

Gergely Egedy

Nation vs. Civilization? The Rise of „Civilizational States”



Summary

After the end of the Cold War, the triumphant West came to the conclusion that the values which it represented were of universal relevance, and this in turn would provide the basis for its long-term hegemony. However, this assumption has been challenged – or even disproven – by the spectacular rise of the so-called „civilizational states”, i.e., states that define themselves not as nation-states but as civilizations, trying to revive the traditions of their erstwhile empires. This study first wishes to explore the main characteristics of the most important civilizational states, China, Russia, India and Turkey, and then it points out that in contrast to these self-conscious countries the civilization of the West has to cope with serious internal problems threatening its existence. The conclusion of the author is that the West has no other choice than to renounce its claims on universalism and at the same time defend by all means its own unique cultural legacy.

Keywords: the hegemony of the West, civilization state, geopolitics, cancel culture

INTRODUCTION

Is it in the 21st century that the age of empires will arise again? After the Peace Treaty of Westphalia (1648), empires were gradually replaced by nation-states on the stage of international politics. In the first quarter of our century, however, we can witness the parallel development of the Western-dominated world order by key states in international relations seeking to revive their former imperial past, building on their own civilizational heritage. For a long time after winning the Cold War, the West assumed that no one would be able to ques-

PROF. DR. GERGELY EGEDY, university professor, DSc, National University of Public Service (egedy.gergely@uni-nke.hu).

tion its dominant position, but that was not the case. On the contrary, we can see that China, India, Russia or even Turkey are increasingly rejecting the Western-style democratic system and market economy, along with the idea of universal human rights. It is a peculiar historical development that while the idea of the exceptionality of the West is being questioned by more and more people, the above-mentioned states define themselves as distinct and unique civilizations. Can the West respond to this challenge, and what are the chances of traditional nation-states? This issue is all the more pressing because the Covid-19 pandemic has brought not only a health and economic crisis but also a crisis of civilization to the entire world.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CIVILIZATIONAL TRADITIONS

In March 1947, the renowned English historian Arnold Toynbee was featured on the cover of Time magazine with the thesis that civilization was a more important factor in history than the classes centered on Marxist philosophy of history.¹ The editors therefore called him the most influential thinker of the XXth century for his recognition. In a peculiar way, however, the idea of emphasizing the key role of civilizations in the ideological battles of the Cold War was relegated to the background, and even Samuel Huntington (1999) made little reference to Toynbee in his 1996 high-impact work, *The Clash of Civilizations*. Yet there would have been plenty of reasons for it, as Ian Hall (2018) points out in his interesting study, as the foundations were laid by the eminent historian. The dramatically growing geopolitical importance of civilizations would be hard to question. The famous journalist Gideon Rachman (2015) rightly wrote after the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris that the events “narrowed the space for those who want to push back against a narrative of ‘The Clash of Civilizations’”. The first non-Western reflection on Huntington’s concept was the 1998 work by Kishore Mahbubani of Singapore, which boldly asked the question, “Can Asians think?” It is hardly a coincidence that several people have described him as an “Asian Toynbee”.

Perhaps the most important and in any case striking factor in the transformation of the world order is that in the non-Western world the so-called civilizational states play an ever-increasing role. What do we mean by this concept? We think of states that base their legitimacy not on a nation but on their own civilizational heritage. It is well known that in the West, the essential condition for the legitimacy of the state is democratic functioning, but in the case of the civilizational states, the existence or absence of democracy does not matter much: the state is expected to preserve civilization, and its success in this respect in itself ensures civic loyalty. We can put it this way, that culture is clearly more important here than the politics; these states use history for their own legitimacy. According to several Asian authors, the distinguishing feature of a civilizational state is that it has not only political power but also extraordinary moral authority- in this it differs from the Western state type.

The concept of the civilizational state has appeared in the literature for a decade. The latest and most accurate summary was made by Christopher Coker, a professor at the London School of Economics in his 2019 book (*The Rise of the Civilizational State*). He emphasized, and rightly so, that the marginalization of Western liberal universalism is fundamentally

transforming the content of geopolitics, bringing the fault lines of civilization to the fore. That is, in geopolitics, the importance of the geographical and political elements decreases, while that of the cultural and civilizational aspects increases. Coke rightly points out that although the civilizational states have many different features, they all agree on one thing which is the rejection of Western universalism. Western culture is presented everywhere as a destructive force: in China, which is greatly difficult to explain, even church music such as Handel's *Messiah* or Verdi's *Requiem* is not allowed to be presented, and in Russia, Netflix is also seen as subversive (Coke, 2019: 170; 177).

