

The Idea of Civilization

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Prologue

As Euro-American empires grew in the nineteenth century, the term “civilization” was applied to distinguish European ancestry from all others, assuming superiority of Europeans in technology, in manners, and in religion. [Arthur de Gobineau](#), in the 1850s, claimed hierarchy in race, innovation, and moral values, with “Caucasians” at the top and Africans at the bottom. Twentieth-century campaigns against racial hierarchy rose with decolonization, but in the 1990s [Samuel Huntington](#) gained wide support for his claim that a “clash of civilizations”—now meaning especially Christianity, Islam, and China—would dominate world affairs.

Essay

The term “civilization” was coined by European writers of the sixteenth century, drawing on Latin terms to refer to cities of the ancient world. By the eighteenth century, the term gained currency as it took on a new meaning that referred to “civilized” behavior in the modern world. Thus, the term linked the prestigious reputation of ancient and localized cities to the more widespread cultures of the modern era.

“Civilization” in the Nineteenth Century

As capitalism and capitalistic empires expanded rapidly in the nineteenth century, European writers relied increasingly on the idea of “civilization” to represent the hierarchy of their world, comparing it to the cities of the ancient world. Arthur de Gobineau, a French lawyer and diplomat, wrote a speculative history of civilizations and races—each divided into tribes and nations—that articulated an emerging consensus of the European reading public. Civilization, in Gobineau’s view, was achieved through a mysterious combination of a “civilizing instinct” with a form of group-level culture and administration that brought stability, sociability, and the hatred of violence. He used the term “Aryan” to refer to Indo-European languages and the term “Caucasian” to refer to light-skinned Europeans. He identified white, yellow, and Black races, arguing that each racial, linguistic, and civilizational group was fundamentally different and mutually repulsive, so that mixing them usually brought more harm than good. Overall, his interpretation of the nineteenth-century world was that race and civilization fit in a clear hierarchy that would not change. Gobineau was an amateur scholar but his publication restated in colorful language the assumptions that had already been adopted by leaders of public opinion in Western Europe and North America.

Interpretations of civilization such as that of Gobineau tended to be *macrocultural*, in that they referred to very large collections of people who collided with other such groups labeled as the civilizations of Europe, China, India, and the Islamic world. The interpretations focused on cultural *reputations* rather than on actual cultural practices. We cannot escape such discussions when comparing societies at the continental level, but they only make progress beyond vague speculation when they can include historical and cultural specifics.

My own study of “civilization” has been especially in its application to people of Africa and the African Diaspora. There, while I do discuss the cultural reputations of Black people and the changes in those reputations, I give more attention to reviewing their practical cultural contributions. Linking these approaches shows that the reputation of the culture of Black people, in Africa and abroad, reached its lowest point in the late nineteenth century. At that moment, Black people were removed from virtually all positions of responsibility because of claims of their inferiority, with the European conquest of Africa and with expanded racial hierarchy in the diaspora. Colonial

propaganda argued that African slavery was a gentle institution and, further, that African society was so backward that the standards of civilization did not apply. Yet in the same era, especially because so many had achieved emancipation from slavery, people in Africa and the diaspora were developing important innovations in music, dance, and visual art that were to spread to many parts of the world in the twentieth century. The African American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois, writing in 1903, that the problem of the twentieth century was the problem of the color line, found that he needed to express the aspirations of Black people in terms of civilization: he argued that they sought to obtain “the right of sharing to their utmost ability the opportunities and privileges of modern civilization.”

White Supremacy

Following rapidly on the expanded discourse of civilizations, the ideology and practice of white supremacy took form by 1850 and expanded thereafter, as with campaigns of Chinese exclusion in North America. Broadly, ideas of white supremacy grew as millions of people, especially Black, gained freedom from slavery. The notion of white supremacy purported to explain both race and civilization. For race, it assumed the division of humanity into separate and distinct races with inherited biological characteristics. The attributes of individuals in each race were seen as determined biologically at the racial level, and the races could be ranked in a hierarchy of efficiency and evolutionary development. For civilization, white supremacy posited the division of humanity into separate and distinct civilizations, each with common cultural characteristics that were passed on through learning and socialization. Each civilization had its strengths and weaknesses, but they too could be listed in a hierarchy. (Some peoples were thought to be so primitive that they possessed only race, since their culture had not yet evolved to the level of civilization.) The central logic of white supremacy was that the differences of individuals and societies *within* groups—racial or civilizational—were smaller than the differences *between* groups. Thus one could speak of the “typical Negro” or the “typical Caucasian” and expect each to be representative of their own group and sharply different from members of the other group. In addition, white-supremacist thinking, by accepting the logic of purity in race and in civilization, argued that any individuals or societies that could be pictured as “mixed” or “hybrid” were most likely to display the worst characteristics of each ancestry.

