

CO-EXISTENCE OF CIVILIZATIONS IN THE GLOBAL ERA

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Abstract: In the most general terms, “civilization” relates to the unique constitution of a “life-world”, defined by a coherent “worldview” (*Weltanschauung*) on the basis of continuity. This includes a community’s religious beliefs and metaphysical views, its social organization, value system, esthetical perceptions, etc. These factors also determine specific notions of dignity and societal behavior. Civilization in this multidimensional sense may comprise a variety of different cultures as sub-sections, mainly on the basis of different languages. In today’s global environment, the constant encounter and interaction between different – often incompatible – worldviews and value systems has an entirely new potential for conflict – with *one* humanity, whose members are constantly aware of their living in *one* “global village,” but with more than one, indeed a multitude, of competing global civilizations. Culture-driven conflicts – or conflicts where antagonists use culture as a tool of legitimation – are much more difficult to resolve or contain compared to conflicts where diverging (economic) interests are clearly defined and not hidden behind “ideals”. Values are not a field for *realpolitik* whereas interests are negotiable. The rapid development of technology, in tandem with the global pursuit of economic interests, has made interaction (encounter) with the “other” a structural fact of society. One of the major challenges of our time will be whether civilizations can agree on a set of meta-values on the basis of mutuality (such as tolerance, non-interference, etc.). Only this will enable them to avoid confrontation at the level of values of the first order (“material” values). This could also open the field for a new dialogue of civilizations in the spirit of Enlightenment, transcending the traditional missionary paradigm. Such a “meta-dialogue of civilizations” would also fit into a new approach of *realpolitik* towards issues of cultural identity.

Keywords: civilizations, life-world, *Weltanschauung*, identities, culture-driven conflicts.

In the most general terms, “civilization” relates to the unique constitution of a “life-world”¹, defined by a coherent “worldview” (*Weltanschauung*) on the basis of continuity. This includes a community’s religious beliefs and metaphysical views, its social organization, value system, esthetical percep-

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tions, etc. These factors also determine specific notions of dignity and societal behavior. Civilization in this multidimensional sense may comprise a variety of different cultures as subsections², mainly on the basis of different languages.

In this context, identity, individual as well as collective, is nothing static, but a dynamic process of encounter with the outside world, natural as well as social. As the I constitutes itself in encounter with the non-I – if we may borrow from Fichtean dialectics of consciousness –, the “collective identity” of a civilization is shaped in relation to, or through its interaction with, other distinctly different life-worlds. Civilization is nothing entirely self-contained, i.e. there is no pre-existing civilizational identity.

There is, however, a novel aspect of identity formation at the global level. In our era of technology and, enabled by it, globalization, interaction with other civilizations occurs on a perpetual and constant basis, transcending all physical barriers and geographical boundaries. This is what I have earlier described as the unavoidable “simultaneity” of civilizational life-worlds (Köchler 2015: 227) in our “global village” (McLuhan 2001). Compared to the pre-globalization era, the simultaneity – and ubiquity – of different and competing world-views may trigger ever more complex and more intense forms of civilizational self-assertion. The identity dilemma in the era of globalization has also become obvious in the phenomenon of “hybrid” civilizations, a phenomenon of today’s multicultural societies in the industrialized world, but also a consequence of cultural hegemony in the formerly colonized world.

A civilization may have a more or less defined, or decisive, global outreach. However, despite of globalization – or maybe because of it? –, there is still not one “global civilization”. (This is also indicated in the title of our roundtable, which uses the term in the plural). There is one humanity (mankind), but not one civilization.

In today’s global environment, the constant encounter and interaction between different – often incompatible – worldviews and value systems has an entirely new potential for conflict – with *one* humanity, whose members are constantly aware of their living in *one* “global village”, but with more

than one, indeed a multitude, of competing global civilizations. In addition, these civilizations represent not only distinct identities, but – through their manifestation in a multitude of nations – different economic interests as well. The conflict potential exists at two interdependent levels: locus (domestic/regional) and globus (international/global).

(A) *Locus*: a community's collective identity (in terms of culture, and on the wider horizon of civilization) is faced with the expression, and assertion, of an increasing number of similarly unique and distinct identities at its own place: *a*) at the same place (town/province/country) and time, and *b*) in the form of cultural influences from outside its traditional realm. The latter is of particular importance under conditions of our modern "information society". Information technology (IT) knows no borders. Not anymore can a civilizational/cultural community be effectively shielded from outside influence. In the longer term, the *fait accompli* of IT also brings with it a threat of cultural uniformity.

