

Recensione. Patricia Chiantera-Stutte, Giovanni Borgognone (eds.), *Civilization. Global Histories of a Political Idea*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2022.

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The new book edited by Patricia Chiantera-Stutte and Giovanni Borgognone provides a rich and compelling analysis of the many narratives on, and around, “civilizations”, and how the latter concept continues to be used to support a variety of political agendas, from liberal democracy to ethno-nationalist authoritarianism. The volume, entitled *Civilization. Global Histories of a Political Idea*, is divided into seven chapters. The first one, authored by Patricia Chiantera-Stutte, deals with Arnold J. Toynbee’s theory of civilization, which was used as a heuristic model of analysis and as a tool to study «the development of politics on a global level» (p. 12). Toynbee placed the «Hellenic society» in direct relation to «our Western society», resorting to «the father/son metaphor» to refer to them (p. 32).

Luca G. Castellin (chapter 2) further lingers on Toynbee’s contribution in shaping the very notion of “civilization”. The author of the 12-volume *A Study of History* (1934–1961) «recognized that civilizations are not isolated or impenetrable, but interact one with the others» (p. 63).

Chapter 3, written by Giovanni Borgognone, contends that, contrary to what might be inferred, Samuel Huntington, best known for his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996), did not consider civilizations as natural objects, but rather as instruments in the hands of elites. The American scholar, according to Borgognone, offered a new geopolitical perspective on the roots of the democratic model: «Even Huntington’s most mindful critics», he claims, «have missed the central significance of ‘political realism’ in his book, in terms not only of the logic of competition between states, but also of the decisive role played by elites in shaping and manipulating identity narratives» (p. 91). Paulo Butti de Lima (chapter 4) analyzes Huntington’s view of democracy, while discussing «the ‘Western’ roots of Democracy». Ancient Greeks, in Butti de Lima’s words, are «a source of our civilization and transmitted to us an accurate perception of religion» (p. 114).

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The following three chapters concentrate on how the notion of civilization has been used and conceptualized in three strategic non-Western areas: the Middle East, China and Russia. The first of the three case studies is covered by Marco Di Donato (chapter 5), which focuses on the case of Pan-Islamism and analyzes the revolutionary and anti-imperialistic interpretation of the civilizational narratives in Pan-Arabic and Pan-Islamic movements. Zhiguang Yin (chapter 6), on the other hand, lingers on the notions and connotations of civilization in the context of the Chinese Revolution (1900-1966), highlighting the use of the notion of civilization with an anti-imperialist function. Last but not least, Kåre Johan Mjør (chapter 7) sheds light on “Eurasianism” and “Neo-Eurasianism” as concepts and tools rooted in the polemic against Eurocentrism and Western hegemony.

Overall, the volume is well structured and thought-provoking. While much of its content is open to counter-arguments and alternative perspectives, the editors and the contributors convincingly apply trans-disciplinary approaches, research tools and analysis to the development of global politics in general, and the debates around the concept of civilization in particular. Especially credible is the way the editors shift research away from essentialized perspectives, while placing the role played by elites in shaping identity narratives at the center stage.

Beyond these merits, this review aims to enter into a discussion with the book to further enrich the debate which the volume seeks to, starting from those around the figure of Toynbee himself. It is certainly true that the renown English historian, who participated in the Paris Conference in 1919 and six years later took over the direction of the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House), warned against what he called «the Jerusalem-Athens-Rome centered view of history». Toynbee’s writings, however, were characterized by a Eurocentric orientation, relegating the history of non-Western peoples to a mere series of responses to processes triggered by the «European factor» (incidentally, that very same self-perception of centrality was highly visible in China as well for many centuries: ancient Chinese, for instance, used to call their land *Zhongguo*, or the «middle kingdom», mirroring a self-centered perception of centrality). On top of this, in Cemil Aydın’s words: «even though Renan and later scholars such as Arnold Toynbee and Samuel Huntington represent different political sensibilities, they shared the same template of a racial, civilizational, and geopolitical Muslim [and Chinese] world distinct from the West»¹.

Huntington, whose debt to Toynbee’s approach is widely acknowledged, published an article (“The Clash of Civilizations?”) on Foreign Affairs in 1993 with the title ending with a quotation mark (in the book published with the same title in 1996, the quotation mark was omitted). One of his main arguments was that the main sources of post-Cold War conflict will not be ideological or economic, but «cultural», with a special emphasis on religion, which he deemed as the «most important» element. This led him to predict peace between Ukraine and Russia (in contrast to more State-based “realist” arguments): «If civilization is what counts»,

¹ C. Aydın, *The Idea of the Muslim World*, Harvard University Press, 2017, 13.

he wrote, «the likelihood of violence between Ukrainians and Russians should be low. They are two Slavic, primarily Orthodox peoples who have had close relationships with each other for centuries»². Huntington was of course wrong on a number of grounds, even more so if considering the centrality of geographical proximity when discussing «the likelihood of violence»: while only 2,5 percent of the world's countries are neighbors, they fought 78% of the wars since World War II.

