

Civilizations over the Long Term: Past Realities, Present Challenges¹

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At the start of his textbook on the contemporary world (1963), reissued in 1987 after his death with the title *Grammaire des civilisations*, Fernand Braudel reminded us that the word 'civilisation' has many meanings, and that its uses do not coincide from one language to another, which often makes it difficult to translate. It appeared in France in the mid-18th century and was contrasted then with 'barbarism', to which category 'good savages' were relegated, even though they were idealized by Enlightenment thinkers for the purity of their way of life. Quickly accepted in England, it took precedence over the older word 'civility', which was identified with day-to-day manners. In Germany, on the other hand, *Zivilisation* was fated to coexist into the distant future with two other words: *Bildung*, which was already an old term, and one which, by contrast, came to the fore in the 20th century, *Kultur*. The latter is identified with activities of the mind (norms, values, ideals) in contrast to techniques for the control of nature, which the very term 'industrial and urban civilization', contrasted with the 'agricultural civilization' preceding it, invites us to class as a civilization. On the other hand Italian managed to make do with the old word *civiltà*.

Over the last two centuries there have come to overlay these differences between our languages, and the words we use to describe the same realities, three new realizations. In the 19th century, when Europe at the height of its power was carrying through an initial unification of the world under its control, the first of these had to do with the plural nature of the civilizations that share our planet. The second one, influenced especially by the progress of social and cultural anthropology, had to do with the unity and coherence of each civilization seen as an entity; any slightly deeper analysis, even if it has begun initially by distinguishing between the different aspects of a civilization (religion, politics, technical mastery, etc.), must then establish the many and complex links between these various factors. This reminds us that a civilization is both a representation of the world and a material and spiritual

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organization of it. The third and final realization made us rethink the relationships between different civilizations and question the hierarchies that may have been set up between them, beginning with the one that contrasts 'primitive' with developed civilizations. To dispel any ambiguity, anthropologists and archaeologists, who differ on this point from historians, prefer to use the word 'culture'. Each civilization – or culture – is in its own way a whole, but with very rare and seldom long-lasting exceptions none is entirely cut off from others. With few exceptions, civilizations are contained within a space with which they tend to identify and be identified. But the frontiers separating them are always porous; they are continually exchanging innovations and 'material or cultural goods', among which they make choices: accepting, adapting or else rejecting.

On this topic Fernand Braudel wrote, half a century ago (1949) in *Méditerranée*, that every civilization was defined by its gifts, its borrowings and its rejections: 'so for a civilization living is being able to give and to receive and borrow . . . Nevertheless a great civilization can be recognized by the fact that sometimes it refuses to borrow, that it is vehemently opposed to certain accommodations, that it makes a definite choice among what those who exchange are offering it and would often impose on it if it did not take care, or more simply if there were not incompatibilities of mood and appetite' (p. 559). Those sentences are more topical than ever. In the years between 1950 and 1975 it was fashionable to believe in the future convergence of civilizations, which their development would cause to evolve in the same direction: that was the credo of theories of 'globalization'. This credo was brutally challenged by the world economic crisis of the 1970s. It is reappearing today behind the new discourse around 'globalization', which is also fashionable. If we are to believe that discourse, globalization is supposed to transform our planet unavoidably into a huge village and abolish both distances and differences between people through the almost instantaneous circulation of information on the internet and through the increased and accelerated circulation of goods. We know that this is not at all the case, and that only a privileged elite worldwide is truly able to access the advantages of that circulation: around 5–10 percent of the planet's population in the case of the famous internet village. And all around us we see increasing rejection of a cultural, political and economic standardization that would mean passive submission to an order imposed from outside with the double face of modernity and inevitability. That rejection may take the extreme forms of religious or ideological fundamentalism pushed as far as what seems absurd to us, and it is hard for us not to reject and condemn it. But it always represents a desire to defend civilizations and reject a standardization that would mean a partial or total loss of their identity. Never has the world insisted with such force, and even sometimes violence, on its diversity and pluralism than in the era of globalization. It has even made it into a principle, using UNESCO's voice.

And so we have to find or recreate conditions for a dialogue that comes about through acceptance of that diversity and recognition of the other in its difference: no dialogue is possible without one form or another of equality between the partners. From that viewpoint the disappearance of the blocs that used to divide the planet marked an indisputable step forward: all the cards have been dealt afresh, even though, out of habit, we still distinguish the 'north', the 'east' and the 'south', just as

20 years ago we used to distinguish the capitalist, socialist and third worlds, linking closely together economic and political criteria. The frontiers to which the second half of the 20th century had accustomed us have lost a greater part (but not yet the whole) of their meaning. The end of the communist regimes in Europe on the one hand, and on the other the rapid economic growth of several great emerging countries, with China, India and Brazil first among them, have shattered the categories of 'east' and 'south'. But other frontiers we thought had been abolished have risen to the surface again and recovered their full significance, for instance frontiers claimed by nationalism, that divide and separate the countries in the south-east of Europe, to cite only the example closest to us, and they raise questions about the existence of states we considered stabilized.

