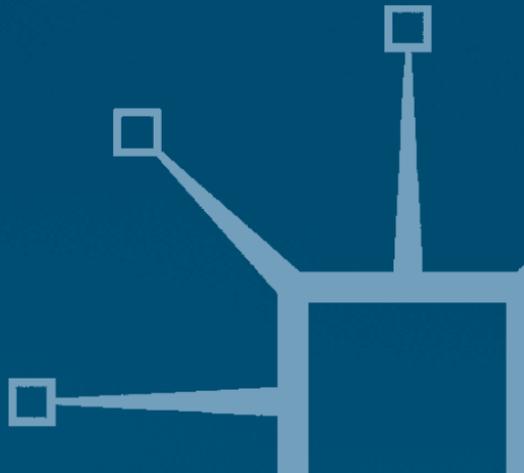


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Conceptualizing the West in International Relations

From Spengler to Said

Jacinta O'Hagan



Conceptualizing the West in International Relations

Also by Jacinta O'Hagan

CONTENDING IMAGES OF WORLD POLITICS (*co-editor with Greg Fry*)

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From Spengler to Said

Jacinta O'Hagan

School of Political Science and International Studies

University of Queensland

Australia

palgrave



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For Gary

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Introduction: The West and Cultural World Order

In the decade since the conclusion of the Cold War, International Relations scholars have anxiously sought to identify and explain the actors and forces that are shaping the emerging world order. Among the debates stimulated by the conclusion of the Cold War, two of the most dramatic focus on the contrasting visions of world order presented by Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' and Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history' theses. Huntington's 1993 essay¹ has become one of the most widely discussed articles of contemporary International Relations.² His analysis of the post-Cold War world is radical and shocking, suggesting an era in which world politics is dominated by conflicts between civilizations. His thesis contains dire warnings to the West that it must consolidate to meet the threats of disintegration from within and attack from without. Conversely, Fukuyama's image of world politics is one of a world divided between societies still evolving through the processes of history, and those which have successfully evolved to a post-historical state. In this context, the West is viewed as at the forefront of a broad civilizing process, providing the model of the rational state towards which the rest of humanity is evolving.

These theses present starkly contrasting images of the emerging world order that highlight the significance of cultural identity. The West plays a pivotal role in both these images of world order, yet their conceptions of the nature and role of the West is also markedly different. In Huntington's, the West is a powerful but declining entity battling to maintain its strength and influence in a world of multiple and conflicting civilizations. In Fukuyama's, the West provides a universal model of human progress and development. How are we to understand these contending conceptions of the West and of its role in the emerging world order? Intriguingly, International Relations, the discipline most closely concerned with analysis of world politics, provides little assistance in thinking conceptually about what or who the West is. This is intriguing given that the West is undoubtedly a significant concept in international relations. It is acknowledged as a political, economic and military force of unprecedented standing. The West

is also considered to be one of the central architects of major modern international institutions, such as the League of Nations, the UN, the IMF and the WTO. Assumptions about the importance of the West are interwoven into the main paradigms of International Relations: realism, liberalism and structuralism. However, these paradigms provide little conceptual space for understanding the nature and complexity of the West.

International Relations primarily theorises the world as one of states. However, the West is not a state, but most commonly conceived of as a civilizational entity. The paradigms of the discipline provide no explicit category into which civilizations can be placed. Consequently, civilizations have been largely absent from International Relations theory. For instance, although Huntington's essay tapped into a broader discussion about the future of the West,³ there was no contemporary debate on civilizational interaction in International Relations scholarship to which it could contribute. As Huntington's theses demonstrated, an interest in civilizational identity and its political significance is beginning to emerge in the discipline (Neumann, 1998; Jackson, 1999; Lynch 2000; Williams & Neumann, 2000). However, there is a need for further investigation of the way in which civilizational identities are perceived and represented, and consideration of how these identities frame perceptions of what is possible and desirable in world politics. In particular further reflection is required on how powerful civilizational identities such as the West are perceived.

