

RUIN AND RENEWAL

Civilising Europe After the Second World War

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Introduction

OLD WORLD MADE NEW

ONE OF THE MOST STRIKING FEATURES OF TWENTY-FIRST century international politics has been the widespread calls to protect civilisation in danger. Since the shock of 9/11, the ‘fight for civilisation’ has suffused the speeches of American Republican Party presidents from George W. Bush to Donald Trump in connection with the ‘war on terrorism’, and recent events in Europe have prompted numerous politicians to sound the alarm about European civilisation under siege. In the wake of the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, French prime minister Manuel Valls described the conflict with Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS for short, as ‘a battle of values, a battle of civilisations’. Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán has repeatedly proclaimed that refugees from Syria and elsewhere fleeing the conflicts in the Middle East imperil Europe’s Christian roots and would forever alter ‘Europe’s civilisation’. Political figures in Poland, Austria, Holland, Denmark, Serbia, Germany and the UK, among others, have voiced similar anxiety about Europe’s fragile frontiers, cultural identity and ‘Christian civilisation’ under mortal threat. Russian president Vladimir Putin has enlisted the language of Russia’s ‘distinct civilisation’ as a rebuff to American-style globalisation and a means to justify military

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expansion in Ukraine. The attack on the National Bardo Museum in Tunis in March 2015 and ISIS's detonation of the Temple of Baalshamin in the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra in August 2015 were denounced as desecrations of 'world civilisation' by voices in Europe and the Middle East and international organisations like UNESCO. No less disturbing, the last few years have witnessed the racist ramping up of the defence of 'white civilisation' as a clarion call for the radical Right across Europe and North America. The tagline of civilisation in crisis is being regularly exploited, in part because its meaning is elastic enough to encompass secular, Christian, international or national causes, depending on the context and identified menace. These developments are usually lumped together as fearful reactions to post-Cold War globalisation, but the European politicking associated with repurposing cultural identities at risk goes back decades.¹

Renewed interest in the defense of civilisation is neither straightforward nor predictable, especially given the term's heavy historical baggage. Critics have long denounced the idea of civilisation as one of the most unsavoury elements of European politics and culture since the eighteenth century, a legacy infamously mixed with imperialist 'civilising missions', war making, and various domestic social engineering projects from the late nineteenth century onward. Civilisation was central to nineteenth-century European self-understanding and a key ideological plank for overseas power and expansion before the outbreak of the First World War, and is now commonly dismissed by many commentators as an embarrassing relic from Europe's unwanted past that thankfully did not survive the mid-twentieth century. According to this view, the twentieth century's grim inheritance of two world wars, the Holocaust, and decolonisation forever buried Europe's civilising mission abroad, with its last rites read out at various low points during the last century, be it at Verdun, Auschwitz or Algiers. British historian Tony Judt was certainly not alone when he wrote that Nazism and the

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Third Reich's genocidal war rendered European civilisation the 'grandest of all illusions'.²

However, the political language of civilisation did not die with Germany's unconditional surrender. On the contrary, it reemerged as a potent metaphor to ascribe positive meaning to material and moral reconstruction after the war. In 1945, Europe lay in ruins. Some 50 million people were dead, cities were reduced to rubble, and large swaths of the continent languished in physical and moral defeat. Unlike the First World War, which was mainly fought in the countryside between soldiers, the Second World War mercilessly blurred the boundaries between civilian and combatant, making it the first war in modern history in which civilian casualties far outnumbered soldier deaths. Law and order had collapsed, refugees were everywhere, and outside powers were in control. The liberation of the concentration camps exposed to a wide international audience the horrors of the Third Reich's racial war, pulling back the curtain on the depth and depravity of Nazi atrocities against Jews and other targeted minority groups. A continent that had long considered itself the measure of civilisation for the world had turned into its barbaric opposite. That the international legal community felt compelled to devise novel terms to try to comprehend (and punish) German misdeeds – such as genocide and crimes against humanity – dramatised the stark sense of living in radically new times. Hannah Arendt's famous comment in 1945 – that the 'problem of evil will be the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe – as death became the fundamental problem after the last war' – resonated among contemporaries about the dark moral inheritance of Hitler's Europe. The discovery of the camps and the question of what to do with Germany and its captured leaders triggered widespread discussion about how the fate of civilisation itself seemed to hang in the balance.³

While some contemporaries reacted by mourning civilisation's demise, many more strove to remake it afresh. It was the very

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corruption and fragility of European civilisation itself that stirred a diverse set of thinkers, politicians, activists and reformers to try to salvage it from the ruins of war, destruction and moral collapse. The mission to re-civilise Europe was by no means confined to conservatives, and was seized upon by a dizzying array of competing causes and interest groups from across the political spectrum and Iron Curtain. In the aftermath of the war, civilisation served as a point of reference to grasp Europe's new postwar condition beyond the confines of the nation-state and Cold War division, and to reconsider its relationship to the past, the future and the rest of the world.