In his 2014 book, *The World Order*, Henry Kissinger concluded that competing ideas of civilizations could provoke conflicts that were more dangerous than traditional interstate struggles.

However, new developments have been highlighted not only by historians and political scientists, but also by more far-sighted politicians. French President Macron, for example, made it very clear in a speech in August 2019 at a regular annual gathering of the country's diplomats that China, India and Russia are "true civilizational states" that have strongly transformed the political world order and the way we think about it." (The Ambassadors' Conference, 2019). We are accustomed to a world system based on the dominance of the West - France in the 18th century, Britain in the 19th century and America in the 20th century - and the importance of the new powers has long been underestimated. However, this was a mistake. We know that civilizations can sink, the French head of state continued, and this threat is also threatening Europe at the moment. So we have no choice but to adapt.

CHINA: A CLASSIC EXAMPLE OF THE CIVILIZATIONAL STATE

China can rightly be said to be a civilization that wants to act as a state in the international arena. Zhang Weiwei, a professor at Fudan University, in his book published in his homeland in 2011 (and a successful English edition entitled "The China Wave: The Rise of a Civilizational State") proudly emphasizes that China has combined the world's oldest civilization with a modern state in all respects. According to him it would be fatal for China to adopt the Western model. The country must follow its own path, as Teng Xiaoping, who had initiated the reforms in the last two decades of the XXth century, did, and as a result is in better shape than ever before in its history. China's GDP has increased 18 times from 1979 to 2011, the first publication of the book dedicated to the memory of Teng-Xiaoping! The author explains that Western experts have long predicted the failure of the Chinese system, but they were not right: the predictions collapsed, not China. In this narrative, the commitment of Chinese culture to a strong and unified state thwarted the territorial disintegration of the country, the secession of Tibet, or Xinjiang inhabited by Uyghurs. Zhang *expressis verbis* states that success does not simply belong to a country, but to a civilization.² The civilizational state is a "new model of development" that does not follow any pattern because it builds on the unique features of its own heritage and, while able to learn from others, retains its own identity (Zhang, 2011: 49-50). As a result, it does not need recogni-

tion from the West either. "Sun Tzu's Art of War does not need the stamp of approval of Clausewitz, Confucius does not need the acknowledgment of Plato, and China's current 'macroeconomic regulation' does not need the approval of the US Federal Reserve Board." – as it can be read.³ On the contrary, according to the Chinese professor, Sun Tzu's book will have an impact on Western military thinking, all of humanity can learn from Confucius, and Chinese economic policy can provide significant lessons for the United States. In the interpretation of the "Chinese wave," China, contrary to the West, which is constantly looking for progress and change, builds on the wisdom of its ancestors and owes its rise to it. This, of course, is a way of thinking that is profoundly different from what is common in the West. The West's biggest problem with China, as explained in detail by the British Martin Jacques, who wrote a bestselling book about China's rise in 2009, is that the West simply doesn't understand.

Confucianism undoubtedly plays a key role in this legacy. Xi Jinping, the secretary general of the Communist Party of China, has repeatedly emphasized the importance of the Confucian heritage - a sharp break from the Communist Party's previous line. In 2017, the party's 19th Congress defined the Confucian-Leninist model based on a one-party system as "Chinese-style socialism". The basic idea of Confucianism is social harmony and this fits well with the Beijing leadership's efforts to maintain domestic political stability even in the midst of rapid change. The remarkably rapid economic growth has been accompanied by the creation of large social inequalities, and Confucianism has proved extremely useful in curbing them. That the contrast between the rich and the poor has escalated in an unprecedented way, even Zhang (2011: 9-10) acknowledges and considers it one of China's biggest concerns. Stability is paramount, professes Deng Xiaoping, whom Zhang considers to be his spiritual master. Confucius' teachings are now also taught in the Chinese schools, to which we should add that the party has, of course, re-evaluated the original Confucian teachings on several important points.

