Civilisations and International Society

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ANDREW LINKLATER, FEB 2 2016

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Interest in civilisations has increased in recent years, as the recent publication of Peter Katzenstein's three edited volumes reveals.[i] As with Huntington's discussion of the clash of civilisations, most of the literature has dealt – but not explicitly – with what Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, in one of the pioneering works of the English School, called 'the expansion of international society'.[ii] The driving idea behind that book was that international society has outgrown Europe, the region in which the society of states and its core institutions such as permanent diplomacy and international law first developed. It is important to note the importance of a central theme in Wight's reflections on different state-systems. All of them – the Hellenic, ancient Chinese, and modern European – had emerged, he argued, in a region where there was a keen awareness of a shared civilisational identity. The corollary was a powerful sense of 'cultural differentiation' from the supposedly 'savage' or 'barbaric' world.[iii]

Wight's position was that the members of states-systems found it easier to agree on common institutions and values because they were part of the same civilisation. They inherited certain concepts and sensibilities from the distant past that enabled them to introduce elements of civility into the context of anarchy – to establish what Bull in his most famous work called 'the anarchical society'.[iv] The sense of belonging to one civilisation made it possible for the societies involved to place some restraints on the use of force – at least in their relations with each other. The idea of civilisation had rather different consequences as far as relations with the outlying 'barbaric' world were concerned. European colonial wars revealed that the 'civilised' did not believe they should observe the same restraints in their conflicts with 'savages'. The latter were not protected by the laws of war. They could not be expected, so it was supposed, to observe the principles of reciprocity that were valued in the 'civilised world. Parallels are evident in the recent language that was used as part of the 'war on terror' to describe the members of 'uncivilised' terrorist groups – the so-called 'unlawful combatants'.

That example indicates that the language of civilisation and barbarism is no longer merely of historical interest. But to return to an earlier theme, its continuing political salience is a function of the challenges that have resulted from the expansion of international society. Before the twentieth century, the European empires denied that their colonies could belong to international society as equals. The establishment of the League of Nations Mandate System, followed by the United Nations Trusteeship System, held out the prospect of eventual membership of international society.[v]

But at the time, most thought that the colonies in Africa, Asia and the Pacific would need many decades, if not centuries, to learn to stand on their feet as independent members of international society. They would first have to 'modernise' after the fashion of the dominant European or Western states. That orientation to the non-Western world reflected the influence of the nineteenth-century 'standard of civilisation'. The concept referred to the idea that only the civilised, as Europeans understood the term, could belong to the society of states. As for the others, they could at least be made aware of the standards by which they were judged, and they could comprehend how they would have

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to change before they could be admitted to international society. Similar ideas were held to apply to societies such as Japan and China that were regarded as 'advanced' but also less 'civilised' than the Europeans. Demonstrating their willingness and ability to conform to Western principles of international relations was essential before any claim to gain entry to international society could be considered.[vi]

It is worth noting that references to civilisation were widespread in international legal discussions of the laws of war in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[vii] In a similar fashion, the idea of civilisation was invoked by the prosecutors in the Nuremberg and Tokyo war crimes tribunals. But that language is not used so overtly today. References to the differences between one's own 'civilised' ways and others' 'savage' practices attract condemnation. That is an indication of significant changes in 'post-imperial' international society. It was once perfectly legitimate – so the Europeans believed – to use a language that is now a sharp, and embarrassing, reminder of the discredited colonial age.

Not that all of the sensibilities that informed the standard of civilisation have departed the scene. Recent literature has discussed the ways in which the human rights culture rests on a new standard of civilisation; similar claims have been made with respect to market society and liberal democracy.[viii] Those discussions stress that international society is far from 'post-European' or 'post-Western' in terms of its organising principles and core practices. They draw attention to the respects in which international society has yet to ensure cultural justice for non-European peoples, a point that was stressed in Bull's writings on the 'revolt against the West' and in Keal's discussion of how the continuing marginalisation of indigenous peoples is testimony to the 'moral backwardness of international society.'[ix]

Such explorations demonstrate that the principles of international relations that developed in one civilisation – Europe – continue to shape contemporary world politics. They suggest that international society has outgrown Europe but it has not exactly outgrown European or Western civilisation. Its dominance has meant that the most powerful societies have not come under sustained pressure to construct an international society that does justice to different cultures or civilisations.[x]