The objectives of the study

This study seeks to broaden our understanding of international relations through reflecting on conceptions of the West in writings on world politics. At one level, its objective is to consider in more depth how the West is conceptualized through exploring how it is described in different contexts and under different influences. It identifies both continuities and variations in these conceptions in order to enhance our awareness of the complexity of representations of the West, and to suggest that these relate to the complexity of the community itself. It assumes that ideas and perceptions matter in international relations, contending that how a community is perceived and represented is important since this shapes and influences analysis and prescriptions. The study is also based on the belief that political identities are not innate or given, but shaped and reshaped on an ongoing basis by the context in which they operate, as well as by interpretations of histories and traditions. They are embedded in social and cultural contexts and constituted by relationships and interaction. In asking how the political identity of 'the West' is conceptualized, shaped and reshaped under different conditions, the study does not try to identify one, authoritative definition of the West. Nor is it an effort to disprove the existence of the

West. Instead, it seeks to use these conceptions to explore the complexity and dynamism of conceptions of the West.

At a second level, the study explores conceptions of the West in relation to broader assumptions about the nature of what is referred to here as the 'cultural world order'. The way in which the West, widely perceived to be a pivotal actor and influence in modern international relations, is conceptualized provides insights into different possibilities for interaction, and different assumptions about the possibilities for world order. Through examining this, the study participates in a broader debate about how conceptions of cultural identities and cultural world order contribute to perceptions of, and prescriptions for, world politics.

This study, then, is not a history of the West, although it does consider the way in which the history of the West has been perceived. Nor does it pretend to establish a new grand theory, or paradigm, within International Relations. It does not suggest that culture provides the principal organizing or explanatory principle in world politics. However, it does suggest that the discipline would benefit from more consciously reflecting on how the identities political communities are conceptualized, and on the role of culture and history in shaping perceptions of communities and their interaction.

Cultural world order

What, however, do we mean by the 'cultural world order'? The concept is introduced to refer to assumptions about interaction between broad cultural identities at the global level, the most significant of which are referred to as civilizational identities. It refers to assumptions about the nature of interaction between civilizational identities in world politics. Such assumptions vary widely. For some, civilizations are multiple and diverse, for others, the concept of civilization is singular and universal, incorporating the whole of humanity in a project of progress and development. Some view civilizations as innately conflicting, others as converging. Assumptions about the cultural world order implicitly frame perceptions of interaction and the possibility for progress and change in relations between peoples, and are deeply connected to perceptions of the political and economic world orders.

Cultural world order is distinguished from the concept of the political world order, taken as relating to the interaction of political communities, and of economic world order, taken here to concern the structure of relations of production and exchange. However, the political, the economic and the cultural cannot ultimately be treated as totally separate; they are deeply interwoven and interactive dimensions of any society. Assumptions about the cultural world order frame perceptions of interaction and the possibility for progress and change in relations between peoples, and are deeply connected to perceptions of the political and economic world orders. This is not to argue that assumptions about culture determine the

political and economic world order. However, perceptions of both the economic and political world orders may be influenced by presumptions about whether relations between people and communities from different civilizational identities are likely to be characterized by conflict or co-operation, or presumptions about the potential for the transfer of ideas and institutions between civilizations. For some, such processes promise convergence and interdependence, for others, domination or imperialism. Therefore, analysis of assumptions about civilizational interaction can deepen our understanding of the perceived possibilities for interaction in all realms of world order. While it seeks to avoid overstating their significance, this project investigates perceptions of civilizational identity as an important, if at times implicit, element which frames important debates in world politics. Therefore, it suggests we can usefully examine conceptions of the West in relation to associated assumptions about the relationship of the West to other civilizational identities.

