

## **THE EUROPEAN CIVILIZATIONAL CONSTELLATION: A HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY**

**Gerard Delanty**

*School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Liverpool, UK*

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### **Summary**

The chapter provides a critical approach to European civilization in a way that avoids some of the traditional Eurocentric assumptions about the superiority of the West and simplistic assumptions about the European heritage based on a common culture deriving from classical antiquity, Christianity, the Renaissance, and Enlightenment. It is also an approach that avoids some of the undifferentiated attacks on the idea of European civilization as exclusively 'orientalist' in the sense of being defined exclusively in terms of a relation of superiority to the Orient. Drawing from recent work in historical sociology and new approaches to the European heritage, the chapter surveys the formative periods in European history with an emphasis on the internal pluralization of Europe and multi-faceted encounters with the non-European world. The central theme is that European civilization must be conceived in terms of a civilizational constellation that has constantly changed in history and is not underpinned by fixed reference points. As a civilizational constellation, Europe is comprised of several civilizations the interactions of which have produced the specificity of Europe. This emphasis on the

hyphenated nature of civilizations is demonstrated by means of a consideration of the major civilizations within this broader civilizational category. On the basis of this analysis the status of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment as signal moments in the European heritage are also looked at and the argument is given in conclusion that the form cultural and political modernity took in Europe was to a large degree shaped by the nature of the civilizational context. As a category of historical memory, one important dimension of the European civilizational heritage today is the critique of Eurocentrism. But one of the main legacies is the tension between the republican and cosmopolitan traditions of community.

## **1. Introduction**

Since the emergence of a European consciousness from about the sixteenth century, the question has been frequently posed as to the meaning of Europe. This was bound to be a contested matter and many definitions of Europe have been controversial. For some it is a political project while for others it is a cultural heritage. There is also little agreement on geographical limits of Europe and how geography relates to the cultural and political dimensions. More noteworthy is the highly contextual nature of these definitions of Europe, which have changed over the course of history. The idea of Europe in the nineteenth century was very different from the early modern idea that arose with some of the first references to a European identity in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and all of these were very different from the twentieth century notion of Europe that came with the Cold War and the emergence of the European Union. Underlying all these conceptions of Europe is a sense of Europe as a historical movement shaped in space and in time by many forces. This suggests a notion of Europe as a civilization. Whether or not this has been explicit in accounts of Europe, it has generally been an implicit assumption. The notion of a European civilization encapsulates the geographical, cultural and political dimensions of Europe. This chapter is addressed to three main questions: what does it mean to speak of European civilization? In what sense can Europe be described as a civilization and what is meant by this term? Can the European civilizational heritage be conceived of in non-Eurocentric terms?

It is by no means self-evident what the term civilization means and what European civilization means. The term civilization is fraught with ideological associations and the notion of European civilization has often been associated with ideas of the superiority of the West and other Eurocentric notions that have now been mostly discarded. In the nineteenth century the notion of civilization, more or less equated with Europe, was generally defined in terms of distinction based on civilization versus barbarism. In this definition there could only be one civilization for the non-western world that was deemed incapable of civilization save in the adoption of western civilization. It was a common notion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that cultures were subordinate to civilization. Cultures were largely national and the diversity of culture, it was believed, reflected the diversity of nations and peoples while underlying all these cultures was a unitary notion of civilization. Several cultures of course competed to be the true representative of civilization, which was a singular and universal condition. It

was often thought, too, that civilization first arose in the East but due to the alleged decadence of oriental cultures, it declined and was resurrected by the cultures of the West. European civilization has generally been regarded as the equivalent of Western Civilization, which as a universal condition was more or less equated with modernity and hence the idea of 'Modern Western Civilization' as the universal reference point for all cultures.