While white supremacy did not become codified into a uniform set of rules, the ideas of its supporters combined to form a wider set of social movements sharing a sense of clear identity and triumphal advance for the white race. It took different forms in various parts of the world and interacted differently with previous conditions in each region. Still, it was a worldwide phenomenon.

The obstacles imposed by white supremacy launched debates among all those labeled as “non-white” on how best to respond to this negative categorization. In racial terms, they had to ask whether it was the case that, regardless of their cultural upbringing, people of the Black race were limited to inferior social and intellectual capacities? In civilizational terms, what disabilities did ex-slaves bring with them from their previous condition of bondage into the society of free people? Was it the case that slavery had created ingrained habits of laziness and servility? For Black people slave and free, had African culture restricted them to primitive and inefficient skills and patterns of life? For those who rejected the ideology of white supremacy, other big questions arose. Did the very strength of the white-supremacist denial of Black capacities suffice to overcome the efforts of Blacks to gain full citizenship? Or, more insidiously and more practically, was it the case that new disabilities imposed on Blacks in the very era of emancipation created new and more insurmountable limitations? From this point of view, racial segregation, limitations on education, restrictions against political participation, and a new specificity in the denigration of Black culture presented new rather than old challenges.

Large-scale migration by Europeans was another phenomenon of the imperial era. Empires and migration became the principal structures for the implementation of white supremacy, especially in Africa, but also in the Old World diaspora and the Caribbean. White settlers in Australia, Africa, and the Americas came to expect better treatment than “nonwhites.” In South America, beyond the boundaries of empire, white supremacy also became linked to migration. There, the phenomenon came to be known as “whitening,” in that white workers got the best jobs and

easier access to land. In the United States a similar “whitening” phenomenon took place. Blacks and whites were often put in direct economic competition, with white immigrants taking jobs that would otherwise have gone to Blacks and with Blacks being brought in as strikebreakers against unionized white workers.

White supremacy advanced through military means as much as through ideology. The colonial wars of great powers—against the Amerindians of North and South America and the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and the Pacific islands—were fought under this banner. By 1900, the ideology of white supremacy was in full swing and had brought many conquests. The overall message was remarkably consistent: the dominant and overwhelmingly “white” interests treated “nonwhite” people as biologically, socially, intellectually, and culturally inferior. People of color would do best to renounce their culture and trust white leaders to guide them, eventually, to positions of social responsibility. The ideology of white supremacy maintained its influence for no more than a century, but it had formidable and devastating consequences within that time.

“Civilization” in the Twentieth Century

The World Wars of 1914-1918 and 1939-1945 transformed the use of the term “civilization.” World War I, with its slaughter of imperial troops on the western and eastern fronts of Europe, greatly damaged the prestige of empires and challenged the vision of white supremacy. Yet the triumphalism of European civilization and white supremacy took another step forward in the elite universities of the United States. There, new courses were established on “Western Civilization.” These courses combined writings of the Classical Mediterranean, Medieval Christianity, early modern European political philosophy, and the rise of industrialism and modern culture. This rich collection of writings served the ideological purpose of tracing the history of white people from Greece and Rome through time, now claiming modern leadership by whites of the United States, with the assistance of Western Europeans.

The situation changed drastically within two decades. World War II, concluding with the atomic bombs of August 1945, brought a further restructuring of global organization and ideology. The results included the rejection of racial categorization, the rapid collapse of almost all the remaining empires, and a virtual abandonment of the discourse of civilization. The Axis Powers had explicitly avowed racial hierarchy as their war aims, with the Holocaust as the most extreme implementation of the policy. The total defeat of the Axis Powers launched a process by which racial hierarchy was gradually disassembled worldwide: the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights stood as the formal recognition of a new and more egalitarian vision.

Political scientist Samuel Huntington, however, reintroduced “civilization” as a major category of discourse at the end of the twentieth century. He published a widely debated article in 1993, “A Clash of Civilizations?”, and followed it up with a 1995 book expanding his argument. His focus was on international relations and on recommending policies in world affairs for the United States government. The Soviet Union had collapsed in 1991, and with it the Cold War of Soviet-American confrontation that dominated U.S. policies throughout the period after World War II. What would be the focus of U.S. policy in the post-Cold-War era? Huntington argued that it the world should be defined as consisting of seven or eight “civilizations.” He urged that American policy makers seek to maintain dominance of the nations within Western Civilization, and that Western Civilization should seek to maintain dominance over the complex interaction of all the other contending civilizations. Of the others, Huntington presented Islamic and Chinese Civilizations as the most dangerous source of disruption of American dominance and leadership.

