

## Civilizational Politics in World Affairs

*Note: The following comments were prepared for a panel discussion scheduled at the American Political Science Association Conference in New Orleans on August 31, 2012. The conference was cancelled due to a hurricane.*

Some months ago, Peter Katzenstein asked me to take part in this panel. I accepted the invitation as soon as I heard the topic was *Civilizational Politics in World Affairs*. From the standpoint of a naturalized American citizen of Iranian origin; a secular man who grew up in an Islamic society; a cultural go-between; an academic who straddles the disciplines of Political Science, Islamic Studies, and Middle Eastern Studies; and one who grew frustrated many years ago with his discipline's disinterest in cultural modes of explanation, I found the topic captivating. Peter Katzenstein's trilogy certainly did not disappoint. Indeed, I think it is fair to say that he has done for the mammoth concept of "civilization" what the University of Chicago's 'Fundamentalism' project did for that other fraught concept. Katzenstein has treated the concept of "civilization," -- which the cultural critic Raymond Williams described as one of the "key words" in the liberal lexicon, along with "individualism," "equality," "democracy" -- with such care and erudition that from now on it is impossible to write on this subject without feeling the need to wrestle with Peter's work. Yet, Peter did not assemble us here to praise his previous handiwork. His marching order to us was to be forward-looking and help him reorganize and sharpen some of the ideas lurking in the backstage of his mind as he pens his next book on civilizational politics. Let me be forward-looking by first taking a detour through the past.

Exactly 150 years ago (in 1862) the French philosopher and philologist Ernest Renan (1823-1892) delivered his inaugural speech at the Collège de France where he argued the Indo-European nations were superior to Semitic people, such as Jews and Arabs in all aspects of

civilization.<sup>1</sup> Renan was of course writing on the heels of Hegel's philosophy of history which dealt more with the evolution of reason (i.e., abstract rationality) and its foundations rather than history per se. As the father of *historicism* and idealism, Hegel considered world history to be a "court of judgment"<sup>2</sup> and believed that history was the process of unfolding of a universal mind or spirit along a logically obligatory corridor which leads to freedom.<sup>3</sup> Renan was also preceded by his compatriot Lamartine who had advocated the emancipation of Ottoman subjects in the name of "humanity and civilization" and headed by the British who were going to "spread civilization in the Indian Peninsula." Since then, many scholars -- not to speak of demagogues and charlatans -- have taken us on a tired ride replete with holistic intimations and grandiose proclamations about the entire course of human history. We, the natives of the non-Western world, had to internalize the uniqueness of the Western trope, and were fed bulky treatise about how history was a process of successive approximation towards a single uniform goal. We were told in the nineteenth century to stand in the "imaginary waiting room of history" until modernity knocked on our doors, and in the twentieth century Daniel Lerner put the choice to us in the starkest possible terms: "Mecca or mechanization."<sup>4</sup> Others followed with "Jihad vs. McWorld," with the "End of History," and with the "Clash of Civilizations."<sup>5</sup> Coming from the land of the ayatollahs and the territory adjacent to Bin Laden's theater of operations, I had to field such

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest Renan, *An Essay on the Age and Antiquity of the Book of Nabathaen Agriculture; to which is added An Inaugural Lecture on the Position of the Shemitic Nations in the History of Civilization* (London: Trübner & Co., 1862), 111-47.

<sup>2</sup> See Hegel's *The Philosophy of Right* (1821).

<sup>3</sup> Hegel famously declared that in Oriental Despotisms "one" is free, the Greeks and the Romans maintained that "some" are free. It was the Germanic peoples, who realized that "all" are free and that this is the natural order of things.

<sup>4</sup> Lerner 1958, p. 40.

