

# Civilizations and Global Hierarchies: An English School Approach

Written by Yannis Stivachtis

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/05/28/civilization-and-global-hierarchies-an-english-school-approach/>

YANNIS STIVACHTIS, MAY 28 2015

It has been asserted that we live in a new era that necessitates the introduction of new policies and practices that stand in sharp contrast to those of the past. As a result, there have been calls for the design and implementation of policies to enforce 'civilized' attitudes in global politics. It is also widely believed that democracy and its associated practices should provide the ground and guiding principles for contemporary global politics. Consequently, various global and regional organizations require that states seeking assistance or closer interrelations with them fulfill certain political and economic requirements associated with liberal democracy. The question, however, is whether these recommended policies and practices are, in fact, new. Using the theoretical and historically-informed framework provided by the English School of International Relations (ES), this article seeks first to illustrate that similar practices (and the associated discourses) were used in the past; and second to demonstrate how civilizational discourses and practices have been used to create global hierarchies.

Because of the core-periphery division and the presence of asymmetrical interdependence in favor of the West, historically states of the periphery have been in constant need for confirmation by core members of the international society, namely Western states. At the same time, this condition has enabled the West to define expectations and impose standards of behavior on certain states, especially those seeking admission to international organizations. As Gerrit Gong (1984:ix) argues, "anyone who has tried to join a club...or a society of some kind understands that certain standards distinguish between those who will be invited to become members from those who will not." Failure to comply with the standards of international conduct – defined by the international society's core members – may result not only in the inability of the states in the periphery to achieve their objectives but, most important, in their condemnation for their 'uncivilized' attitudes and actions.

### Civilizational Discourses and Global Hierarchies

Jacinta O'Hagan (2007:3-4) has drawn a useful distinction amongst two ways in which IR has sought to understand civilization(s): first, the concept of civilization is used "in its pluralist sense to define and distinguish political communities, their boundaries, characters, and their likely interaction with one another on the basis of their cultural identity"; second, "as a singular conception of progress relating to the political, economic and social institutions and practices of societies." This paper is concerned with civilization in the latter sense.

In this sense, civilization constitutes both a standard that defines boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, and a concept that has an inherent 'normative quality' (Bowden 2004:7). This point is clarified by Christopher Hobson (2007:81) who argues that the standard of 'civilization' "shapes practices of inclusion and exclusion, determining which states are accorded full rights and recognition, [and] it is heavily implicated in the structures of power that constitute these hierarchical relationships." 'Civilization' is also an 'evaluative-descriptive' term: "whenever [civilizations] are used to describe actions ... they have the effect of evaluating them at the same time" (Skinner 2002:48). To define something or someone as 'civilized' implies that there exists a 'civilized society' and that its members should attempt to civilize other actors existing outside of its boundaries. In addition, 'civilization' does not make sense without its 'other' – 'barbarism' – to which it is compared and defined against (Salter 2002:18). Who or whatever is associated with 'barbarism' is considered inferior and filled with negative connotations. If 'civilization'

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implies that a subject should engage in 'civilizing' activities, then the 'uncivilized' becomes the object of the 'civilizing' process. In this way, a hierarchical order is established between the 'civilizer; and the civilizee'; the 'teacher' and the 'pupil'.

In sum, civilizational discourses imply that the concept of 'civilization' differentiates, evaluates, includes, and excludes. In doing so, these discourses create global hierarchies. Those located within the boundaries of what it is presented to be the dominant 'civilization' are looked upon positively and they are associated with temporal progress and other attractive traits. In contrast, 'barbarians' are viewed as inferior, lacking progressive traits, and dangerous for the international order. Therefore, 'civilization' identifies a certain uniqueness in international society, demarcating at the same time what lies outside the scope of the society. Moreover, the manner in which various standards of 'civilization' – new or old – differentiate those who meet the qualifications of 'civilized' states from the inferior 'barbarous' ones makes them an ever-present feature of international politics. As Gong (2002:80) notes, "the processes by which an international system establishes standards to define and codify its operating interests, rules, values, and institutions are continuing ones."

It is vital for the study and practice of international relations to recognize the continuity of the standard of 'civilization' along with the different forms it has taken over time. The existence of a civilizational standard is not what varies over time; rather what changes is its character, in the sense that the standard may be more or less exclusive and more or less explicit. If one is to understand the role it continues to play in international politics today, the above must be reflected upon. To comprehend the role that civilizations play in establishing global hierarchies, we first need to familiarize ourselves with the evolution of international society.

## **Civilization and the Primacy of Europe**

One of the most important contributions of Hedley Bull to the study of international relations was the distinction he drew between an international system and an international society (Watson 1987:147). Bull (1977:9–10) defined the international system as being formed "when two or more states have sufficient contact between them, and have sufficient impact on one another's decisions to cause them to behave as parts of a whole." An international society, on the other hand, exists "when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions" (Bull 1977:13).

