



Empires and Civilizations: The Search for Standards Continues

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The Empire of Civilization: The Evolution of an Imperial Idea. By Brett Bowden. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. 320 pp., \$45.00 hardcover (ISBN-13: 978-0-226-06814-5).

The Empire of Civilization: The Evolution of an Imperial Idea by Professor Brett Bowden opens with “Guizot’s Question: Universal Civilization?”—a fitting introduction to the book’s three parts. “Part 1 is about ideas and concepts” (p. 12), specifically the historical arguments for, and limits of, Civilization, Progress, and History as universals. Parts 2 and 3 “are about the application and consequences of those ideas” (p. 12)—the Art and Science of Empire, including the Expansion of Europe and the Classical Standard of Civilization and the Burden of Civilization (Part 2), and issues of New Barbarism and “New Realities” of Imperialism (Part 3). The book’s Conclusion calls for open, nonjudgmental intercivilizational relations and dialogue.¹ Such dialogue is deemed important today because of ongoing conceptual and practical connections: “the same set of ideas and concepts—civilization, progress, universality, and modernity—remain both salient and powerful when it comes to explaining and justifying policy making and decision making” (p. 17).

The purposes that *The Empire of Civilization* identifies for itself include: to provide “a better understanding of the language of civilization” and “a better understanding of the actions that tend to follow the language of civilization” (pp. ix–x); to examine “the concerted attempt to inculcate ‘civilization’ in all corners of the globe” (pp. 1–2); to “argue that certain forces are at work in world politics striving to impose a purposefully charted ‘directionality’ on our world’s near-term history and future” (p. 2); and to “say that the dominant architects of international society continue to be informed and influenced by a faith in the Enlightenment ideal of progress and humankind’s universal linear March toward modernity” (pp. 2–3). Among others, four topics for further discussion arise from *The Empire of Civilization*. These topics include the methodological, philosophical, theoretical, and practical.

An initial topic for further discussion is methodological. In terms of methodology, the work at hand brings to mind the neatly arranged shelves of international legal texts at St. Cross Law Library in Oxford University. The successive editions of the international legal texts written by the leading publicists of their various eras are set in chronological order, volume by volume. Although set horizontally, the volumes can be imagined vertically—like sedimentary layers, oldest layers on bottom, more recent layers on top.

Thus, the 1836 Philadelphia, Care, Lea, and Blanchard first edition of Wheaton’s *Element of International Law* precedes the 1836 Philadelphia second edition, followed by the 1848 Philadelphia third edition, and so on. Likewise, the Great

¹An illustrative example of intercivilization conversation is *Globalization and Civilizations*, edited by Mehdi Mozafari (2002).

Britain A. C. Boyd-edited 1874 first English edition is followed by the 1880 second English edition, and so on.

Such a visualization and reading offers an important reminder. The “living record of the time” reminds us that the leading international jurists and others of their respective eras were puzzling each day through issues and developments new to them. They were confronting what was for them in real time the expansion of the international system. They were trying to develop—and gradually codifying in the process—concepts like a standard of “civilization” to help make international legal sense of an unprecedented global expansion.

A possible paradox of historical teleology arises when twenty-first century interpretations of nineteenth century historical documents choose the documents they (the twenty-first century interpretations) place in evidence that historical teleology existed in an earlier age. There is ample evidence of unabashed racists and imperialists in the nineteenth century, such as James Lorimer. But there is also ample evidence of many jurists and others seeking to make sense of what was becoming for the first time a global international system. In other words, as in our day, leading thinkers of earlier eras were also questioning—in our modern parlance—the extent to which seemingly established metro poles were in fact the Other in a globalizing world.

Historical modesty may mitigate or moderate the understandable tendency to attribute more deliberate design to those in the past than may exist. According to Bowden, “what follows is a step-by-step account of how the project of creating a universal empire of civilization or, more accurately, a uniform empire of civilization has been pursued down through the centuries and continues to be pursued into the twenty-first century. It is a story about the crafting of teleological History and the influence and effect it has on peoples who are swept up or swept aside in the process” (p. 19). To its credit, *The Empire of Civilization* does mention individuals such as “the jurist Robert Ward—who would later serve in the British House of Commons and in executive posts—who observed: ‘When the New World was opened to the spirit and adventure of the Old, it was reasonable to expect what was found; new laws and customs, as well as a new people and language’ that is, new civilizations” (pp. 119–120).

A second topic for further discussion is philosophical. Are the arguments of John Rawls and others sustainable that “some measure of human rights norms are the benchmark of the international system?” (p. 168). Professor Bowden notes, following the groundwork prepared by Gong, Rawls, and others, that Jack Donnelly is more explicit in his claim that, despite “still common skepticism toward international human rights...internationally recognized human rights have become very much like a new international ‘standard of civilization.’” (p. 169). There is much more to discuss regarding the appropriate ongoing search to establish agreed-upon philosophical foundations for practical and aspirational efforts such as may empower universal declarations of human rights, legal frameworks to prosecute crimes against humanity, agreed-upon conventions on laws of war (or implements of war, such as land mines), etc.

A third topic for further discussion is theoretical:² how to deal with the enduring realities of hierarchy and diversity within global international systems. Even now, radical views realistically recognize that standards of “civilization” or other concepts of order in international society reflect both stark realities of power and hopeful aspirations for common institutions, principles, and shared security and welfare in those international societies.³

It is difficult to disentangle the interplay of the influence of unmitigated power politics as cause or consequence of ongoing natural features of hierarchy

²See for example, *Great Powers and Outlaw States*, by Gerry Simpson (2004).

³The classic analysis, Hedley Bull (1977) *Anarchical Society*, continues to speak to those theoretical conundrums.

in international systems, particularly global international systems, which cannot seem to escape characterizing elements of diversity, anarchy, and hierarchy.⁴ In such a light, realists are not surprised that international hierarchies continue to exist, as do perceived divisions among different and unequal countries, as defined in each era's values and nomenclature. This does not excuse or justify the modern situation, but it takes as a statement of common international practice that "the world can be divided and classified into states and societies of varying shades or degrees of civilization, which is to say that the contemporary world effectively still consists of 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' societies" (p. 6).

A fourth topic for further discussion is political. *The Empire of Civilization* criticizes President George W. Bush and his administration because earlier vocabularies "dictates the actions of the United States and its allies in Afghanistan and Iraq in the early twenty-first century" (p. 218). Presumably, the author might now praise President Barack Obama and his administration for recent, carefully crafted trips to Turkey and Egypt and what appears to be determined, creative international outreach toward intercivilizational dialog.

It is difficult to argue against "enhanced mutual understanding" (p. 224) or "multiple dialogues and exchanges of ideas" (p. 230), such as *The Empire of Civilization* calls for. There is certainly much in the attitudes and practices of those who preceded this generation to criticize and from which this generation can learn. We can only hope history will be equally understanding of us. In that spirit, it should be a matter of optimism, not pessimism, to understand that today's international society continues to search and aspire toward what those in earlier emergent international societies called standards of "civilization"—by whatever name.

References

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⁴See Martin Wight (1977), *Systems of State*.