In this context, China does not link its new identity to the history of the 19th and 20th centuries, as it only brought humiliation to it, but to earlier centuries when it could think of itself as an empire. The sharpest wound in the self-esteem of the Chinese is the British initiated Opium Wars (Coke, 2019: 107). Beijing describes the criticism aimed at its political system as the "ideological globalism" of the West and rejects it as such, even claiming that critics want to push the country back into semi-colonial status. Furthermore, in some circles in Beijing, it is not only stated that China is a unique and exceptional country, but also that it is morally superior to the "barbaric" outside world. This idea is also based on an ancient tradition. Part of this is the statement that China, as a great power, does not behave like those do: it is not driven by any intention to expand (Coke, 2019: 118). The same is said by Zhang (2011) when he points out that his homeland extends the Confucian idea of harmony to the international system: while Western civilization is "dangerous," Chinese civilization is fundamentally peaceful. At the same time, Liang Xiaojun (2016), a professor at the China University of Foreign Affairs, emphasized that "China is destined to lead, but it is not ready yet".

RUSSIA UNDER THE SPELL OF EURASIA

Today's Russia also shows the hallmarks of a civilizational state. Moscow has defined Russia as a civilization that is neither Western nor Eastern, but a special, "Eurasian" mixture of the two. This idea is not new either. Already in the first half of the 20th century, the dominant "Eurasianian" line of Russian geopolitical thinking, marked by the names of Nikolai Trubeckoy and Pyotr Savicki, among others, asserted that the Russian civilization united Europe and Asia. In other words, it is not part of either Europe or Asia, but an independent, special entity (Szilágyi, 2019). The exponents of "Eurasianism" have in fact taken over the idea of "Slavophile" Nikolayevich Danyilevsky that Europe does not exist at all; it is merely the western edge of Eurasia (Szilágyi, 2019: 25-15). Russia has far more grounds than China for calling itself a "central empire," he argues, pointing out that Russia, occupying the central part of Eurasia cannot be interpreted as a nation-state, but only as a civilization and empire (Szilágyi, 2019: 19). Going back to this tradition, President Putin stressed that his country is more than a nation-state; it is a "multiethnic civilization" that, like its predecessor Byzantium, absorbed both Eastern and Western elements. Putin emphasized, which is quite remarkable, that nationalists also need to understand that by calling into question the 'multiethnic nature' of the Russian state, they are jeopardizing our 'genetic code' (Valdai International Discussion Club, 2012). The argument that if Russia became a nation-state it would cease to be a civilization also fits into this approach. (Thus, Peter the Great's attempt to carve a modern nation-state out of Russia is especially damaging from this point of view.)

The Orthodox Church was given a special role in the Russian civilizational state. The Moscow patriarch called Putin an outright "miracle of God." According to Vladimir Pasukov, a Russian political scientist living in England, Putin revived the idea of Russian Messianism - a fundamental element of the Russian cultural code (Coke, 2012: 122). The philosopher Alexander Dugin, Putin's former adviser, is a well-known ideologue of Russia's foreign policy expansion; he is greatly convinced that Russia is inconceivable without an empire and he emphasizes that "Russia can only be examined with a thorough understanding of the characteristics of Russian society by simultaneously studying the past and the present."⁴ (This view is also represented by the Putin-friendly "Eurasian" Izborsky Club, organized in 2012, which calls into question the legitimacy of an independent Ukraine.) According to Dugin, the West has already lost its traditions; values are only preserved by Russia. That is why we have to confront the West - or we will disappear - he claims. It can be said, therefore, that the Russian leadership intends to make the rejection of the West an integral part of Russian identity.⁵ Russian researcher Lev Gudkov no longer set the victory in World War II over the Germans as a triumph over Hitler's empire, but as a defeat for the entire West (Coke, 2012: 12). However, there is much truth in Roger Cohen's view that while China is potentially a winner's challenge, meanwhile Russia is a loser's challenge to the West (Coke, 2012:185).

THE DOOM OF ATATÜRK

Erdogan is looking for a way back to the Ottoman imperial past for the Turkish state. Ankara excels in creating a civilizational state and in emphasizing its opposition to the European civilization. In the spirit of embracing the imperial past, he radically rejects the inheritance of Kemal Atatürk, the creation of a modern secular Turkish state. The Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, declared a museum by Atatürk in 1934, was transformed into a mosque in July 2020 as a symbolic gesture of the split that became known worldwide. What could be a more symbolic message than that Erbas, the head of the Turkish ecclesiastical hierarchy, indirectly but unequivocally cursed Atatürk from the pulpit of the church that had been turned into a mosque during the conquest of Constantinople in 1453? (Zaman, 2020). Both Moscow's Orthodox Patriarch Kirill and the U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo have called for the status of the 1,500-year-old world heritage building not to be changed, but the request was in vain.