Complex questions arise about the social-scientific utility of notions of civilisation, but they cannot be considered in this chapter. It is perhaps best to think less in terms of civilisations and more about civilising processes – the processes by which different peoples, and not only the Europeans, came to regard their practices as civilised and to regard others as embodying the barbarism they thought they had left behind. Major studies of how Europeans came to think of themselves as civilised can be found in the sociological literature.[xi] Their importance for students of international society has been discussed in recent work.[xii] But too little is known in the West about non-European civilising processes, and about their impact on European civilisation over the last few centuries.[xiii] Related problems arise in connection with what are sometimes dismissed as 'pre-modern' responses to Western 'modernity'. They need to be understood not as a revolt against the West by peoples who have supposedly failed to adapt to modernity but, more sympathetically, as diverse responses to profound economic, political and cultural dislocations – and reactions to the complex interweaving of Western and non-Western influences – that are part of the legacy of Western imperialism.[xiv]

Such inquiries will become ever more important as new centres of power develop outside the West. The idea of civilisation may have lost its importance as a binding force in international society, but understanding different, but interwoven civilising processes, is critical for promoting mutual respect and trust between the diverse peoples that have been forced together over the last few centuries, and who comprise international society today.

Notes

[i] Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *Civilizations in World Politics: Plural and Pluralist Perspectives* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010); Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *Sinicazation and the Rise of China: Civilizational Processes Beyond East and West* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012); Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *Anglo-America and its Discontents: Civilizational Identities Beyond West and East* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).

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[ii] Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Simon and Schuster: New York, 1996); Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, eds, *The Expansion of International Society* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1984).

[iii] Martin Wight, *Systems of States* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1979), ch. 1.

[iv] Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London, Macmillan, 1977).

[v] William Bain, *Between Anarchy and Society: Trusteeship and the Obligations of Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[vi] Gerrit Gong, *The Standard of 'Civilisation' in International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984); Shogo Suzuki, *Civilization and Empire. China and Japan's Encounter with European International Society* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009); Shogo Suzuki, 'Viewing the Development of Human Society from Asia',*Human Figurations: Long-Term Perspectives on the Human Condition*, 1:2 (2012), http://www.norberteliasfoundation.nl (accessed January 23, 2013).

[vii] Martti Koskenniemi, *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations: The Rise and Fall of International Law, 1870-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[viii] Jack Donnelly, 'Human Rights: A New Standard of Civilization?' *International Affair*s 74:1 (1998), 1-23; Brett Bowden and Leonard Seabrooke, eds, *Global Standards of Market Civilization* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006); Christopher Hobson, 'Democracy as Civilization', *Global Society* 22:1 (2008), 75-95.

[ix] Hedley Bull, 'Justice in International Relations', *The Hagey Lectures* (Ontario: University of Waterloo, 1984), reprinted in K. Alderson and A. Hurrell, eds, *Hedley Bull on International Society* (London: Macmillan, 2000); Paul Keal, *European Conquest and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: The Moral Backwardness of International Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[x] Richard Shapcott, *Justice, Community and Dialogue in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[xi] Norbert Elias, *On the Process of Civilisation: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, [1939] 2012).

[xii] Andrew Linklater, *The Problem of Harm in World Politics: Theoretical Investigations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); John M. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760-2010* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[xiii] Stephen Mennell, 'Asian and European Civilizing Processes Compared', in *The Course of Human History: Economic Growth, Social Process, and Civilization*, eds J. Goudsblom, E. Jones and S. Mennell (London: M. E. Sharpe, 1996); John M. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[xiv] Pankaj Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire: The Revolt against the West and the Remaking of Empire* (London: Allen Lane, 2012); Mustapha Pasha, 'Islam, Soft Orientalism and Empire: A Gramscian Rereading', in*Gramsci, Political Economy and International Relations Theory: Modern Princes and Naked Emperors*, ed. A. Ayers (Basingstoke: Palgrave*,* 2008); Mustapha Pasha, 'Global Exception and Islamic Exceptionalism', *International Politics,* 46:5 (2009); Mustapha Pasha, 'Global Leadership and the Islamic World: Crisis, Contention and Challenge', in *Global Crises and the Crisis of Global Leadership*, ed. S. Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

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Andrew Linklater was Emeritus Professor of International Politics at Aberystwyth University. His most recent book is The Idea of Civilization and the Making of Global Order, Bristol University Press, 2021. He has nearly completed a book on symbols in long-term perspective, which will be published posthumously with the help of and contribution by his former student Dr André Saramago.