Huntington’s argument gave little explicit attention to race. Where civilizational thinking in the days of white supremacy had tended to foreground race as a major element of civilizational identity, Huntington sought to argue that race plays a small role in civilizational difference. Yet his analysis otherwise ended up with the same hierarchies as had Gobineau, 140 years earlier—the same stereotypes and denigration of “non-West,” with Africans at the bottom of the hierarchy. In his specific descriptions of individual civilizations, he gave attention to the unity of race in Chinese, Japanese, and Hindu civilizations. For Western Civilization (and for Latin American Civilization) he gave little attention to race, which means that he treated the continuing disputes on racial identities and racial inequalities as insignificant in determining the global policies in the leading nations of each

civilization. Huntington's maps of the world's civilizations show that, in his view, Islam trumps African society but Christianity does not. That is, he classified Africans who profess the Islamic religion within Islamic Civilization, while he classified African in the same nations who profess Christianity as part of a separate and mostly neglected African Civilization.

The notion of civilization in the time of Gobineau had centered especially on celebrating and preserving the dominance of Europe in world affairs. Similarly, in the time of Huntington, the notion of civilization centered especially on celebrating and preserving the dominance of the United States (partnered with Europe) in world affairs. It focused on macro-level generalizations. It focused on reputations of the various civilizations that it defined, rather than on practical analysis of their details. It explained world affairs as the maintenance of ancestral divisions among communities rather than connections among communities. Huntington, in this view of civilization, sought to distance his outlook from claims that its divisions and hierarchies arose from the discredited racial hierarchies of the nineteenth century, yet he relied at every turn on the categorizations of the days of white supremacy.

Today, after the political and pandemic disasters of 2020, some thirty years after Huntington wrote, Americans seeking to recover from the disaster of the Trump administration often speak of re-establishing "American leadership" in the world. But this echo of Huntington's analysis brings a reminder that the reality underlying American efforts to lead might become a replay of earlier plans to achieve "American dominance" in a world segmented into civilizations. For instance, the U.S. program for COVID-19 vaccinations, with support of both the government and popular opinion, took what can be called an "America First" approach, focusing overwhelmingly on vaccines for the United States with little attention to the rest of the global population. This model of "leadership" seems little different from earlier policies of "dominance."

Finally, Huntington's analysis, while flawed, provided a challenge that is worthy of response. He proposed civilizations and the clash of civilizations as a model for the interactions of global politics for at least several decades beginning in the 1990s. I conclude with three questions about his argument. First, is Huntington's topic, the struggles among major states-powers, the most important issue in global society to be understood in the early 21st century? Second, did he understand or misunderstand the main conflicts and threats in global affairs? And third, even within the issue of struggles among major states, can other models be proposed that account for factors given insufficient attention by Huntington?

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INSPIRATION FOR THIS ESSAY:

Gobineau, *Inequality*

Arthur de Gobineau, trans. Adrian Collins, *The Inequality of the Races* (Los Angeles: Noontide Press, 1962 [first published 1853–1855]), 87–91.

I can thus divide peoples into two classes, as they come predominantly under the action of one or the other of these currents; though the division is, of course, in no way absolute. At the head of the “male” category I put the Chinese; the Hindus being the prototype of the opposite class.

After the Chinese come most of the peoples of ancient Italy, the Romans of the Early Republic, and the Germanic tribes. In the opposite camp are ranged the nations of Egypt and Assyria. They take their place behind the men of Hindustan.

When we follow the nations down the ages, we find that the civilization of nearly all of them has been modified by their oscillation between the two principles. The peoples of Northern China were at first almost entirely materialistic. By a gradual fusion with tribes of different blood, especially those in the Yunnan, their outlook became less purely utilitarian

In Northern Europe the materialistic strain contributed by the best of the Germanic tribes, has been continually strengthened by the influx of Celts and Slavs. But as the white peoples drifted more and more towards the south, the male influences gradually lost their force and were absorbed by an excess of female elements, which finally triumphed. . . .

I conclude from such facts as these that every human activity, moral or intellectual, has its original source in one or other of these two currents, “male” or “female”; and only the races which have one of these elements in abundance (without, of course, being quite destitute of the other) can reach, in their social life, a satisfactory stage of culture, and so attain to civilization. . . .