As noted above, assumptions about the cultural world order vary widely and are influenced by perceptions of civilization. Two key strands can be identified in the etymology of 'civilization'. The first is a singular sense, which implies a universal process of development towards a higher form of society. This strand can be seen as evolving in tandem with the evolutionary and progressive ideals of the French Revolution. The second is a pluralist sense, which refers to diverse cultural communities. The evolution of this strand is evident in some of the Romantic tradition in Western thought that emphasize the plurality and diversity of cultures.⁴ Increased awareness of the diversity of human culture enhanced the pluralist concept of civilization, but this awareness has not necessarily produced a broad acceptance of the equality of civilizations, leading to the perception by some of a hierarchy of civilizations. Furthermore, it has continued to coexist with the concept of civilization as progress towards a superior form of society. In nineteenth-century Europe, it was widely assumed that Western civilization was at the forefront of this process. Into the twenty-first century, both the singular and pluralist sense of civilization persist in the vocabulary of politics.

The way in which the term civilization is employed is significant in what it says about how the cultural world order is conceived by the particular author. This can be a world order defined by a sense of the unity of humanity flowing in a single developmental process, or an order which encompasses essentially separate communities pursuing their own distinctive history. It may also shape perceptions of interaction between human communities. These may be conceived as relations of conflict, of domination, or co-operation and exchange. Not only can we identify different conceptions of 'civilization', but also different assumptions about the pattern of civilizational history. For some, it occurs in cycles, or in waves, while for others, it represents a linear pattern of teleological development.

Conceptions of the West occur within these differing perceptions of civilization and of the pattern of civilizational histories. These perceptions shape expectations and interpretations of interaction between people from different cultures as following trends of integration or incommensurability. These assumptions are important in framing perceptions of the possibilities for interactions between different peoples. They may also be significant in framing the analysis of the role of a major civilizational identity such as the West in the cultural, political and economic world.

As Andrew Linklater has noted, a recurrent theme in Western moral and political thought is the tension between particularism and universalism. In the context of International Relations, this is represented in the question of whether there is or could be a universal human community or a plurality of communities (Walker, 1988; Linklater, 1990; Rengger, 1992). This tension is manifest in the debate between the cosmopolitan and communitarian traditions in normative International Relations theory.⁵ This debate is one concerned as much with the possibility for, and desirability of moral, as for political community. It addresses the question of whether a global moral community is evolving, as the cosmopolitan tradition suggests, or whether moral community will remain located and focused in the particular community in which individuals are engaged (Clark, 1999: 134).

An important, if at times implicit, dimension of this broader debate is the issue of the prevalence of cultural plurality or diversity and the possibility for cultural universality. Underlying assumptions about cultural plurality or universality are implicit in how images of self and other are constructed in international relations, assumptions that influence readings of the past, analysis of the present and prescriptions about the future. These assumptions can influence perceptions about the possibility for interaction across and between particular communities. Furthermore, they can influence perception of whether a framework for interaction has or is evolving in which all communities are engaged. If so, where does such a framework stem from? Is it the product of the expansion of a particular cultural community – a form of cultural hegemony – or is it based on the discovery of universal principles of coexistence in a genuinely multicultural framework of interaction?

These questions can be used to reflect upon the meaning of civilizational identity and the implications of how interaction between civilizational identities is perceived. They are critically linked to conceptions of the West, and of its role in cultural world order. Perhaps one of the most important questions in this respect is whether the West represents a universal culture, or is at the forefront of a universalizing civilizing process, or whether it is a local culture that has attained a global reach? (Harding, 1998). The scale and extent of influence exercised by European based societies over the rest of the world is something that has intrigued generations of scholars from many different disciplines who sought to identify the secret of the West's success. The sociologist Benjamin Nelson, building on the work of Max

Weber, argued that to understand the growth and power of the West, it is necessary to go beyond material and technical factors to examine how the culture of Western societies facilitated a capacity to both reach out to, and draw in, ideas and insight from others. Nelson stresses that the West's capacity for fraternization facilitated communications with and borrowing from other civilizational identities. Furthermore, he suggests that the West was strengthened by a greater degree of tolerance and less rigid codes of inclusion and exclusion than were found in comparable civilizational identities (Nelson, 1976). These qualities, argues Nelson, allowed the West to engage in broader communities of discourse that both strengthened it and facilitated its expansion (Nelson, 1973; Linklater, 1998). In certain respects, therefore, Nelson represents the West as a civilizational identity that is based upon a cosmopolitan foundation. It is, in important respects, defined by its capacity to reach beyond the local, the parochial and to engage in multicultural dialogue.