In some regions of the world religion has thus become a powerful instrument and a veritable marker of identity: an identity that transcends state borders in certain cases, while in others it challenges them. The same thing is true for languages: whereas many are disappearing as soon as they are no longer spoken by a large enough number of people, languages that used to have minority status or one of inferiority compared with the importance of an international or imperial language of communication (German in the central and eastern European empire, Turkish in south-eastern Europe, English in India, etc.), or compared with a national state-imposed language, are finding their official existence recognized again – we think of Catalan or Basque in post-Franco Spain. Alongside English, French or Portuguese the great languages of sub-Saharan Africa are becoming or again becoming communication tools at regional level, but are not rising to the status of sole language at the level of the state, with whose borders they do not in any case coincide. More generally in Europe the great unities – of language, religion, culture, ethnic origin, historical tradition, etc. – on which the 19th-century states had based their existence, their legitimacy and their political project are today being challenged by a dual process of affirming and recognizing particularities on the one hand and on the other of transcending frontiers in order to create larger entities.

To attempt to understand better all these ongoing developments, many of which surprise us with their speed, and which seem fated to shape the early decades of the 21st century, the best possible way forward is still to interrogate other historical realities that are deeper, longer term and more comprehensive even than our states: realities that explain the specific history of each of those states instead of being explained by it. Among the most prominent of these realities are civilizations. But what do we mean precisely by this word 'civilizations'? Without a doubt it covers many realities, which we need to try to sort out. We can organize them around four key ideas: the specific group of cultural features that forms them; the space they occupy; the duration of their life; the societies they give their face to. But the classification might be viewed from different spatial and chronological perspectives too. So, on the European level, we can talk first about a 'western' civilization deeply affected by the different forms of Christianity, and uniting in a common entity eastern and western Europe, as well as South, Central and North America; then about a European civilization distinct from both that of the USA and that of Latin America; then about a civilization peculiar to each of the great states that make up this Europe (Britain, Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Poland, Russia, etc.); then about the two

civilizations (western and eastern) or even – to follow Janos Süsz, who gives an independent place to central Europe (*Les Trois Europes*) – about the three civilizations that share the European space; or finally about another division of the same space into three, this time a religious one that for a millennium has contrasted the Orthodox world with a western Christendom (which has itself been divided for five centuries between the Protestant Reformation and Catholicism). Identical distinctions could be suggested for Asia, which has been deeply marked by varieties of dynamism, religious (Buddhism and Islam in particular), political (the Mongol conquest), cultural and artistic.

It would be pointless to insist on making a choice among the different definitions of European civilizations we might suggest, definitions which are based in a series of changes of level. We should remember that every civilization is multiple and is part of a history that is itself plural and has caused a succession of turning-points to be introduced into it. Seen from the Mediterranean the break between the two Christendoms, confirmed by schism, follows the border separating the Greek and Latin worlds, which Rome had united under the same political authority but without erasing that border, a dividing-line which the fall of Rome again reinstated. But the line that continues that religious border as far as the Baltic is of a later date: it expresses the history of the Christianization of the part of Europe not subject to Rome's authority, of Constantinople on one hand and the western centres of Carolingian Europe on the other. In its turn the line separating Protestant from Catholic Europe also follows for the most part the frontier of the Roman Empire, which had disappeared a millennium earlier, as if the once romanized part of western Europe had opted to remain faithful to the authority of pontifical Rome, whereas the non-romanized part decided to reject it.

Again, seen from the Mediterranean, Islam came to the fore in the 7th century by occupying the whole of the Near and Middle East from Egypt to the Iranian plateau, a region that, several millennia before our era, had witnessed the birth and strengthening of the first great agricultural civilizations in our history – the only ones that can be compared to China and India – and the construction of the first great monarchic political entities. This region, gradually unified and dominated for a millennium by Greece then Rome, suddenly grasped its independence in a Mediterranean which was also destined to separate into three parts – the two Christendoms sharing the northern and Islam dominating the southern shore by seizing the North African countries and southern Spain in the west, where Carthage was already established. This caused Fernand Braudel to write (*Grammaire des civilisations*, p. 73): 'Christendom and Islam . . . those new religions took hold in each case of the body of civilizations already in place. In each case they were its soul: from the start they had the advantage of taking on a rich heritage, a past, a whole present, and already a future . . . Just as Christianity inherited the Roman Empire, which it extended, Islam at its beginning seized upon the Near East, one of the oldest, maybe the most ancient crossroads for civilized individuals and peoples in the world.'