<sup>5</sup> Niall Ferguson and Thomas Friedman helped to further popularize some of these arguments.

questions as, “Isn’t Islam the odd-civilization out?” Having carefully read Edward Said’s *Orientalism* during my doctoral studies, I remembered his characterization of the interwar period (1919-1939) as an era of civilizational anxiety<sup>6</sup> and now in the post-9/11 era, I am witnessing how muddled anxiety, especially in the United States, is making a mockery out of Habermas’s communicative ethics. I applauded when the Indian thinker Dipesh Chakrabarty borrowed Gadamer’s phrase “provincializing Europe” and wrote a book on the subject;<sup>7</sup> I found myself in agreement with the Egyptian thinker Hasan Hanafi who wrote of the need to “relativize” European consciousness and return Europe and its culture to its “natural size,”<sup>8</sup> and Aziz al-Azmeh was speaking for me when he reminded us it is not civilizations and cultures that go to war or enter into dialogue but rather states, armies and social movements.<sup>9</sup> After all, today we do not have the same types of independent civilizations enjoying their own cultural space as the ones that Marco Polo encountered in the 13th century. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, the era of colonialism, world wars and the globalization of capitalism, modernity and the state system it is hard to speak of an independent, autonomous, and self-centered Chinese, Japanese or Islamic civilization.

I fully agree with your embrace of Eisenstadt’s concept of “multiple modernities” that better captures our present global realities and prescribes a dose of theoretical sensibility for representing the cultural universes that permeate our international system (in a way that

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<sup>6</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, p. 248.

<sup>7</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton UP, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Hasan Hanafi, *al-Turath wa al-tajdid: mawqifuna min al-turath al-qadim* (The Heritage and Renewal: Our Position in Regard to the Ancient Heritage) (Beirut: Dar al-tanwir, 1981), pp. 152-53.

<sup>9</sup> Aziz Al-Azmeh, “Human Rights and Contemporaneity of Islam: A Matter of Dialogue?”, [http://www.alati.com.br/pdf/2007/the\\_universal\\_of\\_human\\_rights/pdf220.pdf](http://www.alati.com.br/pdf/2007/the_universal_of_human_rights/pdf220.pdf) (accessed 26 August 2012). This follows the same logic as saying that it is capital that colonizes labor and not cultures.

cosmopolitanism or the “clash of civilizations” cannot do). As Jose Casenova has pointed out what shapes the multiple modernities are both a civilization of modernity and the continuous transformation of the pre-modern historical civilizations under modern conditions.<sup>10</sup> My concern is that in your works more attention has been paid to the former rather than the latter. As you demonstrate with the *Sinicization* volume what is really needed is not a curt and cursory reading of the intellectual and political history of non-Western societies but rather a profound and in-depth engagement and critique. We need to delve into the protectionist impulses, the cult of authenticity, and the worship of difference that has come to characterize such civilizational territories as Islam and Hinduism.<sup>11</sup> In some of my own works, I have taken on nativist forces and ideologies that are reclaiming the public sphere and have a rather inflated (dare I say, arrogant) vision of their own civilizational grandeur.<sup>12</sup> While I am sympathetic to their legitimate objections to Eurocentric forms of knowledge, social theory and political culture, I find myself uncomfortable at their embrace of incommensurability between East and West, Islamists and non-Muslim, etc. I often wonder if Islamists are any more capable than die-hard supporters of Huntington to abandon the discourse of civilization.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Jose Casenova, *Public Religions Revisited*, paper presented at the conference on "The Politics of Religious Making," Hofstra University, October 4-6, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> You have treated China with great deference in your trilogy and perhaps you should do the same for India because of its continental-scale hegemony, market position, and hefty intellectual tradition. The following are a number of texts that are useful for teasing out the civilizational arguments put forward by Indian thinkers: Amartya Sen, *Argumentative Indian*; Max Mueller: *India: What can it teach us?*; Rabindranath Tagore: *Crisis in Civilization and Religion of Man*; Makarand Paranjape, *The Penguin Swami Vivekananda Reader* [Swami Vivekananda was one of the first powerful articulator of spiritual East/materialist West idea], and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *The Cultural Heritage of India* (4 volumes).