However, this stubbornness is not surprising. Ankara no longer demands to be a member of the EU - on the contrary, it is no longer just blackmailing Europe over migrants, it is threatening it. "Give birth not to three children but to five, you will be the future of Europe," Erdogan told the Turkish people in the Netherlands after calling the Hague government "Nazi" because it had not allowed two of its ministers to take part in a Turkish community campaign (Darroch, 2017). Europe's opinion no longer matters: Ankara has accused the EU of a colonial attitude for blaming the gas exploration it began off the coast of the Greek islands. Supporters of Erdogan say the West remains with anti-Islamist ideals which are moved by the spirit of the Crusades. The Turkish head of state declared at the UN that the members of the Security Council could not take over the world (UN Security Council Needs to be restructured, 2021). Foreign Minister Mevlüt Cavosuglu went even further when he put the "Resumption of holy wars" into perspective (Hurriyet Daily News, 2017).

INDIA: THE DENIAL OF NEHRU AND GANDHI

Like the Turkish leadership, Narendra Modi's government also condemns the creators of modern India, especially Jawaharlal Nehru, for embracing Western concepts such as socialism instead of building on the Hindu heritage of the subcontinent. He also does not sympathize with the intellectual legacy of Gandhi, the former legendary leader of the Indian National Congress, who proclaimed non-violence. By bringing civilization to the forefront, Modi's party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, which has ruled India since 2014, has taken a stand on Hindu nationalism and is seeking to establish its old rival, the National Congress, as a "westernizing" force. Under this government, English-style democracy, the basic elements of which are enshrined in the British-minded constitution, has been severely undermined. A spectacular sign of this is the discrimination against the Muslim minority. In 2019, the citizenship law was amended so that while Buddhists, Sikhs and Christians fleeing from neighboring countries (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan) to India are quickly granted Indian citizenship, Muslims however, cannot expect this (Reuters, 2019). According to Zhang, the democratic elements of India's political system are largely responsible for why India lags far behind China (Zhang, 2011: 139).

The civilization of India is, of course, a more controversial formula than that of China, as it is characterized by a wide variety of religions, ethnicities, and languages, but this does not negate the fact that we can find a unique civilization based on Hinduism. Octavio Paz (1985), a Nobel Prize-winning Mexican poet and diplomat and former ambassador of his country to India, thoughtfully remarked that Indo-European India is “the opposite pole of the West,” in fact; it is the “reflection”. Paz, who worked in Delhi in the 1960s, saw India as striving not to shape history but to avoid it as much as possible. Today, this could hardly be said of the Indian government. Having been elected in 2014, Modi stated that “the 21st century will be the century of India” and also indicated that he also counts on the Indian diaspora in different parts of the world as guardians of the Hindu civilization.

THE WEST AND THE “CANCEL CULTURE”

We can see, then, that the “civilizational states” of Eurasia have no problem in defining their roots and identity, in fact, this is their main resource. But can we say the same about the West? Hardly so, it can be said.

In the eyes of the West, China and Russia are currently the main threats, and its leaders, meanwhile, tend to forget that there are sharp contradictions within their own civilization as well. Although Francis Fukuyama was adamant about the global victory of liberalism in 1989, he was well aware of the internal problems of the Western civilization.

Therefore, he rightly warns us, in his augmented work to the “End of History” entitled “The End of History and the Last Man,” that the dilemmas of the survival of the Western political system are mostly dealt with only at the level of foreign policy, even though the West is threatened by internal threats no less powerful than by the rival superpowers (Fukuyama, 1994: 410).