Others, however, lay greater emphasis on the hegemonic rather than the dialogic dimensions of Western growth and expansion, positing that the West remains a particular civilizational identity that has had the capacity to project its culture at a global level. However, while its institutions, norms and even structures of thought have become globalized, they remain particular to the West rather than universal or a complete body of knowledge. Sandra Harding (1998), for instance, discusses how Western scientific thought is profoundly shaped by the historical and cultural context in which it evolved. Cultural preferences, she argues, may guide the questions asked and the causes investigated. Chris Brown (2000) similarly suggests that the promotion of norms and ideas such as human rights, civil liberties and liberal democracy by Western states promotes the values and norms of a particular cultural perspective rather than a universal consensus that incorporate mutual respect for diverse cultures.

Questions of cultural universality and diversity that are canvassed in the debate between these positions are of importance since they influence the way in which the role of the West is perceived in world politics today, whether Western norms and values should be treated as the hegemonic projections of still powerful societies, or as providing the foundations for an evolving, multicultural international society.

The West: the power of the word

The foregoing demonstrates that the West is widely perceived to be a central actor in world politics and a critical element of any cultural or political world order. Therefore, how it is conceptualized and how its role in that cultural world order is perceived, can tell us much about broader assumptions relating to that cultural world order.

The term 'the West' peppers the language of commentary and scholarship in world politics. It appears in an abundance of books and articles, such as *Islam and the West* (Lewis, 1993), 'The West and the Rest' (Mahbubani, 1992) and *Twilight of the West* (Coker, 1998). The West is often invoked in antithesis to a similarly broadly constituted 'other' – the East, the Orient, Islam, Asia, the Third World. The West, meaning the antithesis to the communist East, was central to the language of Cold War politics. Despite the collapse of this East, the West remains central to the language of post-Cold War politics, illustrated by references such as those to the West's role in the Balkans, or the West's position on human rights. In the late 1990s, the decision to extend NATO to include Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic was discussed as bringing former Eastern bloc states under 'the protection' of the West. In the 1999 Kosovo conflict, NATO was frequently referred to as 'representing the West'. In media debates, it is not uncommon to hear discussion of how the West should respond, for instance, to the conflict in Chechnya or Central Africa, or other such locations.

In the history and language of world politics, the West is often presented as a cohesive community, its evolution following a natural progression from ancient times to the future. Yet the legacy of ideas on which conceptions of the West draw is diverse and, at times, contradictory (Dasenbrock, 1991). *The Oxford English Dictionary* devotes no less than three pages to its definition, and another four to associated terms. Its definitions encompass the West as a location, as a jurisdiction – the Western part of the Roman Empire subsequent to 395 AD; a religious community – the Latin Roman Church in contrast to the Eastern Orthodox church; a cultural and racial community defined in antithesis to Asia or the Orient – perhaps its most common usage; and, more recently, as an ideological community, denoting the non-communist states of Europe and North America in the twentieth-century.⁶

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the concept of the West evokes very different images in different contexts. The West of the early twentieth century was still an imperial West. In this context, it is often conceived of as predominantly white, Christian and with its heartland in Europe. However, conceptions of the West also draw deeply on a tradition of liberalism and efforts to introduce Western liberal principles into the structures and institutions of international politics. The establishment of the League of Nations and the promotion of international law, open diplomacy and self-determination demonstrate this. The liberal dimension of the West became more pronounced in the international realm in the mid-twentieth century. The concept of the West in this era is most immediately associated with resistance to totalitarianism, first in the form of fascism, then communism. Geographically, the line dividing West and East was drawn in Europe, and the heartland of the West moved towards

the United States. But the term 'the West' is imbued with a conceptual as much as a geographical meaning in this era, connoting a community of liberal, capitalist societies. However, the conceptions of the West in the bipolar context coexisted with the concept of the West constituted in antithesis to the Third World. In this context the West represented the world's wealthy, developed and industrialized societies.

