

Civilizational Order

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The changing configuration of relations among civilizations constitutes the civilizational order in the world. Civilizations are large collective entities and identities originating from a shared history and culture with a set of institutions, symbols, values, and ideals around which a constellation of diverse social groups may gather. The diversity, rise, fall, and succession of civilizations has always been an intriguing subject in the social sciences, from al-Fārābī, al-Bīrūnī, and Ibn Khaldūn to Eisenstadt, Elias, and Huntington. Ibn Khaldūn is the first scholar of his kind to turn civilization into a subject of academic study. He founded a discipline exclusively dedicated to the systematic study of civilizations and civilizational order. Ibn Khaldūn was primarily concerned with what binds – and unbinds – people together under a particular civilization. His answer was *asabiyyah*, which may be roughly translated into English as the ‘collective memory’, ‘consciousness’, ‘identity’, and/or ‘solidarity’. There is a longstanding controversy concerning the number of civilizations and their geographical borders – but also, most importantly, the criteria by which a society is judged as civilized or uncivilized. Thus, it is not easy to talk with certainty about the numbers, borders, and relations of civilizations that constitute the civilizational order. In particular, our contemporary world has entered the era of open civilizations in which civilizations are no longer separated from each other by geographical distance or borders, due to fast-developing communication, transportation, and martial technology, along with globalized business and politics. The era of open civilizations has given rise to a closely interwoven civilizational order in which symbolic cultural boundaries count more than geographical ones. The attempt to understand the world order from the perspective of inter-civilizational relations represents an alternative or a complementary

view to the conventional international relations perspective.

There are two main competing visions about civilizational order, depending on one’s view-point as to whether the world consists of a single civilization or multiple civilizations. It was fashionable in the west during the nineteenth-century to argue that there is only a single human civilization evolving from the primitive beginnings of history and culminating in western civilization. This was in contrast to Ibn Khaldūn’s much earlier view that there is no society outside civilization, be it nomadic or sedentary, because for him society and civilization are synonymous concepts. Ibn Khaldūn argued that the criterion to be considered civilized is to build a social order with political hierarchy, economy, and norms which may change over time and vary from society to society. Today, the nineteenth-century view about a single human civilization has lost its popularity because it has been heavily criticized as a Eurocentric outlook to civilizational order which serves as an instrument to justify colonization and European expansion. Nowadays, for the vast majority of thinkers in the world, there are multiple civilizations and they are incommensurable in the sense that it is not possible to say which is better than the another, and thus to sequentially order them in a progressive narrative of linear evolution. Nonetheless, it is not easy to objectively count the number of civilizations. In any case, there is a limited number of civilizations, past and present, in the world relative to those who identify and list them, such as archaeologists, historians, and other social scientists. Huntington refashioned the multiplicity of civilizations and the conflicts among them, as he constructed a contested civilizational order. According to Huntington there are exactly eight civilizations in the present world: western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American, and African. His work caused the concept to gain popularity in the social sciences to complement or replace the concept of international order, which is based on the relations among nation-states. For Huntington, like Ibn Khaldūn, there is no society in the world

which may be considered primitive or outside of a civilization. However, Huntington does not share the view that civilizations are incommensurable since he promotes the superiority of western civilization and the clash between western and other civilizations.

In contrast to those who believed in the constant progress and superiority of western civilization, Oswald Spengler argued against the dominant Eurocentric view of history in his book *The Decline of the West*. Spengler shared, like Ibn Khaldun, a worldview based on the cyclical rise and fall of civilizations. Spengler makes a distinction between culture and civilization and sees civilization as the last stage in the life of a culture. Spengler lists eight high cultures in history and the present world that are represented by, or embodied in, various civilizations: Babylonian, Egyptian, Indic, Sinic, Mesoamerican embodied in Mayan and Aztec civilizations, Classical Apollonian embodied in Greek and Roman civilizations, Magian embodied in Arabian or Islamic civilization, and the Faustian culture embodied in the modern western civilization. For him, the rise and fall of civilizations are not tragic rapid ruptures but protracted processes that may take centuries.