Setting aside the now questionable equation of Europe with the West, the idea of civilizations in the plural did not exist, for only culture could be plural – civilization was the universal dimension of culture. This tension between the universality of civilization and uniqueness of cultures lay at the centre of European Enlightenment thought, which celebrated reason, progress, science as well as the romantic pursuit of culture and otherness. When historical and sociological scholarship finally recognized the plurality of civilizations, as in the pioneering work of classical sociologists such as Max Weber, Marcel Mauss and Emile Durkheim, there was generally an implicit assumption of the superiority of the civilization that emerged within Europe. These scholars recognized the plurality of civilizations, but tended to see them as relatively self-forming and separate from each other and based on relatively uniform cultures. In addition, even in cases where Eurocentrism was much less prevalent, teleological notions of a civilizational logic tended to prevail in studies of the non-western world. In such accounts it was generally assumed that the civilizations of the non-western world would eventually adopt the western model of modernity and in doing so would inherit the universalistic aspects of European civilization. Clearly such assumptions can no longer be taken uncritically. While much of the world has been influenced by European civilization it is increasingly recognized that this undoubted fact has not led to the absolute universality of European civilization, which has itself been influenced by non-western civilizations. All this points to a plural notion of civilizations as overlapping and hyphenated.

## **2. Theoretical Considerations in Defining Civilizations**

The approach to be adopted in this chapter on European civilization takes a critical and reflexive view of the idea of civilization as a condition that is not underpinned by a specific cultural, political or geographical set of given facts; rather the view taken is that civilizations are on-going processes which create the very terms that define them. This suggests an anti-essentialist notion of civilization as a transformative process in which various elements and dynamics shape a broad spectrum of societies in terms of their cultural orientations and institutional patterns. In this approach civilizations are not defined as closed systems locked in conflict with each other and based on primordial cultural codes. Civilizations have also been shaped in inter-civilizational encounters: they are not self-positing. Virtually every major world civilization has been influenced by another civilization. Thus any account of civilizational history will have to address the inter-civilizational dimension as much as the intra-civilizational. Civilizations develop in non-linear ways: there is no one simple path from barbarism to civilization and modernity; nor is there a general descent from civilization into barbarism.

Accordingly, what is needed is a multi-dimensional concept of civilizational patterns and encounters.

What is a civilization? Four broad features define a civilization: a geopolitical configuration, institutional structures in which material life and power are embodied, cultural orientations or worldviews, and diasporic movements of peoples. As a geopolitical configuration, a civilization is generally related to a politically delimited territory. This does not have to be a very specifically defined territory, such as the territory of a state. Most of the civilizations of the world have had a territorial basis, however much undefined their frontiers have been. Indeed, most, if not all, the major civilizations of the world were at some point in their history shaped by an imperial power. An exception is the Judaic civilization, which was a diasporic civilization. But even this has a special relation to a specific territory. Second, civilizations also have a basis in material life and entail institutional structures in which resources and power are organized. These institutional structures are broader than specific societies and include what has been called ‘families of societies.’ Thus, for example, the tradition of Roman law gave to European civilization an enduring institutional foundation. Third, civilizations have distinct cultural orientations or, what the historical sociologist Benjamin Nelson called ‘structures of consciousness’, which are also broader than national identities and more like worldviews. The cultural component of civilizations has often been related to the major world religions. Islam, Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity have been the most influential forces in shaping the world civilizations around worldviews. Finally civilizations are related to the diasporic flows of peoples. Such diasporas do not in themselves constitute civilizations but without the migrations of large populations and the resulting creation of large-scale human settlements no civilization is possible.

According to one of the foremost civilizational scholars, S. N. Eisenstadt, the major civilizations of the world have been products of the ‘Axial Age’ civilizations. These civilizations emerged in the second half of the last millennium BCE in ancient Greece, Israel, India, China and Iran where far-reaching breakthroughs occurred and which led to lasting revolutions in the relation of culture and power. The Axial Age saw the birth of the world religions and provided enduring reference points for intellectual elites to articulate different visions of the world. According to Eisenstadt, the most significant development was that the Axial Civilizations led to different degrees of conflict and creativity and that what was to become the European civilization was the civilization that was based on the greatest degree of internal conflict as a result of its distinct civilizational imaginary.

On the basis of these ideas, a few points of a general theoretical nature can be made. What unites a civilization is not necessarily a set of values and dispositions that provide it with a worldview that can serve as a ‘Grand Narrative.’ The Axial Age civilizations were in fact all revolutionary developments in which radical and new creative visions were introduced. What emerged out of these were new ways of interpreting the world. It was inevitable that such interpretations would also lead to conflicts, since there was

often little agreement about such interpretations and their political implications. Nowhere were such disputes as great as in the Christian tradition, which arguably witnessed the greatest amount of dispute over doctrine and political authority.

