

Civilizations in World Politics: Plural and Pluralist Perspectives

Edited By *Peter J. Katzenstein*

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The quest to incorporate non-material factors into international relations has continued apace into the twenty-first century. After religion, culture and identity, now ‘civilization’ seems to be attracting a great deal of attention from international relations (IR) scholars. *Civilizations in World Politics: Plural and Pluralist Perspectives*, which is the result of a roundtable and a panel organized at the 2007 and 2008 annual meetings of the American Political Science Association, investigates the potentiality of the concept of civilizations in order to better explain world politics. The book consists of six case studies of civilizations (American European, Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Islamic) in six chapters, bookended by an introduction and a conclusion by Peter J. Katzenstein and Patrick T. Jackson respectively.

All six case studies revolve around particular questions about how to conceptualize civilizations in contemporary world politics: should civilizations be conceived as having a persistent essence (dispositional approach) or as existing only in politicians’ rhetoric and discourse in such a way as to warrant examination of political discourses? Do plural civilizations exist within one “civilization of modernity” while keeping their own unique and distinctive practices?

In his introduction to the book, while acknowledging at the outset the plurality and pluralistic nature of civilizations, Katzenstein notes that civilizations “coexist

with each other within one civilization of modernity” (p.1), which means “...a multiplicity of different cultural programs and institutions of modernity that derive from the interaction between West European modernity and the various civilizations of the Axial Age” (p.17), or what we often call today a global world” (p.1). Katzenstein’s claim provides a launch point for the rich discussions that follow. Indeed, Emanuel Adler raises an explicit objection to Katzenstein’s argument in chapter three. According to Adler, European civilization, now in its second phase with the EU being the normative power, is rather a post-modern “community of practice.” Adler notes the EU’s embrace of the approach of ‘power to’ instead of ‘power over,’ exemplified by practices such as the elimination of borders, the enlargement process, CFSP [Common Foreign and Security Policy] practices, and the like.

On the question of the proper approach to the study of civilizations, most of the case studies favor a discursive approach to accommodate the use of the concept of civilizations in discussions of world politics. In the closing chapter of the book, Patrick Jackson suggests a post-essentialist approach to studying civilizations. What he has in mind is the study of the invocation of civilizational essences. This way, he argues, civilizations can be incorporated into the IR field. While it is not civilizations that act in world politics, he notes, but rather other political units such as nation-states, these

might bear a *civilizational identity* that could be assessed and taken into account. David Kang also favors a discursive approach to the study of civilizations. He argues in his chapter on Chinese civilization that despite all the talk and its roots in the distant past, China “has no more civilizational influence than does modern Greece” today (p.113). Kang interestingly sheds light on the widely explored issue of identity-building over a demonized ‘other,’ an issue social constructivists deal with most, through the concept of “civilizational identity.” He insightfully argues that nomads such as Monghols, Uighurs and Khitans constituted the ‘others’ to Chinese civilizational identity partly because they resisted Chinese values.

Bruce Lawrence, in his study of Islamic civilization, concurs with the rest of the authors that civilizations exist more in peoples’ minds, attitudes and discourses than in specific territories today. His conclusion that we should focus more on what people think about their civilization is a good reminder that nation-states still dominate thinking about international relations.

In their chapters on Japanese and Indian civilizations respectively, David Leheny and Susan Rudolph substantiate the discursive approach. Leheny asserts that despite the fact that the notion of the essence and distinctiveness of Japanese civilization has been persistent and common among the Japanese, civilizations or civilizational states cannot be employed in an experimental framework in world politics. Rudolph demonstrates the role politicians deliberately play in creating conceptions of civilizations as she analyzes the existence of four variants of Indian civilization within 250 years (mid-18th until 21st century):

orientalist, anglicist, Indian, and Hindu nationalist. Adler is the author of the only chapter to try to advance a dispositional approach as he takes the European civilization as a community of practice with dispositional properties.