Understanding civilizations and the dynamics of their relations may help us better understand societies, social actions, and relations. Social science aims to analyze the causes or the meanings of human action and identify patterns in social relations. Belonging to a particular civilization may be considered a cause of behavioral patterns in society. On a micro level of analysis in social sciences, the social actor is the individual, while on a macro level it is nation-states and civilizations. Civilization is the largest social actor used at the macro level of analysis in social sciences as it comprises societies, ethnic groups, races, nations, countries, and even people from different continents that share the same civilizational identity. For instance, western civilization involves Western Europe, North America, and Australia. Accepting civilizations as social actors leads to analyzing their behaviors and relations at the macro level. Constantly reconfigured relations among civilizations constitute the liquid and dynamic civilizational order — but notwithstanding, it is still possible to identify some patterns in these relations. Civilizational order is understood as the relations

among civilizations. A similar concept is *world order* or *international order* which are based on relations among nation-states. It is debatable whether the diversity of civilizations in the world is a source of unavoidable conflict or a source of peace and prosperity. Furthermore, the macro level of analysis is coupled with the micro level based on the assumption that a particular civilizational identity with distinct values and interests makes member states, groups, and individuals act in a particular way among themselves and with the outside world.

With the aim of understanding the civilizational order today, it would be helpful to take a brief look at the transformations of that civilizational order has undergone throughout human history. Looking at history, it is possible to identify three distinct periods in the civilizational order: the period of closed civilizations, the period of the hegemony of western civilization, and finally the period of open civilizations. Each period will be briefly described below. As will become clear, developments in transportation and communication technology have played a great role in the transformation of civilizational order.

Ancient and Medieval Civilizational Order with Closed Civilizations

Here, “closed civilization” indicates a homogeneous society composed of its own members alone who share the same culture. A closed civilization is not usually concerned with the problem of coexistence with other civilizations. The premodern period was characterized by a diversity of civilizations, separated from each other by geographical boundaries and interacting only with adjacent civilizations. They had minimal connections with other civilizations that were distant from them due to the barrier of geographic distance and the underdeveloped technologies of transportation and communication. Travelers like Marco Paulo and Ibn Battuta gained enormous popularity for introducing other civilizations to their own societies through their travel accounts.

It must be noted here that the Islamic civilization presents an unusual case during the Middle Ages because it was quite open to other civilizations, perhaps due to its normative values

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and geographic location at the crossroads of civilizations trading with one another. Islamic theology and law along with Sufi philosophy played an important role in facilitating diversity during this period under Islamic rule. Five of the nine civilizations Huntington enumerated, including African, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, and Western, lived either completely or partially in Islamdom for long centuries, with the exception of only the Chinese, Japanese, and Latin American civilizations which were remote from Muslim rule. The Ottomans constructed a civilizational order to manage the diverse civilizations living under Ottoman rule. It is commonly referred to as the millet system; "millet" in this context means a religious community that may also be called a civilization. The millet system included such religious communities as Muslim, Christian Orthodox, and Jewish; during the late Ottoman period, Catholic and Protestant millets were later included as well. Roughly speaking, Ottomans, following Islamic law, granted relative autonomy to these communities with diverse civilizational and religious identities. Ottomans inherited this pluralist system from their Muslim predecessors such as the Umayyads and Abbasids. The same practice is seen in India where the same status was granted to Hindus and Buddhists by the Muslim Mughals. An even earlier example of an open civilization may be witnessed in some of the practices of the Roman Empire, which encompassed a diversity of civilizations under its rule in a vast geography.

Modern Civilizational Order with the Hegemony of Western Civilization

This period is commonly known as the period of the Enlightenment, modernization, and colonization. It is characterized by the rise and global hegemony of western civilization with the aim of becoming the single civilization for humanity as a whole. In this era, western civilization usually acted as a closed civilization and tried to subjugate or assimilate all other civilizations.

During that period, the dominant western powers spread the highly contested view that there is only a single human civilization, represented by the west. This view required constructing a unidirectional linear evolution in which different

civilizations represented different stages of development, with western civilization representing the culmination of this evolution, if not the end of it. All civilizations must westernize or modernize to be part of the current and the most progressed civilization. Otherwise, it is argued, they will be left out of the arc of truly civilized progress. The theory of a single human civilization has been used to justify colonization, modernization, and the western cultural hegemony of the world.