But it is worth emphasizing that those two monotheistic religions which divided up the Mediterranean arena took the opportunity, after confronting each other over a long period, to relaunch their expansion in directions where Rome had been forced to withdraw from venturing. Christendom pushed out into all of Europe east of

the Rhine and north of the Danube and the Black Sea, then, from the 16th and 17th centuries, towards Siberia and the further shore of the Atlantic. Islam not only struck off towards the oases of central Asia, which had already been reached by Alexander, and thence towards the Chinese world, but also into India and south-east Asia and across the Sahara towards black Africa: there, from the 16th century, Islam was joined by the Christianity of European merchants then colonizers who had arrived by sea, which explains the current situation of many African states on the north coast of the Gulf of Guinea, divided between Muslims, in the majority in the north, and Christians who predominate in the south.

It is important to see that each time this history, in which we find ancient frontiers, ever-present or ready to be revived according to the requirements of the present, has shaped the spaces in which we live today. It is not the sole key but without a doubt the main one, allowing us to understand them by supplying us with the necessary pointers. Over the last decade the break-up of the Yugoslav federation, in a Europe we thought of as thoroughly secular, has provided us with examples that have surprised us by the violence of the confrontations, closely combining religious and ethnic identities to the extent that the Dayton accords do not recognize any place for those who, as in Bosnia, do not claim to be Serbs, Croats or Muslims. In the Indian Union – which since the independence of Bangladesh nonetheless contains more Muslims than Pakistan, but which since Nehru has chosen to play the religious neutrality card and respect everyone's beliefs – hostility to Islam has become a political ploy again for advocates of an intransigent Hinduism. In Malaysia, despite the existence of a large Chinese minority and a smaller minority of Indian origin, Islam has become the compulsory reference which makes it possible to create the link, around the long colonial parenthesis, between the first Malay sultanates in the 14th and 15th centuries and the new state, which claims their legacy and bases its legitimacy on it.

And so if, over the last two decades, religion has come to reoccupy the front of the stage as a major aspect of civilization and a marker of the long duration of individual and collective identities, it is because it shares with politics two basic characteristics. The first is that it is profoundly interiorized by individuals and helps to shape at a deep level their ways of thinking, believing, acting and seeing the world in a manner that makes them able to resist the loss of religion's influence in the modern world. The second is that, as it involves group ceremonies and rituals, it shapes solidarities, collective identities, networks, which structure our societies. These solidarities and networks have in common the fact that they can operate both at very short distances, by remedying the state's deficiencies and helping individuals and families to meet their most ordinary everyday needs, and over very long distances, as in the case of international migrations, which rely on those long chains of interpersonal relationships and mobilize their resources. Thus in pre-unification Germany voting socialist used to characterize the majority Protestant regions east of the Rhine, whereas the CDU was dominant in the Rhineland and Bavaria with their Catholic-majority populations. In this way our political democracies, even though they are recent, can make infinite re-use of older social and cultural affinities. They are part of a continuity, and occupy spaces where they have written only the portion of history closest to us.

There is no doubt that one of the keys to this continuity is provided by the rural societies that have occupied, developed and built the European space in both its unity and its diversity, just as they have built that of most of the world's great civilizations. Unlike colonial America, which was constructed from its towns, the European space was shaped over a long period by its country people, who formed 80 percent of its population until the early 19th century. And this meant in each case an original mixture, on the one hand, of the spread of a system of techniques combining in variable proportions cereals, forestry, stock-rearing and use of woodland resources, and on the other hand of adaptation to environmental conditions, sometimes favourable and fertile, sometimes hostile and hard to manage. Hence the diversity of the solutions found and the frequent fragmentation of our landscapes, meaning that not one of our villages is like any other in the view of those who know it from the inside, while all the villages in the same region look alike to those who see them with the superficial gaze of an outsider.

And so we could also define Europe as a 'civilization of bread', even if that bread was for a long time white for the wealthy and black or grey for most of the population, and was made of wheat here, rye there, and various mixtures of the most diverse cereals in yet other places. Nowadays, bread has ceased to be the chief food of the very great majority of Europeans, but it has remained our cultural reference. This has not, however, prevented Europe from adopting first maize, an American plant, then rice, a cereal from Asia. Similarly, and increasingly over the last half-century, country people have abandoned the countryside en masse to live and work in town: today they form half of humanity. Today's Europe was produced by the industrial, urban revolution, which remodelled its landscapes and redistributed its inhabitants across the land. But the countryside and the land are still essential cultural references for us: they populate our memory, our language, our proverbs, our morality, the teachings passed on by school and family.

