

Is the Western Civilization in Decline?

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ABSTRACT

Under the status quo with the development and continued economic growth of some developing countries, historians begin to realize and discuss whether western civilization is in decline or not. This essay will display arguments from Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington. With their two different perspectives and framework of overlooking the world, the globe after the cold war can be demonstrated vividly. Analysis from traditional historians Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington is reasonable, but their over-generalization of western civilization is worth discussing. Commonly, commentaries from historians and scholars are too generalized and not precise since they often attribute the status and behaviors of one western country, such as the United States or the United Kingdom, to the entire Western civilization to comment on whether the Western civilization has declined or not. As a general term for all Western countries, Western civilization itself is too abstract. The model of using different “civilizations” to judge the world by concluding countries with different cultures and interests together is questionable.

Introduction

Historians have long used the concept of ‘civilization’ to think about groupings of human society seemingly united by spatial, temporal, structural and cultural features. One of the most prevalent examples is ‘Western Civilization’: this phenomenon supposedly began to cohere around the European inheritance of ancient Greek and Roman culture, went on to shape the world during the age of imperial discovery and conquest, and reached its pinnacle with the global rise of the United States in the 20th century. However, the concept of civilization seems to become especially relevant during times of earth-shaking change. In this essay, I will consider two periods of recent history when people, sensing that the world around them was changing, began to think about their own society in civilizational terms and ponder its future. The first period is the end of the Cold War, a time of relative optimism about the future of the West. The second is our present moment, when many say that Western civilization has experienced a rapid reversal and is now in decline. Across these examples, I will analyze and critique the ways that the concept of “Western Civilization” is used to make sense of history.

Previous Perspectives

In mid-1989, during the breakup of the Soviet Union, the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama made a provocative statement: “What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War,” he wrote, “but the end of history as such: that is, the endpoint of mankind’s ideological evolution”.¹ The end of history, for Fukuyama, meant “the triumph of the West, of the Western idea,” overall other “viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism,”

¹ Fukuyama, 1989: 4

and the “ineluctable spread” of ‘Western’ political, cultural and economic norms across the ‘Eastern’ half of the globe.² In other words, Western Civilization was becoming a universal civilization.

Seven years later, the American political scientist Samuel Huntington offered a more pessimistic—or, in his words, ‘realist’—view of the world as it left the Cold War behind. In his book, “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order,” Huntington declared that history had not yet ended. In fact, the world was in the midst of a major historical development: “for the first time in history,” he claimed, “global politics has become multipolar and multicivilizational”.³ The emphasis on ‘civilization’ was important to Huntington. Five-hundred years ago, imperial countries began fighting wars of conquest and competition over labor, land and other economic resources. In the 20th century, blocs of countries began to fight for ideology. As the world moved into the 21st century, Huntington argued that the main driver of political difference, unity and conflict would be clashes between civilizations, which he broadly defined as cultural identity on a large-scale.

Specifically, Huntington saw the post-Cold War world as “a world of seven or eight major civilizations,” in which “cultural commonalities and differences shape states’ interests, antagonisms, and associations”. Moreover, Huntington expressed doubt that Western civilization would reign supreme over this emerging global order. “The balance of power among civilizations is shifting,” he wrote, and “the West is declining in relative influence.”⁴

Fukuyama and Huntington seem to share a basic understanding of Western Civilization. Both agree that Western Civilization is centered around capitalism and the free market, liberal democracy, and individualism. However, unlike Fukuyama, who argued that Western civilization’s political and economic system was the ultimate form of world civilization, Huntington argued that Western civilization was experiencing decline relative to up-and-coming Asian powers and other civilizations.

Thirty years later, neither scholar’s view seems to have held up very well. While some people might have signed on to the “clash of civilizations” narrative in the context of wars against terrorism, overall Huntington has been particularly attacked for his stereotypical, and at times very negative, representations of other cultures (especially Islamic culture), and conservative views on immigration. Meanwhile, the last three decades have seen controversial wars, financial crisis, social unrest, climate change, and growing competition between the US and China, all of which undermine Fukuyama’s idea that the United States and other Western countries have reached the high point of progress and transcended history.