Despite the criticism that it has received (Stivachtis 2010a and 1998), the system/society distinction constitutes an empirical and practical formula which Bull developed in order to distinguish the homogeneous relations among a particular constellation of states from the heterogeneous relations of these states with the remainder of the political entities in the international system. For example, he saw an essential difference between the type of relations among the European states – based on their common culture, religion and values – and the type of relations with the Ottoman Empire. This difference was also observed by the international historian A.H.L. Heeren (1834:v) who viewed the European state system not simply as a constellation of states having a certain degree of contact and interaction, but as "a union of several contiguous states, resembling each other in their manners, religion and degree of social improvement, and cemented together by a reciprocity of interests."

According to the ES literature (Watson 1992 and 1990; Bull and Watson 1984; Wight 1977 and 1952), when the European expansion began, the world consisted of several regional international societies, each with their own distinctive rules and institutions reflecting dominant regional cultures. These regional international societies were built upon elaborate civilizations, including distinctive religions and different conceptions of the world and ways of conducting affairs. This, in turn, implied that relations between political entities that were members of different regional international societies could not be conducted on the same moral and legal basis as relations within the same society, because the rules of each regional society were culturally specific and exclusive. Therefore, the emergence of a global international society was not possible unless one of the regional international societies expand itself to the degree that it could combine the divergent regional international societies into a single universal society organized around a common body of rules and values. It was the European international society which expanded gradually and brought various regional international societies into contact with one another. In this process, the rules

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and institutions of the European international society were superimposed on other regional international societies. (Stivachtis 1998: 72-73; Bull 1984b; Watson 1984)

In its formative period, the European international society was limited to states of a particular culture and was regarded as comprising only Christians. During the process of European expansion, the ideas of Natural Law and the Law of Nations were often contested by conceptions postulating a fundamental division of humanity between Christians and infidels, and between Europeans and non-Europeans (Wright 1982:15). This idea stemmed from the notion of what Europe was, and what it was not. Specifically, the discovery of the Americas gave rise to doctrinal disputes concerning the status of overseas political communities and provided the background against which Europeans developed their identity. According to these doctrines, the distinction between Europeans and non-Europeans was supplemented by a further distinction between 'civilized' and 'non-civilized' peoples. The Europeans considered that it was their mission to carry the banner of their civilization into barbarous lands (Keal 2003; Keene 2002).

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the international society came to be regarded as a privileged association of European and civilized states, which had visible expression in certain institutions such as international law, diplomacy and the balance of power (Bull *et al.* 1990:82). There was, therefore, a sense that European powers were bound by a code of conduct in their dealings with one another that did not apply to them in their dealings with other societies. As Edward Keene (2002: 47) notes, "within Europe, international order was supposed to provide for peaceful coexistence in an anarchic and plural world by encouraging toleration...Beyond Europe, international order was intended to promote civilization." The Europeans thus developed a kind of "diplomatic fence that divided the European state system from the rest of the world" (Gulick 1955:10).

During the nineteenth-century international lawyers perpetuated the cultural duality between Europeans and non-Europeans, and between 'civilized' and 'non-civilized' peoples. It was argued that "international law is a product of the special civilization of Europe...and could not be supposed to be understood or recognized by countries differently civilized" (Hall 1884: 115). The distinction between 'civilized' and 'barbarous' humanity meant that states belonging to either categories were accorded different stages of legal recognition (Wheaton 1836; Lorimer 1880).

As the European international society spread over the world, many non-European states sought to join international society in order to achieve an international legal status equal to that of the European powers, and which would allow them to pursue and achieve their national objectives. Thus, European states faced the need to define the conditions under which non-European political entities would be admitted into European international society. The result was the establishment of a standard of 'civilization', which reflected the norms of the liberal European civilization (Tucker 1970:9).

Following Gong (1984: 14-15), the standards of 'civilization' evolved to include the following political and economic requirements:

- a 'civilized' state guarantees basic rights, such as life, dignity, and property; freedom of travel, commerce, and religion, especially that of foreign nationals;
- a 'civilized' state exists as an organized political bureaucracy with some efficiency in running the state machinery, and with some capacity to organize for self-defense;
- a 'civilized' state adheres to generally accepted international law, including the laws of war; it also maintains a domestic system of courts, codes, and published laws which guarantee legal justice for all within its jurisdiction, foreigners and native citizens alike;
- a 'civilized' state fulfils the obligations of the international system by maintaining adequate and permanent avenues for diplomatic interchange and communication;
- a 'civilized' state by and large conforms to the accepted norms and practices of the 'civilized' international society.

