The Discourse of Civilization and Decolonization

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For entire generations of scholars, continuing in many cases until today, the term “civilization” was relatively unproblematic, reflecting meanings that were relatively secure in their usage. For instance, “civilization” represented a standard to determine rights in international law, and to this day it serves as a rationale for area studies. When we look back to the usage of the word over the last hundred years or so, it is actually quite astonishing to observe how much difference and contention there has been in the meaning of the term “civilization.” While we have become increasingly conscious of the problem—not only with the term “civilization,” but in the human disciplines generally—of subjecting our analytical categories to analysis, we are not quite sure how to deal with it.¹

Before pointing out some of these differences to convey the vast terrain the term has occupied in the last century, let me try to indicate the “bookends” that have held the term civilization together over this period. Most of these uses have shared an understanding of “civilization” as a way of identifying and ordering value in the world. The identification of value, however, sometimes implies the identification of a community of value, and civilization can also become the means of marking the Self from the Other. In this respect, civilization may resemble other identity forms like nationalism, with which it often

becomes conflated. However, what distinguishes the civilizational idea from nationalism is its appeal to a higher, transcendent source of value and authority, capable of encompassing the Other.

Thus, while the concept of Western civilization was an important means of justifying imperialist domination of the rest of the world in the late nineteenth century, it was accompanied by the ideal of the "civilizing mission," a mission that exemplified the desire not (simply) to conquer the Other, but to be desired by the Other. In this period, civilization represented values associated with the Enlightenment, including the state protection of rights—of life, freedom, and property—and other values and practices ranging from the pursuit of material progress to civilized manners and clothing. Notably, it was the disillusionment during World War I with the idea of the civilizing mission that also encouraged the visibility of other civilizations—Confucian, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, Native American—often tied to decolonizing movements as more genuinely universalizing alternatives.

Norbert Elias pointed to this dual dimension of the civilization idea as it developed in Europe as a temporal phenomenon. Before the nineteenth century, the idea of civilization expressed a process—"the civilizing process"—extending out from the courts to wider reaches of society. By the nineteenth century, however, it had become a rather inflexible expression of national identity that was intertwined with national conflicts, for instance, between the French and the Germans. Elias's temporal difference really indicates a difference in two distinct types of society in their attitude toward the Other. Civilization in the period of nation-states does indeed tend to be more exclusivist than in prenational societies. Still the difference may be somewhat drawn.

In the older imperial formations, such as Chinese, it is certainly true that civilization or wenming could be seen mainly as a process: the spread of virtue from the moral center to barbarians and people with "depraved" customs. In India, it took the form of what M. N. Srinivas has called Sanskritization, or the process of lower castes rising in the hierarchy by imitating upper castes. Yet in both cases, this process also met with groups that it could not or did not seek to civilize—they remained Other. Moreover, even in modern Europe, civilization still retained the ability to identify a transnational group of Enlightened

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civilized nations in opposition to their colonies. The latter were seen as lacking civilization—in the sense of Enlightenment values—and hence, not worthy of sovereignty. This same encompassing urge also reached a point where the "civilizing mission" could potentially merge the Other with the Self. Nonetheless, nation-states as sovereign agencies of global competitiveness would ensure the subordination and containment of the civilizing urge.

One of the major changes wrought in the concept of civilization in the twentieth century was the idea that there was no single civilization but multiple civilizations. While this idea had been around in the eighteenth century, a new constellation of circumstances in the immediate aftermath of World War I gave the idea of multiple civilizations an enormous power and visibility. The changed balance of power, which became less Eurocentric and more dependent on the Soviet Union and the United States, the disillusionment with war—discussed admirably by Michael Adas below—and the rising national movements in the non-Western world, were part of these circumstances. Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*, written just before the war and popularized after the war by the writings of Arnold Toynbee, converged with those of many Asian and, later, African thinkers and writers. The new prominence of counter-evolutionary thought in the West—deriving principally from German thought and often traced to Herder—became affiliated with the ascendant national movements in the colonies that sought to utilize the notion of civilization precisely to counter Western definitions. The idea of civilization as warranting sovereign status circulated around the world as different societies claimed this status.

The new conception of civilization was opposed to the nineteenth-century European conception of it as singular and based on material progress. The idea that there were multiple civilizations and that civilization was ultimately a spiritual and moral concern became widely accepted. This new discourse of civilization was a truly global intellectual product with figures such as Okakura Tenshin, Rabindranath Tagore, Gu Hongming, Liang Qichao, and Mahatma Gandhi among many others adding to the ideas of Spengler and other Western thinkers discussed in the following essays. In the process of decolonization, the concept of civilization also underwent some fundamental trans-

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formations; it resulted in becoming what Lucien Febvre has called an "ethnographic concept." As Frantz Fanon put it, "there are civiliza-
tions without neckties, civilizations with loin-cloths, and others with-
out hats." When the idea of civilization became somewhat freed from
its ties to the cosmology of progress, intellectuals in both the East and
the West sought to find the distinctive civilizational traditions among
the people. The impetus for this ethnographic deepening of civiliza-
tion came, of course, from the nationalist ideal of popular sovereignty,
but it was also reinforced by the holistic conception of culture that was
gaining ground globally.

To be sure, these different conceptions—singular versus multiple,
process versus state, spiritual versus material, popular versus elite—did
not displace each other, but jostled together, sometimes accommo-
dating, as in the idea of the synthesis of East and West, but sometimes
hostile. Despite its earlier emancipatory and accommodative stance,
the new discourse of civilization too became associated with militarism
and nationalism. During the interwar years, this subordination was
most clear in the mobilization of pan-Asian civilization by the Japa-
nese for national purposes. Recently in response to globalization, it has
once again become associated with a certain exclusivism as we can see
in the doctrines of such people as Mahathir Mohammed or Samuel
Huntington.

The historical arc joining the nineteenth and the twenty-first cen-
turies is tied up with changing conceptions of civilization at both ends.
While the term may be in the process of being questioned in certain
academic circles, civilization and cognate notions, such as alternative
modernities, continue to be popular in other academic and nonacade-
monic worlds. In order to explore the new kinds of relationships that
civilization bears in relation to nations, regions, religions, and global-
izing forces, we need a strong grasp of the historical relationships in
terms of the present. Are there new strategies of accommodation
between civilization and nation and between globalization and civiliza-
tion? And—to return to my first question—how shall we study civi-
ilization as a discourse when this discourse has itself shaped us and our
inquiry? The following papers discuss many of the issues raised above

5 Lucien Febvre, "Civilisation: Evolution of a Word and a Group of Ideas," in Peter
Burke, ed., A New Kind of History and Other Essays, trans. K. Folca (New York: Harper and
6 Frantz Fanon, "Algeria Unveiled," in A Dying Colonialism (New York: Monthly
not only to better grasp the present circumstances of civilization, but also to point us in some fruitful directions to develop its study. By exploring precisely the changing and contested notions of civilization—as a new political ideology, as a quest for personal meaning, and as a site of generational tension—these papers enable us to see the effects of the discourse of civilization even if it has shaped some of our assumptions.