Here we have a book very rich in content and so timely in discussing its subject that it will surely broaden the conceptual tools available to international relations scholars, particularly to social constructivists, with its introduction of the concept of civilizational identity. The authors of the case studies problematize the concept of ‘civilizations’ and provide the reader with new insights about them while making a strong case for adopting a discursive approach. Nonetheless, the book is not free of some weaknesses. To begin with, the argument that multiple civilizations exist within one civilization of modernity is not as clear-cut as it might seem at first glance. Even though it is true that plural civilizations exist,¹ the idea that civilizations co-exist under one civilization of modernity should not distract us from noting that various civilizations are not left as free to enact different programs of modernity to bring about multiple modernities as Katzenstein would want us to assume. As Davutoglu has pointed out, the dominant Western civilization does not readily allow other civilizations the essential living space they need to cherish their unique social relations of production and particular forms of spiritual consciousness,² features which Cox pinpointed as factors that “may differentiate civilizations that coexist.”³ One would have to be overtly naïve to assume the coexistence of plural civilizations within one civilization of modernity unless pluralism means “different presentations of the same supreme civilization,”⁴ not the sur-

vival of the authentic parameters of other civilizations.

James Kurth states in his chapter that humanity lives in a secular modern global civilization today, but one cannot help but ask how global that civilization is, especially when he acknowledges that Chinese, Indian and Persian civilizations still have their own civilizational states (p. 65) and that “this conception of global civilization has made America the principal adversary or target of particular repositories and remnants of the old Axial age civilizations such as China, India and Iran and Shiite Islam and Sunni Islam and its transnational networks” (p. 41). Besides, described as “those civilizations that crystallized during the half-millennium from 500 B.C. to the first century of the Christian era”⁵ by Eisenstadt and as confirmed by Lawrence in this book (p.158), contra Kurth, Islam would be a ‘post-Axial age civilization’ not an ‘Axial one.’

Last but not least, those who are familiar with the depiction of Turkey as a ‘bridge’ between the East and the West by foreign observers as well as Turkish politicians could be easily disturbed by Lawrence’s constant description of Islamic civilization as a bridge (p. 164-165, 166, 172). It is not clear if Lawrence is using the ‘bridge’ metaphor in the Huntingtonian sense, in which it would mean “... an artificial creation connecting two solid entities but part of neither,”⁶ or, as seems more likely, something that connects two entities and carries one side to another, but is not perceived as an actor with an independent existence.⁷ Perhaps, it would have been a better idea for Lawrence to adopt the ‘emic’ perspective Jackson raised in his chapter, and try to “explicate how participants in that culture make sense of their own activities” (p.185). If that had been

done, it is highly likely that Lawrence would have found that the participants of the Islamic civilization did not perceive their civilization a ‘bridge civilization.’

Overall, these reservations notwithstanding, *Civilizations in World Politics: Plural and Pluralist Perspectives* not only stands as a valuable and insightful introduction to the study of civilizations and civilizational identities in 21st century world politics, but as an important terminological contribution that might help save a revered concept from such arbitrary usages as “market civilization.”⁸

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Endnotes

1. Richard Falk, “Geopolitical Turmoil and Civilizational Pluralism”, *Civilizations and World Orders*, Istanbul May 12-14, 2006 (Divan Ilmi Araştırmalar, Vol 12. Number 23 (2007/2); Edward Said, “The Clash of Ignorance,” *The Nation*, October 4, 2001.

2. Ahmet Davutoglu, *Civilizational Transformation and the Muslim World*. (Kuala Lumpur: Mahir Publications, 1994); Ahmet Davutoglu, “Medeniyetlerin Ben-İdraki” [Self-Perception of Civilizations], *Divan Ilmi Araştırmalar*, Volume 1 (1997).

3. Robert Cox, “Civilizations and the Twenty-First Century: Some Theoretical Considerations,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Volume 1, (2001), p. 113.

4. Ahmet Davutoglu, *Civilizational Transformation and the Muslim World*. (Kuala Lumpur: Mahir Publications, 1994), p. 74.

5. Samuel N. Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities Part I*, (Leiden & Boston: Brill Publications, 2003), p. 36.

6. Samuel Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 138-139.

7. Ahmet Davutoglu, “Turkiye Merkez Ulke Olmali” [Turkey Should be a Pivotal Country], *Radikal*, February 26, 2004.

8. Michael Mousseau, “Market Civilization and Its Clash with Terror,” *International Security*, 27 (3), (Winter 2002-2003), pp. 5-29.