This book gives voice to the many people who engaged in this reconstruction fever across the Cold War divide and even in various former colonies in the name of renewal and reform. Included among them were warmongers and peaceniks, preservationists and liberal modernisers, scientists and humanitarian aid workers, Christian conservatives and communists, nationalists and internationalists, as well as European imperialists and African anti-imperialists. In diverse ways, they all tried to make sense of Europe in defeat and division, and to forge a new understanding of civilisation that would bring peace and progress to a broken continent. What follows is not just a story of how European intellectuals philosophised about their fundamentally changed fortunes since the Second World War, for the task of regenerating civilisation prompted a variety of practical reform initiatives. Some saw civilisation as singular and universal, others as plural and separate. Yet all parties set out to rebuild Europe anew from the debris of Nazism and the war. The contest for civilisation inspired a mixed crowd of advocates on both sides of the Iron Curtain who mobilised support for the great issues of the day, above all war and peace, religion and science, rights and reconstruction, empire and anticolonial liberation, communism and anticommunism.

Pleas to defend civilisation may be back today with shrill insistence, but there is little sense of how this came about. One of the

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reasons why we are so ill-equipped to get a grip on what is happening is because civilisation is a term we love to hate. When mentioned in books and the press, it is almost always framed by ironic scare quotes or offset by the forbidding *so-called* – rhetorical strategies designed to deny any incriminating association between the speaker and the word itself. There is good reason for such distancing and moral disapproval, given the term’s legacy of eighteenth-century elitism together with nineteenth-century imperialism, racism and religious intolerance, which persist in myriad forms to this day. The strong emotions associated with the concept have animated public discourse in various ways for a century and a half, and were especially prevalent after the Second World War, as ideas of civilisation fuelled new political visions of how Europe’s damaged cultural traditions could be revived and preserved. The breakdown of order in 1945 opened up the possibility of seeing and thinking about Europe differently; competing claims about the meaning and direction of civilisation underlay the politics of reconstruction. Its radical appropriation by today’s conservatives and neo-fascists obscures the ways in which civilisation emerged as a rallying cry for building a better Europe after the war, often in the name of peace, justice, decolonisation and multiculturalism. Right-wing campaigns to reclaim civilisation as their own were certainly present in the form of muscular Christianity, the defence of empire and anti-Americanism, but these views were met by equally powerful counterclaims about the New Europe from liberals, Eastern European socialists, Third World radicals, UNESCO preservationists and other reformers. The point is that the post-Second World War re-civilising mission played host to a multiplicity of political storylines in which Europe was culturally imagined and reorganised, both on the continent and abroad. How and why this old, troublesome, and much-maligned principle was summoned to help redress Europe’s crisis of identity – then and now – is the subject of this book.⁴

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Another reason why we have lost sight of the rich and contradictory historical legacy of civilisation is because it has been converted into crude shorthand for explaining the roots of post-Cold War political conflict. Civilisation has never been just one thing, and variously serves as a contested idea, value, object of desire and claim to power, and this book will attend to its different facets. In recent decades a selective reading of civilisation has been advanced as a master key with which to interpret twenty-first-century war and violence. Such a view was famously put forward by American political scientist Samuel Huntington in his 1996 bestseller on international affairs, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. His controversial ideas were first published as an article in 1993 in *Foreign Affairs* and then expanded as a full-length book three years later. Huntington's main argument is that future global conflict will not be so much about politics and economics, but rather will centre on culture. 'Global politics is the politics of civilisations', he wrote, in which the 'rivalry of the superpowers is replaced by the clash of civilizations'. In his telling, individual civilisations are essentially unchanging and unchangeable regional cultural identity blocs made up of shared religious and cultural histories, whose collisions of values perforce will fuel and frame political antagonism in a post-Cold War world. While there is no need to revisit the well-known pitfalls of the argument, Huntington does raise the issue of how the meaning of civilisation was radically retooled after the Cold War.⁵

A more useful interpretation of the role and history of civilisation as a global political force is the long-forgotten work of British historian Arnold J. Toynbee. His twelve-volume universal world history, *A Study of History*, published between 1936 and 1961, served as a standard reference for global history for decades. Toynbee is usually lumped together with Oswald Spengler as a gloomy prognosticator of Europe in decline. Yet such a characterisation overlooks some of Toynbee's insights, which are important for this book. His principal point was to move beyond the modern