Defenders of European extraterritoriality contended that the protection of basic rights included in the standard of 'civilization' were "protection which every civilized state automatically affords" (Schwarzenberger 1955:220;

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Schwarzenberger 1971:84). Thus, by definition, countries unwilling or unable to guarantee such rights could not be considered 'civilized'. Consequently, non-European candidates were judged not only by how they conducted their foreign relations but also by how they governed themselves. Non-European states had to learn to adjust themselves to new realities, even at some cost to their own societies. Thus, the imposition of European standards upon the non-European world invited a confrontation between different cultures, since European cultural principles clashed with non-European ones (Bull 1984c).

The early twentieth century international society was still dominated by European powers. World War I, however, meant the destruction of that international society. It also meant that Europe no longer dominated the world's affairs and that the interests and pressures of the system were truly global (Watson 1992:278).

As Europeans lost control of the international system, a new international society emerged following the end of World War I and the establishment of the League of Nations. The latter's design for a new global international society incorporated almost all the rules and practices of the European society of states including its international law and diplomacy, as well as its basic assumptions about sovereignty and judicial equality of states recognized as independent members of the society. The new design left almost intact the capitulations and other practices, as well as the imperial structures of dependent states controlled by European colonial powers (Louis 1984).

## Civilization and the Primacy of the West

World War II led once again to the destruction of international society. The establishment of the United Nations (UN) constituted the virtual expression of a new global international society. In fact, many principles and structures found in the League of Nations were replicated by the United Nations. However, the emergence of a bipolar world led to the division of the global international society into two more homogeneous sub-global international societies: one associated with the West and one with the Soviet Union and its ideological allies. During this period, the West saw itself as the guardian of civilization and the promoter of freedom and progress, while the Soviet bloc came to be associated with tyranny and barbarity (Stivachtis 2006).

The historical standard of 'civilization' presented above functioned until the beginning of the decolonization process. There are three main historical factors that led to its demise. First, during World War I, Europeans began describing each other as 'barbarian'; a fact that started to unravel the distinction between a 'civilized' Europe and a 'barbaric' other (but still Europe) (Salter 2002:82). Second, the horrors perpetuated by some European powers during the Second World War undermined the idea of a 'civilized' Europe (Donnelly 1998:12). Third, the standard of 'civilization' was insulting to representatives of non-European civilizations, as the privileged legal status which European states claimed for themselves invited abuses and led to campaigns for its abolition. Consequently, colonized communities started revolting against its application (Bull 1984b:220).

While the old standard of 'civilization' fell into disrepute, a number of alternatives have risen as new standards in contemporary international society. The first possible successor to the historical standard of 'civilization' is the 'standard of non-discrimination' or the 'standard of human rights'. For example, Jack Donnelly (1998:1) argues that "internationally recognized human rights have become very much like a new international standard of 'civilization'." Ian Browlie (1979:596) also suggests that "the principle of respect for and protection for human rights had become recognized as a legal standard." Moreover, during the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, various delegates in the International Law Commission argued that the principles that should apply "must be sought out in the Constitutions of the different civilized states, namely the states which respect fundamental human rights" (cited in Gong 1984:91).

The similarity between the historical standard of 'civilization' and the 'standard of human rights' is staggering as they share a common concern for fundamental rights of life, liberty, property, and individual dignity. But what is even more intriguing is that the protection of human rights became a new standard for European countries. For instance, the European Human Rights Conventions requires compulsory jurisdiction, while European organizations, such as the Council of Europe and the European Union (EU), may suspend a country's membership due to the violation of human rights. Moreover, effectiveness in addressing human rights concerns have become a precondition for joining

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international organizations, such as the EU, NATO and the WTO or receiving economic assistance from global institutions, such as the World Bank and IMF.

Stivachtis (2010b; 2008) has argued that the standards of 'political' and 'economic performance', associated with liberal democracy and market economy respectively, have become the standards of 'civilization' in post-cold War international society. Drawing on the example of the EU, he has demonstrated the similarity between the contents of the Copenhagen criteria, whose purpose is to regulate the EU enlargement (expansion) process, and the contents of the standard of 'civilization', and has argued that unless candidate states fulfill these criteria, they cannot be admitted into the European Union (Stivachtis 2008). 'Economic performance' is closely tied to 'political performance' and 'good governance'. It also figures prominently in the policies of global and regional organizations, which provide a powerful incentive for aspiring member states seeking assistance to rethink their domestic political and economic arrangements by making democracy and market liberalization a precondition for membership or assistance (Bowden and Seabrooke, 2006).

