Civilisation in the Scottish Enlightenment

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Since the 9/11 events, the so-called 'war on terror' and the rise of organised terrorism, debates about civilisation have witnessed a steady revival in International Relations (IR). A clear distrust has mounted in recent years among numerous IR scholars with regards to an excessively static understanding of civilisation as a historically stable cultural and social formation. Indeed, many endorse now a dynamic and pluralist understanding of civilisation(s) and have turned to history in order to unearth some important genealogical lines of descent of our contemporary civilisational discourses[1]. While this is certainly a welcome development, the majority of IR scholars engage only superficially (if at all) with what I consider to be a central site of observation for the emergence of a European discourse on civilisation, that is, the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment. Indeed, it is in this intellectual context that the word 'civilisation' made its first significant appearance in the English language (Caffentzis, 1995). The Scottish moral philosopher Adam Ferguson played an important role in that, particularly through his 1767*Essay on the History of Civil Society* (Ferguson, 1782 [1767]).

In what follows I provide a preliminary analysis of the idea of civilisation that emerged from the Scottish Enlightenment. I show that it significantly differed from the one that took hold in Europe later in the late nineteenth century and I argue that it was less of a companion to imperialism than it is usually thought. Hence, while 'civilisation and hierarchy go hand-in-hand' (Bowden, 2015), that is not necessarily true of civilisation and imperialism. Turning our attention to the origins of the Anglophone notion of civilisation both helps realising this point and equips us with a better understanding of the concept. If the Scots' notion of civilisation was certainly Eurocentric, it was also understood as a complex and indeterminate process stemming from within the specific history of a society rather than as a linear and inexorable process grounded in a teleological view of human history.

Civilisation and Imperialism before the Nineteenth Century

The semantic struggle over the concept of civilisation occurred (and still does) in a multiplicity of linguistic registers and intellectual contexts, and, among them, the Scottish Enlightenment deserves particular attention. That in IR little attention has been granted to the Scottish Enlightenment is surprising, in particular if compared to the centrality attributed to the late nineteenth and twentieth century discourses about civilisation (e.g. Gong, 1984; Salter, 2002; Buzan, 2014). I set out here to start redressing this imbalance by adding a new and important historical layer of complexity to our understanding of contemporary civilisational discourses. Historicising civilisational discourses is by no means an attempt to uncover their 'true' origin. Rather, in doing so, I remain committed and reaffirm the contingent nature of the concept of civilisation, which is at risk of being obscured by temporally overstretching the relevance of a specific understanding of civilisation – the one that prevailed in Europe since the late nineteenth century.

By the late nineteenth century the concept of civilisation was used in a discriminatory way to indicate the backwardness of non-European people through widespread references to an exclusive 'family of civilised nations'. Moreover, it was commonly held and explicitly argued that European states, and the white race more generally, had a 'special responsibility to civilize' (Keene, 2002: 120). Whereas the idea that European imperialism has a moral purpose has a long history, the emphasis on race is a feature peculiar to the late nineteenth century, when cultural, social and political differences among societies and populations were being increasingly explained through the language of the natural sciences. Yet, today this idea of a racially grounded 'civilizing mission' is all too often projected and superimposed on liberalism or even on 'modernity' and 'the West' as a whole. This move denotes a

tendency to overlook the different theories, arguments and justifications that characterised European imperialism over a period of at least three centuries. The risk then, as Hutchings puts it, is 'to occlude major differences between seventeenth century and nineteenth century imperialisms and the conceptual vocabularies through which both were understood and legitimated' (2014: 390). We should thus pay more attention to the relation between ideas of human nature, empire and civilisation in different historical contexts and authors.

Since its beginnings in the fifteenth century, European colonial expansion was accompanied by attempts to rationalise the 'discovery' of human diversity in a way that was compatible with the dominant cosmological-theological beliefs of the time. Yet, only in the late nineteenth century were explanations of this diversity decidedly tethered to nations, race and science (Hont, 1995; Douglas, 2013). During the period of the European Enlightenment a multiplicity of categories was used to identify human diversity: climate, national character, race, *moeurs*, *Kultur*, stadial accounts of social developments and sociological distinctions among agricultural, hunting, and pastoral lifestyles (Keene, 2005: 140-152). Thus, the evolution of the human species *tout court* and, more specifically, the evolution of societies along the path of progress and civilisation, was not always a matter of biological or scientific determinism.