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historical preoccupation with the nation-state as the main unit of historical analysis. For him, the most ‘intelligible unit of historical study’ is ‘neither a nation state nor (at the other end of the scale) mankind as a whole but a certain grouping of humanity which we have called a society’, and ‘societies of this species are commonly called civilizations’. In this view, civilisations are therefore essentially large societies that share common beliefs and values, and function as the last stand of diversity and plurality in the world. Toynbee was a devout Christian, and in the 1930s he repeatedly railed against the ‘new paganism’ and ‘idolatrous worship’ of state power, be it in the form of communism, nationalism or fascism. He even criticised the myth of Western superiority and the ‘illusion of progress’ that ‘proceeds in a straight line’, which partly explains why he was often admired by non-European anticolonialists and Eastern European communists alike. But this was no defence of cultural relativism. Whereas individual civilisations may perish, so he argued, the shared global story of civilisation as a constant through history remained firm. As he put it in his 1947 booklet, *Civilization on Trial*, ‘Civilizations have come and gone, but Civilization (with a big ‘C’) has succeeded, each time, in re-incarnating itself in fresh exemplars of the type.’ Abstract as some of this may seem, Toynbee’s work struck a chord with countless readers around the world from the 1930s to the 1950s, to the point that he became the twentieth century’s bestselling historian. His popularity derived less from his complex interpretations of the rise and fall of world civilisations than from his ability to give readers a sense of communal identity and broader historical purpose beyond the nation-state during the turbulent mid-century decades.⁶

That said, civilisation escapes easy definition. The eminent British art historian Kenneth Clark opened his 1969 blockbuster BBC television series *Civilisation* – whose accompanying book was sold to over sixty countries – by confessing, ‘What is civilisation? I don’t know. I can’t define it in abstract terms – yet. But I think

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that I can recognise it when I see it.' Whatever one makes of his breezy patrician self-confidence in judging what does or does not count as civilisation, Clark put his finger on the problem of identifying what civilisation is. For him and many others, it is synonymous with a canon of venerable cultural artefacts in the arts and sciences, the unique material inheritance of a people or culture, in his case a Western cultural patrimony that stretched back to ancient Greece. For others, civilisation was better understood as the cultural fruit of urban life – that is, roads and central states, food production and hospitals, cargo ships and cathedrals. German American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, writing in the early 1950s, took up this view when he defined the difference between culture and civilisation as one of scale, inclusion and durability. Culture 'would represent the sum total of the art, philosophy, literature and religion of a civilization, and civilization would represent the social, economic and political and legal arrangements by which the human community is ordered'. Here Niebuhr alluded to the nineteenth-century distinction – most pronounced in Germany, as we shall see – between culture and civilisation. By the 1950s, this once fiercely maintained dichotomy had lost much of its cultural power, apart from episodic expressions in the Federal Republic of Germany. French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his classic 1955 rumination on the limitations of anthropology, *Tristes Tropiques*, extended the scale even more broadly when he posited civilisation as the last and most basic element of species-belonging in a connected world: 'Being human signifies, for each one of us', he wrote, 'belonging to a class, a society, a country, a continent and a civilization'.⁷

But if some embraced civilisation as a story of edification and inclusion, others were less sanguine. For more than a century, the West European Left summarily rejected the ideology of civilisation as nothing but window dressing masking Western imperialism, domination and barbarities of all sorts. German Jewish literary critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin sharpened the

polemic in his 1940 ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ when he wrote that there ‘is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism’. For those on the receiving end of European expansion and colonial conquest, the line between civilisation and barbarism was so thin as to be indistinguishable. Mahatma Gandhi’s purported quip when asked what he thought about Western civilisation – ‘I think it would be a good idea’ – captured widely shared perceptions of the violence and hypocrisy inherent in the whole European enterprise itself. Nevertheless, these well-known objections miss two issues. The first is that Western civilisation was never unified or consistent – its history has been marked by perennial doubt and self-criticism from various quarters since the eighteenth century, and most acutely so after the Second World War. Secondly, the claims of civilisation were not completely dismissed by anticolonial intellectuals; as we shall see, the language of civilisation was reformulated by elites in Asia and Africa in the aftermath of decolonisation to showcase the glories of precolonial indigenous civilisation as emblems of postcolonial sovereignty. Africa was a special case in this development, and thus the focus will be on that story. Of relevance here is that the early postcolonial critique did not reject the concept of civilisation outright, but rather maintained that civilisations were multiple and equal, in which no continent – least of all Europe – enjoyed a monopoly or advanced position.