The cultural aspects alone will not determine the shape of a civilization. Important too is the geopolitical and institutional context in which cultural orientations impact upon the material and institutional organization of power. As specific configurations of power and culture, civilizations can be dynamic fields in which some of the most fundamental structures of the social world are shaped in an on-going historical process.

Civilizations come into focus only in the longer perspective of history when large-scale structures take on the character of a historical pattern. For this reason the term 'civilizational constellation' can be used to refer to a pattern that becomes discernable only when a wider, cosmic view is taken. Therefore civilizations cannot be reduced to short-lived political entities, whether nations or empires. Such political entities may be pivotal to the shaping of civilization, but civilizations are ultimately products of what Fernand Braudel called the *longue durée* – they are shaped in a long historical process.

As a singular condition, a civilization is internally pluralized. Benjamin Nelson, who was instrumental in developing a comparative historical sociology of civilizations, used the term 'civilizational complexes' to capture the sense in which civilizations were both internally differentiated and at the same time integrative frameworks. Often the integrative dimension was not apparent until a longer historical perspective is taken. The historical sociologist Johann Arnason, following philosophers Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Cornelius Castoriadis, refers to the cultural dimension of civilizations as 'ways of articulating the world.' As such, civilizations have at their heart conflicting interpretations of world; they are not self-enclosed systems of meaning based on enduring ontological visions, but entail evaluative systems of meaning and also more radically creative impulses. In this sense, then, the civilizational thrust can be a source of societal transformation and should not be mistaken for that which is simply handed down unchanged. This gives to civilizations a radical reflexivity in that their worldviews offer reference points for the evaluation of the present and an orientation for the future.

Finally, it can be remarked that civilizations, and in particular encounters between civilizations, have been important carriers of globalization. It has been increasingly recognized that globalization is not a recent development, but goes back a long time and can be related to the rise and expansion of the early world civilizations. Civilizational encounters arising as a result of trade, diasporic movements, world religions, imperial expansion were early instances of globalization. The rise of global connections was a direct consequence of civilizational encounters. Such encounters, which cannot be all explained in terms of wars and violent clashes, were decisive in shaping the worldviews of those civilizations that came into contact with each other. It has very often been the case that arising out of these encounters new civilizational forms emerged or new orientations within existing civilization took place. Increasingly, the logic of the

encounter - adaptations, direct borrowings, cultural translations, mutual learning - has shaped the civilizations of the world: a phenomenon now known as globalization. Whether or not this has now led to the end of civilizations and the coming of a new global age is a matter than cannot be discussed here.

### **3. The European Civilizational Constellation**

The previous arguments suggest a multiple view of European civilization. The received view is that European civilization is underpinned by fixed reference points, which are often associated with the Greek and Roman civilization, Christianity, the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Modernity, generally defined by reference to the Enlightenment, is held to be part of this heritage, which culminated in 'Modern Western Civilization.' An alternative view, more in keeping with current philosophical thinking and research in comparative historical sociology, would suggest that the civilizational nature of Europe is far less tightly defined. The historical heritage, including the conventional reference points, can be interpreted in different ways. Before looking at this below, a few points of a general theoretical nature can be made with respect to Europe specifically.

European civilization can be understood in plural terms in three related senses. First, it can be defined in a way that includes a multiplicity of civilizations within Europe; secondly it can be defined in way that includes a wider trans-continental dimension to inter-civilizational encounters; thirdly the specific civilizations under consideration should be seen as themselves highly plural. The upshot of this is a notion of a civilizational constellation, which is particularly pertinent to the European case although by no means exclusively European.

Under the first heading would be a notion of European civilization including a broader spectrum of civilizations than Greek and Roman civilization or a unitary notion of the Judeo-Christian civilization. An alternative and more inclusive civilizational approach would have to include the Byzantine tradition and its later renaissance in imperial Russia where it lent itself to Orthodox and Slavic cultural flows. Included too in a broad notion of the European civilizational constellation would be the Jewish diasporic civilization and the Islamic civilization, including its Turkish offshoot and modern European Islam. These different civilizations are not entirely separate but interact with each other. The Judaic civilization, for instance, is present in Islamic and Christian civilizations and the Byzantine civilization was related to both western and eastern traditions. Russian civilization includes both western and eastern civilizational currents. Modern Turkey is a combination of the Ottoman heritage and westernization.

