (one might think of twentieth-century Japan, just to mention one case). What is more, as we have seen, empires have made use of civilisational discourses in wars and colonial annexations, not to mention the education of both colonists and colonised peoples. In other words, the link between the two, although not always clear-cut and fully understandable, has often been evident.

If we want to draw a line between civilisation and empire, we have to clearly acknowledge the role of dialogue and respect, that is, two terms which are often misunderstood in both scientific literature and everyday politics. Following Köchler's (2006; 2007) interpretation of hermeneutics, it is possible to talk about 'dialogue' and 'respect' only when the parts are committed to fully understand and know each other without any intention or purpose to dominate or win over the interlocutor. Dialogue and respect completely rule out any imperial attitude. Obviously, this is a difficult intellectual exercise and it is even more difficult in political practice. How can we comfortably listen to what we feel 'alien' and 'other' in relation to our attitudes and sensitivities? How can we temporarily suspend our entrenched convictions and accept understanding and reflecting on other peoples' arguments and beliefs? While this might prove difficult, it probably represents the only way to set the stage for a 'non-imperial' attitude in a civilisational dialogue.

Furthermore, listening to the supposed 'Other' might help us understand the commonalities and similarities we share, and avoid the error of 'essentialising' civilisations, cultures, and their characteristics. Historians have demonstrated how civilisations have constantly borrowed from each other, and human history has been one of exchange and combination rather than a linear succession of dominant worldviews. In this sense, a process of mutual understanding is compatible with the view of civilisation as a constant process of learning and exchange. Only if we accept the idea of a slow, constant, and processual dialogue we can avoid falling into the trap of the 'imperial' dimension of civilisation itself.

Such trap is particularly visible in the case of Western history. Despite all statements to the contrary, and the usual rhetoric of human rights and democracy, Western politics does not seem inclined to listen and understand. It remains to be seen if this will lead to further confrontations or the rise of new and 'non-Western' powers will lead to a more balanced international order and suggest innovative institutional solutions at a global level.

Biography

Ernesto Gallo received his PhD in International Relations at the University of Turin and is currently working at The Open University and Kaplan International College London. He has published in English and Italian and in 2013 co-edited (with Giovanni Finizio) the book *Democracy at the United Nations* (Brussels: Peter Lang).

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Notes

1. Let us just mention three 'big' names in historical studies of empires and civilisations: A.J. Toynbee (1961), F. Braudel (1949), and W.H. McNeill (1963). [↗\[#N1-ptri\]](#)
2. 'Civilisation' in the singular traditionally refers to a 'general' process, with potentially universal claims, even if such universality has often been defined according to the parameters of 'Western' civilisation, and sets of practices and processes connected to it. See Katzenstein 2009:5. The plural form is more descriptive and historical. This paper relies on the idea of a plurality of civilisational experiences, main characteristics of which would be amalgamation, hybridity and combination, and on a tradition which includes a range of different authors from McNeill (1963) to Subrahmanyam (2004). [↗\[#N2-ptri\]](#)
3. Robert L. Carneiro (1978), a Brazilian anthropologist, estimated that in 1,000BC there would have been some 600,000 independent political communities, whereas nowadays they are some 200. See also

Wendt 2003: 503, and Linklater 2010: 162-163. †.[#N3-ptri]

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