Civilisation’s protean but also multivalent quality is neatly captured by well-known French philosopher and former government official Régis Debray in his recent study of the global reach of American empire. In it he described civilisation as a ‘vaporious, ethereal, shape-shifting word’ that ‘sings and is sung in all sorts of scenes’, a ‘wandering fairy that evaporates in an iridescent blur’. While Debray rightly evokes the ever-changing nature of the term itself, he overlooks the ways in which civilisation’s power resides in the fact that it is both visible and invisible. Civilisation goes beyond

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what meets the eye, serving as a myth of origins and development abstracted from the here and now. This stands in stark contrast to its less solemnly costumed cousin – heritage – which generally takes on more flamboyant expression in the form of historical reenactments, patriotic pageantry, feel-good tourist attractions, and mass-produced souvenir trinkets. Unlike heritage, civilisation has no obvious emblems or flags – crusader banners, cathedrals and McDonald’s outlets may signify Western civilisation for many, but these examples never originated as such. The point is that civilisation is elusive and hard to pin down, not least because it exceeds the nation-state, religious identity, or any singular people; it is at once material and transcendent, made real through belief, vision and argument about the inheritance of history. Civilisation is a way of seeing and a mode of action, what historian Mary Beard, in her co-presented 2018 BBC television series *Civilisations*, called both ‘the eye of faith’ and an ‘act of faith’.⁸

Libraries around the world are full of learned histories of civilisations that chronicle the grand achievements of various empires, nations, regions and peoples, often composed as glorified family trees of cultural bling and belonging. But it is worth remembering that the conjuring up of civilisation more typically is a sign of rupture and plea for action. The breakdown of order in Europe in 1945 is an instructive example, as the continent became a vast theatre of activity devoted to remaking Europe and Europeans, however differently understood and practised. In this case, civilisation functioned as a rhetoric of moral alarm announcing cultural breakdown, and the need to erect frontiers of inclusion and exclusion. It did not speak in a unified voice for a single cause, and instead was used to underwrite a range of diverse agendas and reforms. Just as democracy was subject to political wrangling after the Second World War – as seen in the proliferation of qualifying adjectives like social, Christian, liberal, socialist – so too did civilisation fragment into multiple, overlapping, and antagonistic stories of Western, Christian, Atlantic, African,

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white, universal and socialist civilisations. And precisely because discussions of democracy after 1945 – in both West and East – betrayed a distinct present-mindedness that belied shallow historical roots, civilisation was enlisted to bestow post-fascist Europe with a deeper sense of place and purpose.⁹

THE IDEA OF CIVILISATION CAME TO REPRESENT SOMETHING new after 1945, and departed in significant ways from its traditional understanding. Chief among these is that unlike in the nineteenth century, the postwar understanding of civilisation was shaped by insecurity, anxiety, defeat and the daunting task of starting over. To better grasp this mid-century novelty, we need to backtrack to the history of the term. Etymologically, civilisation is a neologism that originated in eighteenth-century France, and has long been associated with Guizot, Condorcet, Mirabeau and Voltaire, as well as with those connected with the Scottish Enlightenment, such as Adam Ferguson, David Hume and John Gordon. Its early eighteenth-century usage was connected with jurisprudence, to the extent that a criminal trial was turned into a civil proceeding. By the last quarter of the century, civilisation became interchangeable with advancement, refinement and humanity – the antithesis of barbarism. The history of the concept is greatly indebted to the influential German sociologist Norbert Elias, whose two-volume *The Civilizing Process*, published in 1939, analysed its legacy in two strands – the first sees civilisation as synonymous with civility, politeness, courtesy, manners and the emergence of a law-based state and civil society; the second interprets the term as part of a broader project of state pacification and consolidation, to the extent that newly emerging absolutist states neutralised a rival aristocratic warrior class, along with others deemed hostile to the regime. Whether the ‘civilising process’ originates from civil society or the state depends on one’s perspective. What both dimensions have in common is the idea that

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civilisation was a call to action and quest for power. In fact, the term first existed as a verb (to civilise, or to be civilised) long before it became a noun in the late eighteenth century. But for all the ideological differences, its eighteenth-century iteration presumed the idea of civilisation in the singular, something closely linked to progress and the prospect of universality.¹⁰

The nineteenth century brought a new plurality of definitions, as pre-1789 ideas of a singular civilisation fractured into various philosophies of difference that became increasingly nationalised and racialised in the second half of the century. This was especially pronounced with the expansion of imperialism, when civilising missions based on a self-serving evolutionary hierarchy of races and cultures emerged as a primary justification for European enlargement and conquest. The French Revolution recast the secular mission of civilisation as a French-led universalism predicated on republican progress, after which Napoleonic reforms imposed on vanquished territories assumed the equation of civilisation with the French nation. There is a long and quite elaborate history of how civilisation was defined differently in German, French, Italian and English, and how it was suffused with hallowed national values and virtues. In Germany, much was made of how the inward, cultivated, and soil-bound German *Kultur* stood in proud opposition to the deracinated and superficial materialism of Anglo-French *Zivilisation*. But as culture was increasingly enlisted by all the Great Powers as a sphere of national competition, the realm of civilisation conversely held out the possibility of broader allegiances that surpassed the nation-state, evidenced in the more abstract and far-flung terminology of European, Western or Christian civilisation. The linguistic differences between culture and civilisation hardened along national lines during the First World War, as all transcendent philosophies of political community were pressed into national war service.¹¹