Western Civilization’s Contemporary Condition

However, people today are still very interested in the fate of Western civilization. In fact, whether they consider themselves in or outside of the ‘West’, people seem to be increasingly fascinated by the idea that Western civilization is declining in absolute as well as relative terms. They look for signs in the political and economic problems that seem to plague countries seen as leaders of the western world. For instance, looking only at the United States, in recent years Covid cases have exceeded 2 million; gun violence continues to wipe out many poor souls; cities across the country have exploded into riots because of long-term racial tensions and systemic inequality; crowds of angry people ransacked the US capitol because they believed that the electoral system had been rigged against them. And that is to name a few examples. These types of problems have led to discussions about western civilization across public spheres in and outside of the West.

² Fukuyama, Francis. “The End of History?” *The National Interest*, no. 16 (1989): 5.

³ Huntington, 1996

⁴ Samuel Huntington, “Chapter one: The New Era in World Politics,” excerpt from *The Clash of Civilizations and the Making of the World Order*, 1996, *The Washington Post*, accessed 27 May 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/books/chap1/clashofcivilizations.htm>.

On Chinese social media, for example, one finds many people sharing their opinions about why western civilization is in decline. The following post on the site Zhihu, from March 2019, is representative of the broader conversation, which often focuses on the inherent flaws of liberal capitalism: “Western Civilization is in decline because capitalism is another form of imperialism or colonialism. China's development militarily and economically prevents Western powers from entering the market and exploiting Chinese resources,” it read.⁵ In the public spheres of the West, people seem less likely to condemn Western civilization in terms of basic principles. However, one finds just as much, or maybe more, interest in the possibility of Western civilization's decline. In addition to the huge popularity of apocalypse-themed films, novels and televisions shows set in the Western world, we find news articles, academic papers, and books of popular non-fiction offering less dramatic, though still very bleak, perspectives on the future. “End of days: is Western civilization on the brink of collapse?” reads one 2018 headline from the magazine *New Scientist*, and it goes on to describe the growing number of scientists and historians who study whether the US and other ‘Western’ countries fit the patterns of rise and decline of ancient civilizations. After reviewing the evidence, the article's author concludes that “if we do not reduce our dependency on fossil fuels, tackle inequality and find a way to stop elites from squabbling among themselves, things will not end well.”⁶ Similarly, the journalist and professor Andrew Potter, author of *On Decline: Stagnation, Nostalgia, and Why Every Year is the Worst one Ever*, argues that Western countries are in a state of decadence, stagnation and slow decline. Problems like climate change, or the dysfunctional responses to COVID-19 seen in the US and other countries, are in his view symbols of the decline of a western civilization that has lost the ability to adjust and mitigate harm.⁷ Another common preoccupation is China's rapid climb to a position of global power. Political economist Robert Skidelsky expressed this concern in a 2015 essay about Western decline published by the Guardian, when he noted that, “fitting a rising power into a decaying international system has rarely occurred peacefully.”⁸

While many of these problems are serious, do they mean that Western civilization is in a state of absolute decline? Or perhaps there is a more important question: is civilizational decline the best way to understand these problems in the first place, especially if we are interested in solving them? In the next part of this essay, I will highlight certain parts of Fukuyama and Huntington's arguments that might help us to think about today's problems. Then, I will point out assumptions about Western civilization that today's conversations have in common with Fukuyama and Huntington and explain why they should be reconsidered.