When some special point of view is accepted by the mass of a people as the basis of their legislation, it is really because it fulfils, in the main, their most cherished desires. The male nations look principally for material well-being, the female nations are more taken up with the needs of the imagination; but, I repeat, as soon as the multitudes enroll themselves under a banner, or—to speak more exactly—as soon as a particular form of administration is accepted, a civilization is born.

Another invariable mark of civilization is the need that is felt for stability. . . . The purer a race keeps its blood, the less will its social foundations be liable to attack; for the general way of thought will remain the same. . . .

By the side of stability, and the co-operation of individual interests, which touch each other without being destroyed, we must put a third and a fourth characteristic of civilization, sociability, and the hatred of violence—in other words the demand that the head, and not the fists, shall be used for self-defense.

These last two features are the source of all mental improvement, and so of all material progress; it is to these especially that we look for the evidence as to whether a society is advanced or not.

I think I may now sum up my view of civilization by defining it as *a state of relative stability, where the mass of men try to satisfy their want by peaceful means, and are refined in their conduct and intelligence.*

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INSPIRATION FOR THIS ESSAY:

Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations*

Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster), 20, 311–312.

The central theme of this book is that culture and cultural identities, which at the broadest level are civilization identities, are shaping the patterns of cohesion, disintegration, and conflict in the post-Cold War world. The five parts of this book elaborate corollaries to this main proposition.

Part I: For the first time in history global politics is both multipolar and multicivilizational modernization is distinct from Westernization and is producing neither a universal civilization in any meaningful sense nor the Westernization of non-Western societies.

Part II: The balance of power among civilizations is shifting: the West is declining in relative influence; Asian civilizations are expanding their economic, military, and political strength; Islam is exploding demographically with destabilizing consequences for Muslim countries and their neighbors; and non-Western civilizations generally are reaffirming the value of their own cultures.

Part III: A civilization-based world order is emerging: societies sharing cultural affinities cooperate with each other; efforts to shift societies from one civilization to another are unsuccessful; and countries group themselves around the lead or core states of their civilization.

Part IV: The West's universalist pretensions increasingly bring it into conflict with other civilizations, most seriously with Islam and China: at the local level fault line wars, largely between Muslims and non-Muslims, generate "kin-country rallying," the threat of broader escalation, and hence efforts by core states to halt these wars.

Part V: The survival of the West depends on Americans reaffirming their Western identity and Westerners accepting their civilization as unique not universal and uniting to renew and preserve it against challenges from non-Western societies. Avoidance of a global war of civilizations depends on world leaders accepting and cooperating to maintain the multicivilizational character of global politics. . . .

All civilizations go through similar processes of emergence, rise, and decline. The West differs from other civilizations not in the way it has developed but in the distinctive character of its values and institutions. These include most notably its Christianity, pluralism, individualism, and rule of law, which made it possible for the West to invent modernity, expand throughout the world, and become the envy of other societies. In their ensemble these characteristics are peculiar to the West. Europe, as Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., has said, is "the source—the *unique* source" of the "ideas of individual liberty, political democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and cultural freedom. . . . These are *European* ideas, not Asian, nor African, nor Middle Eastern ideas, except by adoption." They make Western civilization unique, and Western civilization is valuable not because it is universal but because it *is* unique. The principal responsibility of Western leaders, consequently, is not to attempt to reshape other civilizations in the image of the West, which is beyond their declining power, but to preserve, protect, and renew the unique qualities of Western civilization. Because it is the most powerful Western country, that responsibility falls overwhelmingly on the United States of America.

to preserve Western civilization in the face of declining Western power, it is in the interest of the United States and European countries:

- to achieve greater political, economic, and military integration and to coordinate their policies so as to preclude states from other civilizations exploiting differences among them;

PATRICK MANNING

World History Center | 3900 Posvar Hall | University of Pittsburgh | Pittsburgh, PA | 1-617-435-6540 | pmanning@pitt.edu

- to incorporate into the European Union and NATO the Western states of Central Europe that is, the Visegrad countries, the Baltic republics, Slovenia, and Croatia;
- to encourage the “Westernization” of Latin America and, as far as possible, the close alignment of Latin American countries with the West;
- to restrain the development of the conventional and unconventional military power of Islamic and Sinic countries;
- to slow the drift of Japan away from the West and toward accommodation with China;
- to accept Russia as the core state of Orthodoxy and a major regional power with legitimate interest in the security of its southern borders;
- to maintain Western technological and military superiority over other civilizations;
- and, most important, to recognize that Western intervention in the affairs of other civilizations is probably the single most dangerous source of instability and potential global conflict in a multicivilizational world.