(B) *Globus*: the potentially global outreach of civilizations, magnified by the rapid development of technology, has led to a permanent competition between worldviews and value systems. In particular: if a civilization understands itself as universal, claiming a paradigmatic status vis-à-vis mankind, it *per se* enters into a conflictual relationship with the rest of the world.

At level (A), the conflict potential particularly lies in a kind of cultural threat perception or fear, which is nurtured by the gradual disappearance of homogeneity of societies (communities) that for hundreds of years have existed in the monocultural environment of the nation-state. In the context of globalization and a policy of "open borders", connected with economic interests on all sides, the industrialized countries in particular have attracted an ever-increasing number of people from many different civilizations with value systems that are often incompatible.

Against this background, sustainable solutions to the problems of modern multicultural societies may at times amount to squaring the circle: how, for instance, can diversity of a society be made compatible with each group's (communi-

ty's) assertion of cultural identity – and remain stable and peaceful at the same time?

One crucial fact must not be overlooked: value systems, attached to distinct civilizations (or, more specifically, cultures) may be overlapping, but they are not necessarily compatible in basic respects of the life of a society. In today's multicultural context, this has become particularly obvious in regard to notions of personal dignity, the role of the individual in society, gender identities, religion, family relations, the meaning of decent behavior, even dress code, etc. That we all belong to one and the same mankind – i.e. an abstract awareness of our being human – is not enough to resolve these conflicting interpretations.

It has also proven impossible to reshape existing civilizational (cultural) identities along the lines of secularism as defined and practiced in the West. This was often perceived as a totalitarian project by those who are rooted in different and/or competing traditions, based on different paradigms. Introducing secularism as an ideology (in the eyes of some even as a surrogate religion) has become one of the decisive factors of the erosion of social cohesion and political stability in the industrial societies of the West.

The dialectical process of identity formation is at work here. Each group (community) defines itself in distinction from the other, thus reasserting its identity vis-à-vis the other, and in particular vis-à-vis the dominant civilization of the moment (Köchler 2009). In view of these developments, it appears appropriate to rethink, or recalibrate, the notions of integration as well as assimilation.

At level (B), the conflict potential mainly relates to universalization and (political) instrumentalization of a civilization. In the unipolar environment after the end of the ideological rivalry of the Cold War, the world has increasingly witnessed a tendency to reshape – “reinvent” – other civilizations in the image of one's own. While, in the colonial era, the “metaphysical arrogance” of a civilization was manifested in the Christian missionary project, in our modern era a secular missionary project appears to be implemented on the basis of the worldview and value system of the dominant civilization. In

most cases, this has been part of a legitimation strategy to justify the global projection of power in the economic as well as military field.

Universalization, in such a context, is not intellectually innocent, but intrinsically linked to the instrumentalization of civilization for ulterior purposes, namely the power and interest politics of nation-states (Köchler 2014). This has been particularly obvious in the U.S. policy of “régime change”, linked to a strategy of “exporting democracy” (as interpreted by that country). The – by now failed – project for the creation of a “New Middle East” is a case in point. In actual fact, such interventionist policies risk triggering a conflict between civilizations, most notably between the Western and Muslim world, but also between the Western world and China.

It is to be noted that culture-driven conflicts – or conflicts where antagonists use culture as a tool of legitimation – are much more difficult to resolve or contain compared to conflicts where diverging (economic) interests are clearly defined and not hidden behind “ideals”. Values are not a field for *realpolitik* whereas interests are negotiable.

Today’s civilizational rivalries – described as “clash of civilizations” (Huntington 1993)³, but actually linked to, and fuelled by, the global competition for power and influence in the emerging multipolar order – have a direct impact on tensions at the domestic and regional levels on all continents. Evoking an almost eschatological aura of confrontation, they often not only aggravate existing conflicts, but also may make them nearly intractable.