A sense of European superiority also found its roots in ideas about refined manners, civil government and expanded commerce. These ideas constituted the bulk of the eighteenth century 'Enlightened histories' of the Scots David Hume, William Robertson, Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith, John Millar and Edward Gibbon[2]. These socio-economic histories, and Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776) in particular, laid the foundations for the subsequent emergence of political economy as a 'scientific' discipline (Fontana, 1985; Walter, 2011). At the same time they played a very influential role in shaping later discourses about Western civilisation (Pocock, 1985: 37-50; Kohn & O'Neill, 2006: 194-195).

The Idea of Civilisation in the Scottish Enlightenment: Between Political Economy, Conjectural History and Moral Philosophy

It is striking to see the constancy and the frequency with which the word 'civilisation' was used by British, French and American political economists in the nineteenth century. Among a selection of eighty five books on the topic of political economy published in Britain between 1820 and 1899, I found that roughly two-thirds of them included the word 'civilisation'. This comes over as less of a surprise when we recall the central role that the notion of civility played for Adam Smith, author of the *Wealth of Nations* and primary point of reference for several generations of political economists. Drawing on French philosophers and their intellectual practice of the *histoire raisonnée*, Adam Smith and his fellow Scottish moral philosophers embarked in a less idealistic, more empirically and historically-oriented style of grand narrative based on deductive reasoning. This new 'species of philosophical investigation' – which the Scottish philosopher Dugald Steward (1793, section II) retrospectively termed '*Theoretical* or *Conjectural History*'[3] – was adopted by the Scots with the purpose of historicising the recent emergence in Europe of 'commercial societies', as to explain their dynamics and to defend their superiority *vis-à-vis* other 'stages' of societal developments (i.e. hunting, pasturage, agriculture).

At the same time the 'Enlightened narratives' of these authors signalled a general dissatisfaction with natural law theories of sovereignty and their grounding on different but essentialist assumptions about human nature. While these XVII century contractarian theories of political authority recounted the formation of civil society from a pre-social state of nature, the Scots' accounts were based on a non-essentialist conception of the self, whose formation was to be observed and could only be understood within social interactions, through a self-reflexive process of judgment and action characterised by the universal capacity for 'sympathy'[4]. Based on this 'socially constructed' understanding of the subject, the 'Enlightened narratives' of the Scots reinforced the historicist tale about the progressive emergence of Europe as a civilised society of nations, from the medieval order through to the formation of contending monarchies capable of civil government and reason of state (Pocock, 1999: 309-310).

Histories of civil government intertwined with histories of civil society to recount the demise of the preceding feudal and religious order and the struggle against the spectre of 'universal monarchy'[5]. The resulting macro-narrative worked towards the consolidation of a consciousness of Europe's historical specificity and superiority. This

consciousness was based on good manners and commerce, as well as on the balance of power, on diplomacy and modern warfare as means for the protection of the liberty, independence and security of all (ibid.: 20-21; 309-318). Whilst their 'stadial' histories described a civilizing process that saw European commercial societies as representing the most advanced 'stage' of societal development, civilisation was understood by the Scots not as an endpoint but as a set of interrelated historical processes and transformations in the social, economic, political, cultural and military fields (Buchan, 2006: 176).

The Scots' conjectural histories of mankind are often cited, not entirely without reason, as examples of a Eurocentric tendency to adopt a temporalizing and developmental view of humanity (e.g. Hindess, 2007; Helliwell & Hindess, 2011; Metha, 2012; Di Muzio, 2012). As the intellectual historian J.G.A. Pocock (1999: 316-318) reminds us, within these narratives the 'progress of society' was held to have occurred in the history of Europe alone, 'orientals' and 'savages' being excluded from it[6]. The 'savage' stage of societal development was expelled altogether from European history and 'the role of the barbarian himself began to change; he ceased being an "other" and became an origin of the self' (ibid: 363).

Yet, while the conjectural histories of the Scots were certainly Eurocentric, it is problematic to describe them as imperialist or to conflate them with later deterministic narratives of linear historical development and progress based on racial theories (Hall & Hobson, 2010). Indeed, it was not uncommon to find critics of colonialism and imperial expansion among the Scots (Pitts, 2005: 25-58). Hume and Smith, for instance, condemned colonial wars and imperial expansions for their exacerbating effects on the growing British public debt, which represented a major element of degeneration and corruption of commercial societies (Pocock, 1985: 125-141). Neither their support for commercial societies was unconditional, nor did their socio-economic histories univocally suggest that non-Europeans ought to be excluded from ordinary standards of political respect, inclusion, or reciprocity.