Europe is also probably the first great civilization which, though it did not invent writing, generalized the use and teaching of it. For millennia that teaching was restricted to relatively small minorities, but over the last 500 years it has spread in stages to new sections of the population until, from the 19th through the 20th century, our school systems made it compulsory for everyone. First to become universally literate, to borrow Jack Goody's classification, Europe could thus be defined as a 'civilization of the printed text and education', which in turn became the basis for a 'knowledge society', today in competition with an 'information society': this time the definition corresponds to the widest expression of European civilization, including North America, part of Latin America, and all the countries populated by Europeans, such as Australia and New Zealand.

Finally, there is no doubt that war has played a major part in the history of European civilization and given it a share of its content. Until very recent times war was, for a long period and for its inhabitants, misfortune, indissolubly associated with the history of the states that shared the European arena. They made considerable use of it to acquire new territory and stabilize their borders, and beyond that to extend to the whole of the continent rules that hold the balance between independent sovereign states, and which had first been developed in mid-15th-century Italy. And the change recorded over the last half-century, which we wish to

believe in, is still both very recent and fragile. To make dialogue possible between its different elements, Europe must still affirm itself to be a 'civilization of peace'.

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So in dealing with space and time, in moving in turn from religion to politics, from economics to culture and the forms, now peaceful, now violent, that regulate the relationships between people, we have found ourselves faced with the extreme complexity of the word 'civilization'. But far from being its restriction, that complexity is in fact the basis for its richness. To return to Fernand Braudel's definitions, 'civilizations are spaces, societies, economies, collective mentalities, continuities'. Any choice between these many definitions, whose spatial boundaries are always far from coinciding, would sacrifice their complexity for a concern to simplify that would fix frontiers and make them impossible to cross. On the other hand, all dialogue assumes exchange and any exchange assumes a form of equality between the partners, but also, for it to be possible, meeting-points and intermediaries, cultural go-betweens who are comfortable on both sides of the border and able to understand the differences, but also assist in overcoming them by suggesting equivalences. It is the quantity of these mediators that is the key to the success of this stage in its history – one in which the whole of Europe has been engaged for just over ten years. We need to increase their number, their diversity, and strengthen their position, their role and the recognition they enjoy in our societies. The challenge is a long-term one but all the progress achieved can easily be capitalized on and exploited to make fresh progress possible. If we can wish something for Europe at the start of this century it is that the 21st century, rather than becoming the century of the single language, should be the century of the 'translators', the only people who can communicate the cultures whose differences we need to safeguard.

Europe is not alone in moving in that direction. Indeed this is also the road followed by the Indian Union after independence, when it chose both to retain as the language of the central administration the colonial language – English – which was also the language of the elites, and to recognize on an equal footing, with the status of 'national languages', all the 'regional' languages (around 20 today), many of which are used by the administrations of the various states in the Union: they are spoken, taught and used as literary languages, and the increasing number of television channels that have, over the last 15 or 20 years, appeared on the scene have strengthened their ability to stand firm against the inexorable rise of Hindi.

These two examples, Europe and India, illustrate how today the process of political unification can be reconciled with preservation of cultural diversity, and at the same time create bridges between the different languages and the different uses and users of them at a period marked by intensification of the circulation of messages and information of every kind: even more than goods, produced here and sold elsewhere, thousands of miles away, without any meeting between producers and purchasers, this circulation alone is a powerful factor in the restructuring of cultures unless there is a counterweight.

Indeed the last few decades have upset the old balance that had long been the inspiration of historians. Whether it was a question of people – with the silent, all-

conquering migrations – or goods – with the different types of trade by land and sea – or plants grown and domestic animals, or yet the techniques – with the revolution brought about by the discovery of America in the intercontinental circulation that had previously occurred over several millennia on the level of the ancient Eurasian world – or languages – with the promotion of some of them to the rank of languages of culture, of power, of religion or of art – whose expansion often exceeded that of the political entities that had brought them into being and seemed to ignore borders blithely, historians and all around them who recorded their thoughts and research with the long term in mind, thinking of permanence and continuity, were encouraged to place emphasis on communication and circulation. In their eyes, both of these were questioning fragmentations of the local, changing acquired habits, requiring dialogue and exchange (in the peaceful mode of commercial trade or the violent one of war and looting) with the Other, creating huger entities that were helping to change the course of history in a manner that was both lasting and irreversible. Exchange arrived to save various cultures and civilizations that had shared the world from the temptation of isolation and turning inwards: it found itself cast in the dynamic, flattering role of the motor of history. Roads (with circulation) and borders (with contacts between neighbouring but separate worlds) became the two pre-eminent means.

Today our view is fundamentally different, since the threat has changed place and nature: standardization has replaced isolation. And suddenly diversity has become the compulsory reference, the supreme good. Consequently, the question facing us today with particular force is: can history and knowledge of the past still claim to help us understand the present?

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Note

1. A first version of this text was published in 2005, with the title 'La longue durée de civilisations', in the journal *Teomai*, first semester, no. 011, Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, Quilmes, Argentina.