Civilisation and Hierarchy Go Hand-in-Hand

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BRETT BOWDEN, APR 27 2015

The Ideal of Civilisation

As I have outlined in detail (Bowden 2009, 2009a Vol. 1), virtually since its inception in the mid-Eighteenth century, the term civilisation has been imbued with both descriptive and evaluative dimensions. It is in large part because of this evaluative and normative nature that the concept of civilisation is also an inherently hierarchal concept, particularly when applied to the theorising and practice of world politics.

Civilisation is used to describe human societies marked by an advanced stage of development and social complexity; examples include Western civilisation and the civilisation of Ancient Egypt. The evaluative dimension of civilisation is most evident when civilised societies are compared and contrasted with uncivilised peoples, such as savages or barbarians. In effect, both of these uses have a normative dimension, for civilisation is what Quentin Skinner (1999) describes as an 'evaluative-descriptive' term. Civilisation is used both to describe and evaluate; or pass judgement in the very act of describing. Not every collective of peoples is civilised or a civilisation. Civilisation is reserved for the elite, the chosen few – albeit a largely self-chosen few. As Anthony Pagden (1988: 33) explains, civilisation 'describes a state, social, political, cultural, aesthetic – even moral and physical – which is held to be the optimum condition for all mankind, and this involves the implicit claim that only the civilised can know what it is to be civilised'.

Civilisation also refers to the process of becoming civilised:

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It describes the stages that must be passed through before any human collective can reach the apex of development: civilisation.

In short, civilisation is, by definition, an inherently hierarchical concept.

The term civilisation was out of favour for a good part of the twentieth century, a century in which two World Wars, the Great Depression and the Holocaust all served to undermine the very idea of civilisation. Despite this, the middle years of the century did produce a number of comprehensive studies of the rise and fall of civilisations by noted historians, sociologists and anthropologists (e.g. Bagby 1959; Braudel 1993; Coulborn 1959; Melko 1969; Toynbee 1934-61; Sorokin 1937-41; Spengler 1962 & Quiqley1961). The 1980s also saw the publication of a major study from within International Relations on the standard of civilisation in international society (Gong 1984), but this too was a largely historical study.

It was not until the publication of Samuel Huntington's (1993, 1996) version of the 'clash of civilisations' thesis in the mid-90s that International Relations scholars started to think more seriously about civilisation and civilisations as tools and units of analysis. A notable exception here is Adda Bozeman (1960/2010). The airing of Huntington's thesis and the post-Cold War international political climate in to which it emerged, along with the subsequent rise of the threat of fundamentalist terrorism, has generated extensive and ongoing debates that have helped to again popularise the term civilisation/s. Nowhere is this more the case than in the practice and study of world politics.

Standards of Civilisation

As suggested above, of particular interest and relevance to IR are standards of civilisation in international law or international society (see 2014 special issue of Millennium, 42/3). Standards of civilisation are an explicit tool of hierarchy, separating those admitted to the international society of states from those deemed unworthy and denied entry, at least until they can measure up. As the term standard suggests in many contexts, standards of civilisation are largely about widely accepted norms and expectations, or *the* norm; in this case, what is required in terms of perceptions about civilised behaviour.

A standard of civilisation is a means historically used in international law to regulate relations between civilised and uncivilised nations or peoples. The concept entered international legal texts and practice in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries under the influence of anthropologists and ethnologists who drew distinctions between civilised, barbarian and savage peoples based on their respective capacities for socio-political cooperation and organisation. Operating primarily during the European colonial period, and sometimes referred to as the classical standard of civilisation, it was a legal mechanism designed to set the benchmark for the ascent of non-European nations to the ranks of the civilised society of states. Membership in international society conferred full sovereignty upon a state entitling it to full recognition and protection under international law.

In the recent past, scholars of IR have again turned their attention to standards of civilisation as a means of dividing and ordering the world, which also means a necessarily hierarchic world order. Some prominent recent discussions of standards of civilisation in IR and international law focus on what might be appropriate standards for the late twentieth or early twenty-first centuries, ranging across human rights (Donnelly 1998), democracy (Franck 1992), economic liberalism (Fidler 2000), globalisation and modernity more generally (Mozaffari 2001). Mehdi Mozaffari (2001: 253-54), for instance, suggests that the responsibility for formulating and enforcing the principles that constitute a standard of civilisation 'is incumbent upon the predominant civilisation'. When the Roman Empire dominated Europe, Rome set the standard, when the balance shifted toward Islamic civilisation, Islamic principles dominated, and 'when Christianity was predominant, the dominant values were Christian'. And so, today, by Mozaffari's reckoning, the 'global standard of civilisation is therefore defined – primarily – by the dominant Western civilisation', which means democracy, liberalism and economic globalisation prevail.

Much of this literature is largely uncritical of the sometimes damaging consequences of standards of civilisation and the hierarchy that comes with them, insisting that the new missionary zeal for promoting human rights, democracy

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and economic liberalism is somehow quarantined from the stigma associated with colonial exploits (e.g. Donnelly 1998). But as Tony Anghie (1996: 333) forcefully argues, standards of civilisation are 'mired in the history of subordinating and extinguishing alien cultures'. Nevertheless, many people would accept that there is a need for some means of distinguishing between the states in the international system, such as on the basis of legitimacy, however that might be defined. For instance, whether it is conservative, social democratic or libertarian, a freely and popularly elected government – even if you do not share its values – is in all likelihood going to be seen as more legitimate than the government of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, or the Kim dynasty in North Korea. Standards of civilisation in internal law or international society have long been one means of drawing such distinctions, albeit an inescapably hierarchical means.

Civilisation without Hierarchy?

Isaiah Berlin (1969) reminded us in his essay 'Two Concepts of Liberty' that the German poet Heinrich Heine warned the French in the early 1830s 'not to underestimate the power of ideas: philosophical concepts nurtured in the stillness of a professor's study could destroy a civilisation.' Berlin might have added that the idea of civilisation itself is one of those powerful concepts that has long been used to divide and separate peoples in the course of shaping history and our world.

But is it possible to make use of some conception of civilisation in world politics without an accompanying tendency to divide and separate, closely followed by an equally powerful tendency to unify and homogenise (see Inayatullah & Blaney 2004)? As far as I can see, I think not. Since its inception, the ideal of civilisation has been very closely associated with ideas of progress and stadial theories of development – a hierarchic world order with the civilised at the top. And that remains the case to this day in much development thinking and practice. So too, it largely remains the case in the conduct and theorising of world politics.

In short, civilisation and hierarchy go hand-in-hand.

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