In the post-Cold War era, conceptions of the West no longer revolve exclusively around concepts of ideology or development. Some commentators speculated that the West as a political community would be unable to retain its cohesion without the threat of the Soviet Union (Harries, 1993). Others saw the demise of the West with the unravelling of the Atlantic community that had been a core of this identity during the Cold War as the structures of American and European societies change and the Western European powers become more engaged in their European community (Coker, 1998). However, despite the demise of the communist East, and the rapid development of certain post-colonial societies, particularly in East Asia, the West as a concept has become neither redundant nor universal. It remains part of the political vocabulary in discussions about the maintenance of international order, security and economics. Daniel Deudney and John Ikenberry (1993/94) define the contemporary West as consisting of Western Europe, North America and Japan. Their West is based on the logic of 'industrial liberalism' and distinguished by a private economy, a common civic identity and public institutions. Its hub, and ultimately the model upon which this conception is built, is the United States. For these authors political culture and shared norms play a significant role in defining the West.

For many the West, its practices, institutions and norms, form the core of globalization. Others understand the West as a regional, cultural community rather than a global one; one which is powerful but not unrivalled (Huntington, 1996a). However, in an increasingly fluid international environment, it is hard to conceive of the concept of the West becoming a purely territorial or racially exclusive one.

What is evident is that while conceptions of the West are frequently deployed in discourses of international relations, it is not always the same conception of the West that is being discussed. At times the term may refer to the UN, at times to the United States, at others to the colonial or former colonial powers of Europe, elsewhere to the advanced capitalist economies of the world. The West is often perceived as an actor, a powerful actor, yet the nature of its agency is problematic. The West is not a formal political community in the same sense in which sovereign states or international organizations are. It is not a formal alliance, although it is a conception often used to refer to formal and informal alliances of actors, the most prominent of which is NATO. Despite the West being a concept that is rooted in geography, it is not simply a place, nor is it only a racial or reli-

gious community, although all these properties form important dimensions of what the West is perceived to be. Therefore, while the West is widely acknowledged as a central force in world politics, its character, composition and the nature of its agency are interpreted in different and, at times, in contesting ways.

As noted, the West is often invoked in antithesis to a similarly broadly constituted other – the East, the Orient, Islam. It has been used to call upon a loyalty that goes beyond local priorities. Its ‘membership’ appears fluid and capable of contextual redefinition. It is perhaps from this fluidity or plasticity that the idea of the West derives its power and continued currency, allowing it to flow across and coexist with, existing local and regional communities and identities. However, its power also derives from the sheer scale of the influence in world politics of actors and ideas associated with the West.

The impact of the West

Therefore, while acknowledging that the constitution of the West is complex and subject to interpretation, we must also acknowledge that it is identified with a range of powerful actors and processes that have helped to shape contemporary world politics, actors such as the United States and the European powers, processes and ideas such as imperialism, capitalism and democracy. In many respects, the impact of these actors and processes identified with the West has been unprecedented in its scope and extent. For the purposes of analysis, we can divide the perceived influence of the West on modern international relations into three key elements: ‘the West’ as actor; ‘the West’ as institutional model; and ‘the West’ as an intellectual foundation. As actor, ‘the West’, meaning principally Europe and the United States, has been a dominant force in modern world politics. Mann describes the nineteenth-century West, as a multi-power civilization, and undisputed global hegemon (Mann, 1993, vol. 2: 262–4). European expansion from the sixteenth century onward meant that Western powers became involved economically, militarily and politically in Asia, Africa and the Americas; the affairs of Europe coming to influence and dominate those of other continents. Fieldhouse estimates that by 1800, Europeans controlled 35 per cent of the world’s landed surface; by 1878, 67 per cent; and by 1914, 84 per cent (Fieldhouse, 1984: 3). Mann estimates that by 1913, Western powers contributed to nine-tenths of global industrial production. Increasingly the concept of ‘Western powers’ was expanded to also include the United States. Even when the direct control exercised by Western states and empires over societies was reduced through decolonization, they maintained predominance in the world’s systems of production, trade and finance. This meant that the newly emerging societies continued to operate within the context of extensive Western power. During the Cold War, the