Despite the pressures from an intellectual context where the belief in deep differences among human groups was steadily growing, the Scots hold on to the assumption about the equal rationality of human beings and their belonging to a common humanity (Keene, 2005: 137-144). Like other eighteenth-century European thinkers, they retained a sense of humility and respect in the face of complex civilisations of which Europeans had only the most superficial knowledge (Pitts, 2005: 19-21)[7]. They dwelled and dueled in this context to provide explanations of human diversity in socio-economic terms. The application of the conjectural method infamously resulted in the kind of progressive narratives of societal development exemplified by Smith's four-stage theory (i.e. stadial histories). However, such 'stages' of society did not add up to an evolutionary theory of society; rather, they were heuristic devices that did not presuppose a fixed order nor did they exclude the coexistence of different 'stages' at a given point in time (Pocock, 1999: 322-323).

Conclusion

As it has become apparent that lines of political, economic, and legal exclusion inherited from the colonial order persist in the present, IR scholars are increasingly turning to history in order to make sense of contemporary civilisational discourses. Much attention has been devoted to recovering those lines of political and legal exclusion bequeathed to us from the nineteenth and twentieth century colonial order in the form of 'standards of civilisation'. However, less effort has gone into researching seventeenth and eighteenth century European discourses about civilisation, that is, the antecedents of the standards of civilisation.

In this article I have sketched out some of the salient traits of the conception of civilisation emerging from the Scottish Enlightenment and suggested a closer engagement with it. Like other eighteenth-century European thinkers, the Scots were not centrally concerned with dictating their theories in the service of European imperialism, but rather with the creation a European order of territorial states. The fact that Scots' conjectural histories looked 'inward' – to the history of Britain and Europe – more than 'outward' did not preclude later authors from downplaying the 'local' character of these histories and adapting them to teleological views of world history and to ideas of a civilizing mission of white and Western imperialism.

Going back to examine the concept of civilisation that emerged from Scottish Enlightenment is not only important

because it is the social space where the notion of European civilisation finds its 'modern' roots, but also because it is an example of an intellectual context in which civilisation was understood as an internally diverse cultural formation and a historically fluid process. Recovering this multidimensional and dynamic conception can therefore play a role in downplaying the purchase of some contemporary theories – such as the 'clash of civilisations' – based on internally homogenous and historically static notions of civilisation and culture.

Notes

[1] See the 2014 special issue 'Rethinking the Standard(s) of Civilisation(s) in International Relations' in *Millennium – Journal of International Studies* 42(3).

[2] See for example David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* [1739-1740] and *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution of 1688* [1762]; William Robertson's *History of the Reign of Charles the Fifth* [1769] and *The History of America* [1778]; Adam Smith's *Lectures on Jurisprudence* [1763]; Adam Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society* [1767]. Lord Kames *Sketches on the History of Man* [1774].

[3] Steward writes in an 'Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith LL.D.' (1793): 'To this species of philosophical investigation, which has no appropriated name in our language, I shall take the liberty of giving the title of Theoretical or Conjectural History; an expression which coincides pretty nearly in its meaning with that of Natural History, as employed by Mr Hume, and with what some French writers have called Histoire Raisonnée' (section II – Of the Theory of Moral Sentiments, and the Dissertation on the Origin of Languages).

[4] David Hume declares his intention to lay the foundations of a 'science of man' in the opening pages of his *Treatise of Human Nature* [1739-1740]. For a discussion of the Scottish Enlightenment's approach to the study of human nature more broadly see AHNERT, T & MANNING, S. 2011. Character, Self and Sociability in the Scottish Enlightenment, New York, Palgrave Macmillan.

[5] For a conceptual history of 'universal monarchy' see BOSBACH, F. 1998. *Monarchia Universalis. Storia di un concetto cardine della politica europea (secoli XVI – XVIII),* Milano, Vita e Pensiero. On the prominence of the concept in late seventeenth and early eighteenth century English discourses about liberty and security see Devetak, R. 2013. 'The fear of universal monarchy': Balance of Power as an Ordering Practice of Liberty. *In:* Flockhart, T. D. A. T. (ed.) *Liberal World Orders.* British Academy.

[6] The term 'orientals' has in recent decades aquired a pejorative connotation to refer to the West's patronizing perceptions and fictional depictions of "the East" — the societies and peoples who inhabit the places of Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East. 'Orientalism' – in Edward Said's famous formulation (1978) – is hardly associable to the XVIII century Scottish Enlightenment.

[7] For a contrasting view of Smith on this point and the teleological nature of his historical approach see (Hall & Hobson, 2010: 233-236).

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