Operational disruptions are marked by failures to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic, but the “Black Lives Matter” (BLM) movement that unfolded after May 2020 could also be included in the crisis. The world-famous practice of tearing down statues is a way of separating the past from the present, and thereby it manifestly declares war on the traditions of the Western civilization, those which preserve more democratic elements than any other civilization in the world. The BLM, which enjoys a widespread mass support, reminds the famous English philosopher John Gray of the professed millenarianist-messianic sects of the late Middle Ages, because like them, they sought worldly salvation, the perfect society, in a utopian and anarchist way (Gray, 2020). The “social justice warrior” (SJW) is convinced that for a better world, it is enough to destroy the old thus, to destroy the Western culture. According to Gray, their movement also bears some parallels with the Bolsheviks, but the latter had definite goals and ideas, and they have no vision. Of course, the problems are not new; the legitimacy of Western civilization has long been undermined in many American universities (Egedy, 2016: 62-66). Modern thinking does not prevent the nihilistic war from being waged against liberal democracy in the future from their sweet children,” - says Fukuyama (1994: 471). At the moment, we are now at the point where the “enlightened” BLM supporters would make public apology for standing up for the Western civilization a mandatory norm.

Thus, the most serious problem in today's Western civilization is a kind of schizophrenia - the recently deceased Roger Scruton (2005) aptly defined it as „cancel culture”. While in the “non-Western” world they seek to explore and focus on the heritage of their own civilization, in the West there is an expectation to deny the traditions that distinguish us from others. It is as if the West is sacrificing its own civilization for the sake of a universalism that no one needs... This attitude, of course, profoundly weakens the resilience of our civilization in an era when it would be needed more than ever. So a change of direction is inevitable; the West must rely on its own heritage and give up shaping the world in its own image. The West must accept the fact that their civilization is extremely rich but it is not universal.

CIVILIZATION AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE NATION

Macron rightly said in his previously quoted speech that the civilizational states have a much greater initiative than the old European states. The general secretary of the Janata Party, which rules India, has said that “from now on, Asia will rule the world and that will change everything, because here we have civilizations, not nations”.⁶ This is certainly a key phrase: paradoxically, it contrasts civilizations with the nations associated with the West.

It is all the more noteworthy because the idea of civilization was developed in 18th century Europe, and in this context it was not unreasonably believed by the great French historian Fernand Braudel that the plural use of civilizations could mean the rejection of the civilization when used singularly. The nation-state as a political form is historically truly tied to Western civilization, as real nations have only emerged in this circle. It is fair to ask whether the reference to civilization is not a peculiar covert form of nationalism. In any case, Adrian Pabst (2019), a professor at the University of Kent, argues that these states represent a specific hybrid doctrine: nationalism at home and the emphasis and protection of their civilization in the international arena. Let us add to this that the offensive attitude of the civilizational states clearly calls into question the position of traditional nation-states in the international system.

The last two centuries belonged to the nation-state; will it now belong to the civilizational states? As is well known, today's nation-states face a number of challenges: on the one hand, from large supranational integrations, and on the other, from states that think within the imperial framework. It is reasonable to ask whether the EU itself is not on its way towards becoming a ‘civilizational state’... (Zhang writes in the Chinese Wave that “if the ancient Roman Empire had stayed united till now and transformed into a modern state, Europe could also be a medium-sized civilizational state.”). Scruton (2005: 170-173) is, of course, right that the nation-state is not the only possible source of social membership, but it is also undoubted that, with all its flaws, it has the most organic connection with our Judeo-Christian civilization heritage, and it provides the patterns of community that can best ensure a person's dignity. So we have a reason to defend the Western civilization that sustains nations, and thus our Hungarian identity as well.

NOTES

- ¹ Arnold J. Toynbee, March 17, Time (TIME Magazine Cover) <http://content.time.com/time/co- vers / 0.16641.19470317.00.html> Download: 2021, Oct. 29.
- ² The development of the state of Chinese civilization is followed in detail in Chapter 3 of *The Wave of China*. Zhang: i.m. 47-82.
- ³ Zhang: i.m. 3. (The Fed is the US central bank)
- ⁴ Quotes Dugin: Szilágyi: i.m. 25. Perhaps Dugin's most important work is entitled 'Fundamentals of Geopolitics' and was first published in 1997. Also available in Hungarian: *The Fourth Political Idea*, Quintessence Publishing House, Debrecen, 2017.
- ⁵ Let us add, however, that for the Russians the West is not as distant and foreign as for China - this explains why the so-called „western” tradition is also powerful.
- ⁶ Quotes: Macaes, Bruno: *The Attack of the Civilization-State*, Noema, 2020, June 15, <https://www.noemamag.com/the-attack-of-the-civilization-state/>. Download: 2021, Oct. 29.

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