The second possible successor to the historical standard of 'civilization' is the 'standard of cosmopolitan culture' which refers to the possibility of shared values, moral norms, and experiences on a global perspective (Gong 1984:92). For example, Andrew Linklater (2007, 2005a; 2005b) argues for a sociology of global morals with an 'emancipatory intent', as well as for policies with a commitment to ethical universalism. Mehdi Mozaffari (2001:251) claims that globalization has provided the fertile ground for the development of a global standard of 'civilization', which refers to a set of laws, norms, values and customs that provides opportunities and constraints for international actors. For Mozaffari, the global standard of 'civilization' is a product of the historical standard of 'civilization' that has been formulated through centuries in a cumulative fashion. Brett Bowden agrees with Mozaffari's observations although he entirely disagrees with him on the desirability of an international order based on the Western conception of 'civilization'. According to Bowden (2004:14), "basic human rights, a descent standard of living, and a just system of government are achievable in societies that are something other than replicas of the West."

The third possible successor to the old standard of 'civilization' is embodied in contemporary international law, which constitutes a clear reflection of liberal values. Specifically, David Fidler (2001:147) argues that "the civilizational conquest that started with the old standard of 'civilization' is now being carried deeper into the hearts of non-Western cultures through international law" and that "under the new standard of 'civilization', international law is a tool of political, economic, and legal harmonization and homogenization on a scale much greater than of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries." According to Fidler (2002), while capitulations were at the heart of the old standard of 'civilization', the new standard "has equivalent centers of activity, namely human rights, market liberalization strategies, structural adjustments policies, the emphasis on the 'rule of law,' and 'good governance', and the democratic legitimacy of governments."

Moreover, scholars working with liberalism have divided the world into liberal and non-liberal zones. For example, according to Benedict Kingsbury (1998:90), the liberal zone consists of "liberal states practicing a higher degree of legal civilization, to which other states will be admitted only when they meet the required standards" and that "the liberal West as the vanguard of a transformed legal global order contains a new standard of 'civilization'...to promote the advancement of the backward."

One just needs to compare the features of the historical standard of 'civilization' with the features of the new standard to see the similarities involved. Following this comparison, one can safely arrive to the conclusion that many areas of contemporary international law could have a more significant impact on a state's domestic governance and law than the historical standard of 'civilization'. For example, human rights law today extends protections of life, liberty and property beyond those guaranteed to foreigners under the capitulation agreements. Likewise, liberalization of trade and investment requires far-reaching reforms of domestic economies and legal systems than the old standard required, while the test of democratic legitimacy is far more reaching than under the historical standard of 'civilization'.

The fourth possible successor to the historical standard of 'civilization' is the standard of 'liberal democracy' (Morphet 2005; Franck 1995 and 1994; Hutchings 1998). In fact, democracy has been the unifying feature of all

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possible successors to the historical standard of 'civilization.' Democracy is recognized as the most suitable form of governance and essential for the full protection of human rights. Freedom, stability, accountability, openness, and social justice all make democracy the focal point for the current standard of 'civilization.' In providing a set of socio-political institutions, democracy becomes the blueprint and mechanism through which Western values and interests are transmitted.

The end of the Cold War and the apparent triumph of the Western model of market capitalism and liberal democracy led to a "reinvention of a restrictive international society" (Clark 2005:180). A considerable resurrection in the confidence of liberal values, combined with a sizeable power differential favoring democratic states, has led to the re-emergence of a more restrictive standard of 'civilization,' which largely reflects the values and interests of Western states (Sen 1999: 5). The movement towards a 'restrictive international society' has meant the strengthening of the principles that inform 'rightful membership,' with the growing conviction that the internal (democratic) makeup of states plays a crucial role in bringing about 'rightful conduct' (Bowden 2009). This has led to a renewed emphasis on the socio-political organization of states. According to Gerry Simpson (2004: 243), the end of the Cold War led to the return of 'liberal anti-pluralism,' characteristic of the era of the historical standard of 'civilization.' This version encourages exclusiveness and intolerance towards non-liberal regimes. Again, the world is described as being inhabited by 'civilized' and 'barbarous' communities, the difference is that now it is understood in terms of democracies and non-democracies (Stivachtis 2006). In the post-Cold War era marked by liberal anti-pluralism, a much heavier emphasis has also been placed on labeling, ostracizing, and when necessary, confronting 'pariah' or 'outlaw' states that do not conform to the new form of the standard of 'civilization' (Simpson 2004; Donnelly 2006).

## Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was twofold. First, it has illustrated that despite being presented as 'new', contemporary practices of inclusion and exclusion in the international arena have been also used in the past. Second, it has demonstrated how civilizational discourses and practices have been historically used to create global hierarchies. The paper has shown that standards of behavior similar to those associated with the historical standard of 'civilization' continue to exist in international society. Such an acknowledgment implies that although we may live in what many have called a 'new' era, international society's practices remain almost unchanged. In this sense, civilization discourses continue to differentiate and evaluate, as well as include and exclude thereby creating hierarchies globally.

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