Paul Poast pointed out that «Huntington's 'Clash of Civilization' has done damage to IR scholarship because it's a racist and empirically groundless theory that is nevertheless quite popular»³. While his claims are of course open to counter-arguments and criticisms, very few scholars question that some of Huntington's maps look much like the “global races” map produced by Lothrop Stoddard in the 1920s. On top of this, one of Huntington's mentors, Adda Bozeman, who contended that Islam is inimical to the «core idea of the state», inspired and shaped much of Huntington's definition of culture. And yet, Lila Abu-Lughod pointed out that scholars should oppose the very concept of «culture», because it «enforces separations»⁴. Tomoko Masuzawa highlighted that «the term 'culture' is dangerously capacious, semantically vague and confused, and finally, taken as a whole, inconsistent»⁵.

Putting aside from the concept of «culture», which is so central in Huntington's discourse, it is also important to analyze Greece's “oriental” legacy. To cite Ellen Meiksins Wood, «it is even more artificial to detach ancient Greece from, say, Egypt or Persia, as if the Greeks were always 'European', living a separate history, and not part of a larger Mediterranean and 'Eastern' world»⁶. Indeed, scholars who link Europe's roots to Ancient Greece, are simply (more or less consciously) recognizing Europe's oriental connections (in Greek mythology, Europe is the name of the daughter of Agenor's, king of Tyre, in modern-day Lebanon), dominant religion (Christianity was an Oriental religion), and philosophical roots. The term φιλόσοφος (philosophos) itself, “lover of wisdom”, is most likely drawn from the Egyptian *mer-rekh* (*mr-rh*), “lover of knowledge”. The earliest philosophical texts originate precisely from ancient Egypt, and this also includes the papyrus on the *Immortality of writers*, (re)discovered in the 1920s and dated 1200 BCE. As noted by John M. Hobson's words: «Today we take it as axiomatic that Greece was the birthplace of Europe. [...] But this notion of Greece is a fabrication – an idea that was constructed by European thinkers only as late as the end of the eighteenth century [...]. Greece was linked spiritually and culturally to the East [...].

² S.P. Huntington, *The clash of civilizations?*, in *Foreign Affairs*, No. 3, 1993, 38.

³ Tweet made by Paul Poast on January 21, 2023. Available on-line: <https://twitter.com/ProfPaulPoast/status/1616796585442299904>.

⁴ L. Abu-Lughod, *Writing Against Culture*, in R.G. Fox (ed.), *Recapturing Anthropology*, School of American Research Press, 1991, 137.

⁵ T. Masuzawa, *Culture*, in M.C. Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, The University of Chicago Press, 1998, 71.

⁶ E. Meiksins Wood, *Citizens to Lord: A Social History of Western Political Thought from Antiquity to the Late Middle Ages*, Verso, 2011, 26.

Moreover, that Ancient Greece owes so much to ancient Egypt (as the Greeks readily acknowledged), wreaks havoc with the notion of a pure Aryan lineage of Europe that is cherished by Eurocentric thinkers»⁷.

Last but not least, also identity-related dynamics should be further problematized. Stuart Hall, for instance, refuted the essentialist conceptions of cultural identity and de-ontologized the very concept of identity. Eric Hobsbawm, on the other hand, highlighted that «We have become so used to terms like ‘collective identity’, ‘identity groups’, ‘identity politics’, or, for that matter ‘ethnicity’, that it is hard to remember how recently they have surfaced as part of the current vocabulary, or jargon, of political discourse. For instance, if you look at the International *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, which was published in 1968 – that is to say written in the middle 1960s – you will find no entry under *identity* except one about psychosocial identity, by Erik Erikson, who was concerned chiefly with such things as the so-called ‘identity crisis’ of adolescents who are trying to discover what they are, and a general piece on voters’ identification»⁸.

⁷ J.M. Hobson, *Revealing the cosmopolitan side of Oriental Europe: the eastern origins of European civilization*, in G. Delanty, *Europe and Asia beyond East and West*, Routledge, 2006, 109-10.

⁸ E. Hobsbawm, *Identity Politics and the Left*, in *New Left Review*, No. 1, 1996, 38–47.