In the modern globalized environment – where every individual and every group, state or region is constantly interconnected, where interdependence can simply not be avoided – the conflict potential of cultural differences is – counter-intuitively – considerably greater and much more complex than in the earlier nation-state era. The civilizational (cultural) “other” is not anymore a distant competing identity, in an area clearly distinct from one’s own (geographically as well as conceptually), but the “other” is constantly present in one’s own realm. Distinct collective identities⁴, in different phases of

their internal historical evolution, are facing each other simultaneously.

The problems of such an “asynchronous simultaneity” were already obvious in the missionary activities of earlier centuries and became nearly insurmountable in the abrupt encounter of indigenous civilizations with the industrial-technological world. The “culture wars” of today (in the sphere of the modern state) are nothing compared to the “culture shock” caused by these involuntary encounters. We are faced here with the question of an implicit cultural imperialism of technological civilization – irrespective of the religious or metaphysical worldview and value system in which it may see itself embedded⁵. Is there still any breathing space for indigenous civilizations with their distinct views of nature, community, and family? Or will the rich heritage of these civilizations – in terms of the human-nature relationship in particular – forever be lost? (Köchler 1991).

In conclusion, we ask what all these conflictual schemes and processes mean for the shaping of civilizational or, more specifically, cultural identity. Identity formation is essentially dialectical. To “de-fine” oneself – to realize one’s identity – also means to “draw the border” (*definire*) vis-à-vis the other, that which is different from myself (in individual as well as collective terms)⁶. Consequently, co-existence between civilizations and cultures *a)* is *conditio sine qua non* for the realization of distinct identities; *b)* while essential for self-realization, it also contains a potential for conflict: asserting one’s identity vis-à-vis the other, “defending” it from any intrusion into the “integrity” of one’s *Weltanschauung*, carries the risk of “culture wars,” of perpetual conflict along civilizational lines. This risk has become ever greater with the increasing multitude of civilizational identities facing each other in everyday life in our “global village”.

The rapid development of technology, in tandem with the global pursuit of economic interests, has made interaction (encounter) with the “other” a structural fact of society. One of the major challenges of our time will be whether civilizations can agree on a set of meta-values on the basis of mutuality (such as tolerance, non-interference, etc.). Only this will ena-

ble them to avoid confrontation at the level of values of the first order (“material” values)⁷. This could also open the field for a new dialogue of civilizations in the spirit of Enlightenment, transcending the traditional missionary paradigm. Such a “meta-dialogue of civilizations” would also fit into a new approach of *realpolitik* towards issues of cultural identity.

In view of the dialectics of repulsion and attraction, of drawing the limits and reaching out to the other, a “perpetual war of civilizations” will only be avoided if identity formation can be reconciled with forms of positive interaction. Each civilization – and each cultural life-world within it – must have its unique “breathing space”, without the threat of violent intrusion, or imposition, of the paradigms of other civilizational horizons. This excludes, in principle, any wars in the name of civilization; and only this will “empower” a civilization to reach out to those communities that are shaped by a different perception of the world, including a different system of values. Additionally, only such an approach of mutual enrichment will stem the threat of cultural uniformity under the conditions of globalization.

In this sense, “multitude” and “diversity” at the global level correspond with the “singularity” of civilizations and cultures in their own realm, locally as well as regionally. As there is no one “global civilization”⁸, there can be no global “*Leitkultur*” (lead culture). The latter would mean the loss of diversity and a denial of cultural identity. How to reconcile identity and difference, universality and diversity, global interaction and local cohesion, *globus et locus*, will be the major challenge of our increasingly multi-civilizational and multi-cultural world.

NOTES

¹ We use the term in the sense of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology (“*Lebenswelt*”): see Husserl 1970.

² We follow here the distinction between the notions of “civilization” and “culture” suggested in Huntington 1993: 24.

³ For the definition of this key notion of today’s global affairs see also Köchler 2017.

⁴ In terms of civilization and culture.

⁵ I refer here to the Christian and Greco-Roman roots of Western civilization in particular.

⁶ On the dialectics of civilizational/cultural identity see also Köchler 1978.

⁷ “Material” does not mean “materialistic.” In distinction from material values (that may be different in different civilizations), meta-values are values of second order, i.e. values in the “formal sense”: norms that are the condition for the realization of norms of first order (“material” norms). In this formal sense, they are shared by all civilizations.

⁸ There are only “global civilizations” (plural) in the sense of civilizations with global outreach, or in the context of globalization.

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