<sup>12</sup> See my *Iranian Intellectuals and the West* (Syracuse University Press, 1996); “Iranian Islam and the Faustian Bargain of Western Modernity,” *Journal of Peace Research*, 34: 1 (February 1997), pp. 1-5; and “Subduing Globalization: The Challenge of the Indigenization Movement,” in Richard Grant and John R. Short (eds.), *Globalization and the Margins* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 39-49.

<sup>13</sup> For an early example of this line of thinking by a Turkish intellectual see Halil Halid, *The Crescent versus the Cross* (London, 1907).

I hope in your forthcoming book you address the following topics:

- We know that the processes of modernization have transformed non-Western civilizations but do these civilizations have manifest or latent potentialities to (re)shape what we consider to be modern "religious" and "secular" qualities?<sup>14</sup> I make this comment because I think a close reading of Samuel Huntington reveals that most of the time his "civilization" is in fact a code word for "religion."
- It will be nice to emphasize (yet again) that religious traditions do not exist in a condition of perpetual mutual hostility or hermetic isolation and that civilizational encounters can allow for intellectual loans and cross-fertilization of ideas. After all, as Jose Casanova has argued, today "all world religions can be reconstituted for the first time truly as de-territorialized, global imagined communities, detached from the civilizational settings in which they have been traditionally embedded."<sup>15</sup> He refers to the Bahais, Moonies, Hare Krishnas, Afro-American religions, Falun Gong, etc., as examples of an "emerging global denominationalism."
- How your idea of a polymorphic globalism differs from Andrew Moravcsik's search for a non-ideological liberalism<sup>16</sup> or John Ikenberry's *Liberal Leviathan*.
- How does your recognition of multiple modernities impact your view of radical cultural relativism?
- In *Orientalism*, Edward Said raised the question of whether what keeps people apart is really a difference between civilizations or, rather, a difference of power. Following him, some scholars have argued that "civilizational talk only reproduces the fault lines of colonial modernity."<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Stuart Hall has argued that western identity is grounded in its role as "master signifier" for all others and that this idea (the West as an analytic category), once produced, becomes productive in its turn as it allows a certain way of thinking and speaking. I think these perspectives deserve some further attention from you.
- Considering your substantial intellectual prowess, I would like to see you commence a discussion that takes on the sociological rather than the abstract models of modernity. In

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<sup>14</sup> Of course you yourself have argued in *Religion in an Expanding Europe* that "religion continues to lurk underneath the veneer of European secularization."

<sup>15</sup> Casanova 2007.

<sup>16</sup> See Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics". *International Organization* 51, 4, 1997: 513–53.

<sup>17</sup> See Khaldoun Samman, *The Clash of Modernities: The Islamist Challenge to Arab, Jewish, and Turkish Nationalism* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2011), p. 37, 217.

other words, instead of studies defining modernity primarily in terms of pre-given, fixed cultural and civilizational distinctions (Huntington 1993; Fukuyama 1992; Barber 1995) we need better explanations of the social and economic conditions of birth and breeding of nativist, Occidentalist and anti-modernist movements that manage to transform themselves into historical Gestalt.<sup>18</sup> So I would say less Hegel and Bernard Lewis and more Marshall Berman (*All That is Solid Melts into Air*), Arjun Appadurai (*Modernity at Large*) and Asef Bayat (*Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*).

- Beyond the academic community, how would you make the news media, as well as governmental experts, to adopt your notion of polymorphic globalism? Can this even be done while nationalism remains the tormented yet triumphant intellectual paradigm for the greatest number of people around the globe? Of course you can say this is not your audience but then I imagine you invoking the translation of Huntington's book into 39 languages and its impact on your Cornell students as the reason why you undertook this project in the first place.

I hope you find these comments useful as you continue this impressive project.

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<sup>18</sup> These discourses often criticize modernity for its uniformity, impersonality, self-interested individualism, privileging of mind and body over the soul, infatuation with technology, imprisoning universal logic, superficiality, and commercialism.