Implied in this plural notion of the European civilizational constellation is a strong emphasis on civilizational encounters and in particular a relation to the wider Asia context. This points to a hyphenated notion of civilizations as opposed to a singular notion, as in the terms Graeco-Roman civilization, the Judeo-Christian civilization, Byzantine-Russian civilization. The second aspect, the trans-continental dimension of inter-civilizational encounters, highlights the role the non-European world played in the

making of Europe. This was a relation that itself took many forms, ranging from violent encounters to mutual learning. Europe variously borrowed, adapted, translated, the cultural, technological, scientific creations of other civilizations, in particular those of Asia. The reverse of course also happened. As a result of centuries of trade and later as a result of imperial ventures and colonization, the various European-Asian civilizations have become quite mixed. The important point is that any consideration of 'European Civilization' must include the non-European dimension, a relation that has not one but many dimensions.

With respect to the various civilizations that make up the wider civilizational constellation, the internal pluralization of those civilizations must be emphasized. This internal pluralization can, in part, be explained by the wider inter-civilizational context, but it is more than this. Indeed, the very notion of a civilization suggests a diversity of social and cultural worlds that also bear some common patterns. As mentioned earlier, it has been argued by some scholars that civilizations have at their core certain cultural orientations that are common to the various social worlds of which they are composed. These orientations by no means provide stable reference points that constitute a received body of traditions such as a heritage or a self-enclosed world that remains unchanged. In the case of Europe this is strikingly evident in the Christian tradition, often seen as the defining aspect of European civilization. From a civilizational perspective this tradition has been internally highly pluralized and whose core ideas have given rise to conflicting interpretations of the world. The same can be said for the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, which have been far from a common singular culture. These points will be returned to below.

European civilization cannot be explained in racial terms. There is no European race. European civilization can be seen as a diaspora of diverse groups formed out of waves of migration and civilizational processes over many thousands of years. The Indo-European tribes who spread across Europe and Asia over 5000 years did not leave a common culture or civilization, but a common language which never translated into a common cultural or political system. In any case this Eurasian or Indo-European linguistic group did not coincide with the general geographical area of Europe, which also includes the non-Indo-European linguistic group, which includes the Finns, the Hungarians, and Estonians in addition to the Turks. Aside from the Latin and Hellenic linguistic groups, the most important of the archaic cultures that stemmed from the Indo-European tribes, and which had civilizational tendencies, were the Celtic, Germanic and Slavic peoples. Many of these peoples were to become Romanized and Christianized, but until then there was little of a civilizational commonality arising from their common origins in the Eurasian linguistic group. The Celts, for example, were not a racial or ethnically defined people than a diverse group who shared a common cultural heritage. For a time Latin was a common language for the elites, but since its vernacularization the European elites have never been consolidated by a common language. Language then is not a defining feature of European civilization. The notion of a civilizational constellation offers a way to comprehend the transformative processes that were involved in the numerous groups that were to make up the mosaic of Europe.

The following is a necessarily brief historical sketch of the main components of the European civilizational constellation. In line with the theoretical argument outlined in the foregoing, the narrative will emphasize the internal pluralization of the civilizations under discussion and the inter-civilizational context, both within and beyond 'Europe.' The political, cultural and diasporic flows within the main civilizational currents will be provided the principal reference points.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Gerard Delanty**, born in Cork Ireland in 1960 and studied sociology and philosophy at University College Cork, obtaining the degrees of BA (1982), MA (1984) and PhD (1987). He was a D.A.A.D. Scholar at Frankfurt University in 1986-7. His major field of study is social theory and historical sociology.

He is Professor of Sociology, University of Liverpool, UK and has held visiting professorships at York University, Ontario and Doshisha University, Kyoto. He is the author 100 papers and eleven books and has edited several volumes. His books include *Inventing Europe: Idea, Identity, Reality* (London, Macmillan, 1995) and (with Chris Rumford) *Rethinking Europe* (London: Routledge, 2005). He has edited (with Engin Isin) *Handbook of Historical Sociology* (London, Sage, 2003), *Handbook of Contemporary European Social Theory* (London, Routledge, 2005), (edited with Krishan Kumar) *Handbook of Nations and Nationalism* (London, Sage, 2006). He is the Chief Editor of the *European Journal of Social Theory*.