

# No End to History

by Theodore Dalrymple



The end of history in some Hegelian or Marxian sense that had supposedly been brought about by the dissolution of the Soviet Union seemed to suggest that from now onwards the world would be ruled by the equivalent of liberal-democratic parish councils that concentrated solely on such questions as the days of the week for rubbish collections. This always seemed to me an idea both hubristic and shallow. No political victory is permanent and the only teleological principle of history (in the long term) is that of the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Until that Law's denouement, we shall have to live with historical surprises.

Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* certainly poured scorn, or at least cold water, on the idea that henceforth all conflicts would be of minor dimensions, intellectually at least, the end of history having been fixed

in advance. On the contrary, he proposed that there were potentially enormous conflicts between whole civilizations, with their radically different conceptions of ethics, the good life, the rights and duties of citizens (or subjects), and so forth. *Grosso modo*, his view has turned out to be a good deal more realistic than that of the liberal-democratic teleologists.

### **The Limits of Civilization**

Of course, civilization itself is a *grosso modo* type of concept, and words should not be made to bear more precision than they are capable of bearing. As Gregg observes, Huntington saw "different 'levels' of identity." We should always be as precise as possible, but no more precise than possible. An exact, or Linnaean, taxonomy of societies is not possible, given the existence of borderlands, interpenetration, mutual influence, change, and so forth. Even in biology, disputes exist over speciation (for example, whether the Australian dingo is a true species, or is merely a sub-species), so it is hardly surprising that there is no universal agreement as to what a civilization is, at what point a culture becomes a civilization, or for that matter at what point a sub-culture becomes a culture.

In large part, it all depends upon which end of the telescope you look down. For example, I live in a small market town in England in which, perhaps surprisingly, there are 12 pubs, one for every thousand inhabitants. Within a radius of a hundred yards, there is a pub with deafening music where young people congregate and deal in drugs (or did, before Covid-19), a pub patronised by degenerate middle-aged alcoholics and chronic chain smokers who talk mainly of football and betting, and a pub without music or flashing lights which attracts the local bourgeoisie and farmers who often bring their gun-dogs with them, where the conversation sometimes even touches on world affairs. The patrons of these three pubs would not feel much at ease in each other's territory, and they segregate

themselves spontaneously without direction by anybody. Do they inhabit different sub-cultures, cultures, or civilizations? For myself, I am more at my ease and feel I have more in common with my Indian doctor friends than with the patrons of the first two pubs I have mentioned: but does that make me an inhabitant of Huntington's Hindu civilization? Or does it mean that my Indian friends are now inhabitants of European civilization? Or are we now Indo-Europeans in more than the linguistic sense?

### **What Kind of Clash?**

As a heuristic device, how useful is the notion of a conflict of civilizations? Let us take the growing hostility of the United States and China as an example. No one could fail to notice that the ways of life, religious ideas, political philosophies, ideas of good behaviour, and so forth of the two countries are very different, and these differences would persist even if, as for the moment is not very likely, China ceased to be ruled by the Chinese Communist Party. The great anti-Maoist sinologist and literary critic, Simon Leys, used to say that anyone who did not know China did not know half of humanity, which is why he devoted much of his life to studying it.

But are the radical differences between the United States and China the *cause* of the growing conflict between them? Certainly, the conflict is likely on both sides to be cast in such terms. The Chinese have already attributed their containment of the Covid epidemic to the superiority (in their own eyes) of their social model, which is based on an ethically superior, much less individualistic notion of society than the American, derived from Chinese tradition and civilization. For their part, many Americans hope that, by cutting off Chinese access to American technology, they can stall or halt Chinese advance, for they suppose that, precisely because of the conformist nature of Chinese culture and civilization, which is ethically inferior to the ideals of

American civilization, the Chinese will not be able to innovate for themselves, such innovation being crucial to the maintenance of power in the modern world.

*History, psychology and culture have combined to restore China to a pre-eminent place in the world. The determination of the leaders of a naturally industrious people to overcome or revenge defeat by nations hitherto assumed to be cultural inferiors is an enormous advantage in a world of competitive powers.*

There is, of course, another way of reading the increasing conflict, namely the inherent tendency of great powers to conflict with one another. The history of Europe, for example, which is home to one of Huntington's civilizations, is hardly free of great power conflict: indeed, before the advent of social history as an important part of the study of history, such conflict was taken as being almost as the whole of European history. My father's history textbooks, dating from the early 1920s, were almost entirely about the ebb and flow of the various attempts to impose hegemony in Europe and later the world. Of course, it would be open to defenders of the Huntingtonian thesis to remark that the civilizations of Britain and France at the time of the titanic Napoleonic wars were different, but that would be dishonest: the differences between French and British culture were tiny and insignificant by comparison with those between the United States and China. And yet the two countries fought to the death.

Admittedly, Huntington argued that global conflict would *begin* to take on a civilizational character at the end of the Cold War, not that it has always been that way. And the conflict between the United States and China might seem to lend credence to his prediction. But is there reason to believe that the essence of this emerging rivalry is different than that between England and France? It is surely the result of the swift, almost historically sudden, rise of Chinese

power, both economic and military. If *that* had not occurred, we should have heard nothing of the conflict: both sides could have got on peacefully with their different cultures, as kudu and gazelle co-exist peacefully on the same savannah. The United States does not feel threatened by the Stone Age culture of the Andaman Islanders, which is so very different from its own.

## **The Growth of Chinese Power**

What accounts, then, for the rise of Chinese power, which in turn is responsible for the growing conflict? The answer is two-fold: first, a change of economic policy (mostly in China, but also elsewhere) and second, a wholesale adoption of science.

Gregg observes that “modernization is not westernization.” Similarly, science—as the self-conscious and institutionalised method of acquiring knowledge and power—is a western invention, but it can be adopted by anyone prepared to use powers of logic and observation, and who is committed to intellectual honesty, at least in this restricted field. Within a generation of Commodore Perry’s arrival in Japan, the Japanese were making contributions to ‘western’ science, particularly bacteriology. The Indians and Chinese, utilising the same methods, are perfectly capable of preserving their cultural particularities while pursuing science. And it is this ability that accounts for the decline in the hegemony of the west. Hilaire Belloc put it very succinctly in the heyday of European imperialism:

*Whatever happens, we have got  
The Maxim gun, and they have not.*

Well, the world has been equalised by the spread of the modern equivalent of the Maxim gun (the differential possession of which endowed its possessors with much greater relative power than do the more sophisticated weapons of today).

Of course, if science is the seed, the soil in which it is sown must be fertile or ready to receive it. As it happens, I have recently been reading Rebecca West's account in her book, [\*Library of Law and Liberty\*](#).