Postmodern Civilizational Order with Open Civilizations

Open civilization denotes a civilizationaly diverse society. This is—a quite_a new phenomenon characterizing our age. It indicates a radical shift in the civilizational order from closed civilizations, each with a homogeneous society, to heterogeneous societies housing in the same social space its native members from a particular civilization along with people from other civilizations. Civilizational order in the postcolonial and postmodern period has been characterized by four changes: (1) the re-emergence of the voice of nonwestern civilizations as global actors; (2) all civilizations being connected with each other; (3) increasing volume of relations due to improved transportation and communication technologies; and (4) the rise of multi-civilizational societies. In contrast to previous eras, the postmodern period is characterized by a civilizationaly diverse society or multi-civilizational society. There has been a shift in these relations during the last decades due to the fast-developing technologies of communication and transportation: In the past, only neighboring civilizations had a relationship with each other, but today all civilizations have relationships with all other civilizations in the world. All civilizations have become intertwined and interdependent due to the increasing mobility of populations, ideas, and goods. Consequently, a new phenomenon has ever since emerged: multi-civilizational society. Local groups and societies now reflect global civilizational diversity in their microcosms.

In the present age of globalization, civilizations are increasingly perceived to be detached from the geography or the territory they are traditionally associated with. Instead, civilizational

identities have become mobile, portable, and porous with migration, conversion, and social and demographic mobility around the world. Openness was perhaps a choice for a civilization in the past, but today it is an inescapable necessity because conventional territories of civilizations are no longer protected by isolating territorial borders. Consequently, the borders separating civilizations – or more precisely, individuals and groups – from different civilizations have become symbolic. This is because they increasingly share the same space.

This radical change in the civilizational order is reflected in the search for a global normative order, with a universalist approach to international law and global ethics in particular. This period has witnessed several international and local declarations of human rights expressing the views and concerns of different civilizations on the global normative order. In addition to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which is internationally recognized, there are regional human rights documents emanating from various world civilizations such as the European Human Rights Convention, American Convention on Human Rights, the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam, Arab Charter, African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and Asian Human Rights Charter.

There is a highly contested claim among some social scientists to use civilizational differences as a new cleavage or dividing line (Hunting-ton, Fukuyama) to replace the cleavage among nation-states, including the cleavage between the capitalist and the socialist blocs. Yet, changing patterns in the relations of civilizations, in particular mutual interdependency and intertwinement

along with the rise of multi-civilizational society, has drastically changed the civilizational order.

The postcolonial period made it possible for other civilizations, after two centuries of dormancy, to insert their civilizational identity and the search for alternative modernizations. The end of the Cold War expedited this process and it may even be seen as another turning point in the civilizational order. The end of the Cold War, coupled with globalization, was first seen as the triumph of western civilization and lib-

developments have demonstrated that the new world order is unstable and the supremacy of western civilization is now challenged by the re-emergence of China, India, Russia, and the Muslim world. This challenge may be seen as merely economic and political rather than civilizational because these emerging powers also adopt analogous political institutions and similar values in economics and morality.

There is today a great economic imbalance in the world regarding production and consumption. The longstanding discourse in the social sciences **aboutcentered around** the imbalance between West and East has now been reconstructed as the imbalance between North and South. The United Nations is no more successful at healing the North–South rift than it was at healing the East–West divide. The end of the Cold War was seen as the end of the bipolar civilizational order and the rise of a new world order with a single dominant power.

Nevertheless, history repeats itself as a new world order with multiple actors **are** in the making. History demonstrates that there has never been a single civilization dominant all over the world, and the efforts to make it so had no success; there is no doubt that this law applies to the future as well. Therefore, constantly reconfiguring relations among various world civilizations, but not a single civilization, will constitute the future civilizational order.

SEE ALSO: 'Asabiyya; Civilizations; Globalization; Khaldun, Ibn (732–808 ah/1332–1406); Values: Global

Reference

eralism over other civilizations and political systems. Nonetheless, paradoxically, unfolding

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ABSTRACT

Civilizational order refers to the configuration of relations among civilizations in the world. Civilizations as collective social entities in space and time have always been a source of fascination for scholars throughout history from diverse disciplines, who question what constitutes a civilization, whether it is one or many, what is distinctive about each one, as well as the reasons for their rise and demise. Since the time of its founder Ibn Khaldun,⁷ civilizational studies has played a significant role in understanding the world order on a macro and micro level. Social sciences observe and analyze civilizations in themselves and also their changing relations with each other. We can divide the history of civilizational order into three periods: ancient and medieval civilizational order with closed civilizations; modern civilizational order with the hegemony of western civilization; and postmodern civilizational order with open civilizations. Accordingly, these time periods enable us to make sense of how the world has been and could be, and what role civilizational social actors play in the hegemonic world order and how they interact with each other.

KEYWORDS

asabiyyah; civilization; closed civilization; Ibn Khaldun;⁷ international order; levels of analysis; open civilization; social actor; world order