As mentioned before, racism and inequality are considered major, and perhaps fatal, flaws of western civilization. Fukuyama was aware of this. However, he pushed back against the idea that those inequalities are inherent to the social structure and ideology of western civilization. Instead, he argued that racism, sexism, and almost all forms of inequality are “the historical legacy of premodern conditions”. What he meant is that they are produced by the “cultural and social characteristics of the groups” participating in these structures, by people shaped by history and tradition.⁹ From a present-day perspective, this explanation of inequality in countries like the United States and Europe may seem like an underestimation of the problem. Nevertheless, his point that we should take historical accident into

⁵ Wen Wen Yue, “In the next 50 years, why would I say that the West will decline, and China will become the center of the world?”, 16 March 2019, <https://www.zhihu.com/search?q=西方衰落了吗&type=content>

⁶ Laura Spinney, “End of days: is Western civilization on the brink of collapse?”, *NewScientist*, 17 January 2018, <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg23731610-300-end-of-days-is-western-civilisation-on-the-brink-ofcollapse/#:~:text=If%20we%20don't%20reduce,muddles%20through%2C%E2%80%9D%20he%20says.>

⁷ CBC radio, “Nowhere to go but down? Past year proves civilization in decline: author”, *CBC*, 29 September 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/nowhere-to-go-but-down-past-year-proves-civilization-is-in-decline-author1.6192307>

⁸ Robert Skidelsky, “Is Western Civilisation in Terminal Decline?”, *The Guardian*, 17 November 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/nov/17/is-western-civilisation-in-terminal-decline>⁹

Fukuyama, Francis. “The End of History?” *The National Interest*, no. 16 (1989): 10.

consideration is constructive, because it gives us a way of thinking about serious social problems as not inevitable, and therefore solvable, without condemning the whole structure of society. In Fukuyama's view, we can and should continue believing in the cultural ideals and values that inspire us to look for solutions to collective problems in the first place, while still facing the harsh realities of the world.

Some of Huntington's views and predictions are also worth reconsidering. Specifically, despite the fact that conflict is so central to his theory, Huntington's view of the world could also be used to support a less aggressive attitude. Rather than a binary East versus West world, in which supposed leaders like the United States are automatically seen as in-decline if they are not on top, Huntington presented a picture of a multipolar world of multiple civilizations, each one unique but none of them universal. Regardless of how we might criticize the specifics of his civilizational map, this basic premise could promote a less imperialistic, and more international, perspective on global dynamics and issues.

However, all of these arguments, whether they address the present day or the world of thirty years ago, have a common tendency to limit themselves to a monolithic civilizational view. In other words, they assume that western civilization is a unified social and historical phenomenon, despite the multiple, very different cultures that make up the so-called 'Western world'. Some of the scholars discussed in this essay acknowledge the problems with thinking in terms of 'Western Civilization'. Huntington, for example, wrote of the "universal but unfortunate practice of calling European civilization Western civilization", and about how this practice was closely tied to an imprecise and polarized understanding of "the East" as everything opposed to "the West".⁹ Nevertheless, they can't let go of the ideology of privileging the similarities and shared interests between European countries and their former settler colonies, over their many differences and tensions—and over the interests and problems that they might share with other parts of the world.

This way of thinking is understandable in some ways, and not only because it is deeply ingrained. When people round up the different countries of Europe, North America, Australia, etc. to "Western Civilization", and then ask whether it is in decline, its often because they are looking for a way to frame and diagnose a problem, or a highly complex set of problems. In theory, identifying the problem should make it easier to solve. For instance, when people use Western civilization to explain the problem of climate change, they may be trying to identify a combination of systems, historical events, and actors who carry particular responsibility for the cumulative environmental harms we are all dealing with today. Like the Chinese commentator on Zhihu, they are trying to connect things like imperialism and capitalism to a specific history, and to countries that historically have had great influence over the rest of the globe.

But what if we could find ways to talk about systemic problems, cultural difference, and historical responsibility, without inventing a character of "Western Civilization" to be the protagonist (or the villain) of an epic, and perhaps tragic, narrative? By taking an international perspective that is less prejudiced and more historically grounded, we might have an easier time confronting the political, economic, and environmental realities of our changing world without resorting to competitiveness or pessimism.

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⁹ Samuel Huntington, "Chapter one: The New Era in World Politics," excerpt from *The Clash of Civilizations and the Making of the World Order*, 1996, *The Washington Post*, accessed 27 May 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/books/chap1/clashofcivilizations.htm>.

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