

GEOPOLITICS ROUNDTABLE INTERVENTIONS

A Good Act of Contrition? Geography, Civilisational Thinking, and the Colonial Present

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There exists a growing interest in the complicity of geographical knowledge and practice in the colonisation by European powers of territories in Latin America, Asia, and Africa.¹ In particular, the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century professional and institutional development of Geography cannot, it seems, be studied without reference to the historical geography of European imperialism and colonialism. Through the mapping of coastal zones, transport routes, soil and climatic conditions, natural resources, and disease patterns, Geography provided technical support to colons and serviced their commercial and business imperatives. More importantly, by contributing to the development of environmental determinist ideology and the notion that there existed a hierarchy of civilisations or a number of civilisations surrounded by a sea of debased barbarism and savagery, Geography aided in the development of forms of scientific racism that legitimated colonial settlement and economic exploitation. It was the discipline of Geography that codified and mobilised civilisational thinking and lent authority to its role in colonial aggrandisement.

Whilst welcoming such critical self analyses, Mary Gilmartin and Lawrence Berg have recently made a compelling case that British and American Geography might be guilty of focusing upon the past at the expense of the colonial present.² Geography is turning to the past at the precise moment when the forces of neoliberalism and neoconservatism are combining in complex ways to propel a new wave of American imperial and colonial maneuvers in Afghanistan and Iraq, among other places.³ It would be erroneous of course to imply that the rise of this new wave of

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American imperialism has failed to excite the attention of at least a number of Geographers.⁴ Nevertheless by focusing upon 'defunct', 'safe' and 'distant' colonial and imperial projects, British and American Geography more generally might be accused of paying insufficient attention to forms of annexation, occupation, and foreign orchestration which threaten peace and global stability today.

But Geography's moment of confession and contrition might not be entirely incommensurable with such calls to refocus on the present. Precisely because of its past the discipline of Geography ought to have something serious to say about the complex processes of domination, control, resistance, and violence which are characterising the colonial present. This is especially prescient given the stark parallels which exist between past and present colonial adventures. Old habits, it seems, die hard. Once more the resurgence of colonial and imperial projects is being accompanied by the birth of a new genre of civilisational thinking in geopolitics. And whilst not Geography on this occasion, once more civilisational thinking is being produced, reproduced, circulated and policed by a number of complicit academic disciplines of which political science is a notable example. These developments require first registering, second analyses, third critique, and fourth action.

In 1993, in part in response to the currency then afforded to Frances Fukuyama's *The End of history and the last man* (sic), Samuel Huntington published a now famous article titled 'The Clash of Civilisations' in the journal *Foreign Affairs*. Emboldened by reaction to this article, Huntington then followed this up with a full length book in 1996 titled *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*.⁵ Huntington sought to draw attention to the shape of future global conflicts in the post-Cold War era. Contra Fukuyama, Huntington's contention was that it was premature to 'celebrate' Western liberal capitalist democracies as the final settlement in the unfolding of History with a capital H. Conflict would resurface but along a new set of fault lines. If in the Cold War era conflict was most likely to occur between the Western free world and the Communist bloc, around questions of ideology and economy, it was now most likely between the world's major civilisations and religions, which were (re)emerging with new potency.

In his search for the 'first civilisations', Glyn Daniel was to use the threefold criteria of towns of more than 5,000 inhabitants, evidence of writing, and complex ceremonial centres, to identify seven early starters; Sumer, Egypt, the Indus Valley, Shang China, Mexico, the Maya, and Peru.⁶ Today civilisational differences are demarcated according to relationships between church and state, competing concepts of freedom and law, relationships towards market rule, attitudes to democracy and so on. Using these metrics, Huntington identified and even sought to map eight (re)emerging civilisations with a possible ninth: Western, Latin American,

Islamic, Sinic, Hindu, Orthodox, Buddhist and Japanese, and the possible ninth, African. For Huntington the hegemony of the West would be most threatened by the Sinic Civilisation (spurred on by Chinese economic growth) and Islam (fuelled by a youthful population bulge/age structure).

Huntington's thesis has been viewed by some as prophetic of subsequent events. Of course wars such as those following the break-up of Yugoslavia, in Chechnya, and between India and Pakistan were already providing fodder for his thesis. But the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York on 11 September 2001 and the events which followed have been taken as the real substantive proof that Huntington was correct. And moreover civilisational readings were not only being pedalled by the West. Islamic militants too were keen to render the present intelligible in terms of conflict over ways of life, culture, and religious practices. Huntington's interest of course has not been confined to Islam. In *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*, Huntington provided a polemic against the impact of Latin American civilisation, migration and culture on American Protestant culture.

Of course the deployment of civilisational thinking in the present climate is different to that of the past. The world which Samuel Huntington occupies is clearly incomparable to that which Ellen Churchill Semple lived in. The meanings and deployments of civilisational thinking today bear little resemblance to that which undergirded the early establishment of the discipline of Geography. The colonial and imperial interests, strategies, modes of annexation and control, and territorial ambitions are different. So too is the species of civilisational thinking, technologies of dissemination, and modes of manufacturing consent which pervade political discourse. And of course the academic division of labour and funding of the academy today cannot be compared to that which prevailed at the turn of the century.

And yet the insidious weaving of civilisational depictions of world order and the preparedness of some authors and bodies of scholarship within some disciplines to promote and defend these depictions in the combustible climate sown by contemporary colonial and imperial exploitation presents Geography with a challenge it ought not to walk away from. After all, culture, capital and spectacle are once again combining to motivate and legitimate foreign excursions.⁷ Neoliberalism and Neoconservatism are performing an awkward tango in which specific concepts of freedom, democracy, order, sovereignty, and reason, are being reified in intense ways. These concepts are then reinvigorating the sense that 'our' civilisation is bigger, better, and more advanced than 'others', that 'we' have a right to invade annex and control territories which currently serve as the ecumene of civilisations with different ambitions; and that 'we' have a moral duty to export and impose our concepts of progress upon other civilisations whether they want it or not. If Geography is able to rise to meet the challenge this reality presents then criticisms of historical self indulgence and

narcissism can be tackled head on and an awareness of past mistakes can be directed to speak to contemporary geopolitical and hegemonic projects.

The purpose of the following interventions, which were first presented at the annual meeting of British Geographers in London in September 2007, is to bring Geographers into confrontation with the emergence of new forms of civilisational discourse and academic complicity in the colonial present. The interventions are of necessity brief, polemical, and political. The idea is to furnish authors with a platform from which they might speak in a direct, provocative, and insightful way to the clash of civilisation thesis and civilisational thinking more generally. Whether represented as a 'round-table discussion', a 'debating fora', or a 'site of intervention', this format has served to generate a number of valuable strands of critical enquiry. These interventions should be read alongside other emerging critiques of Huntington's work and civilisational discourse more generally in the present, including critical interventions by geographers – in particular see here the work of Mark Bassin.⁸ In their own way they seek to delineate the critical threads that might help to guard against unproblematic geopolitical interpretations which rest on assumptions about civilisational hierarchies and the essential moral, economic, technological and aesthetic virtues of the West relative to the rest.

Richard Phillips and Rhys Jones begin the discussion with an analysis of status of the 'pre modern' in present imperial and civilisational projects, and parallel status of civilisational thinking in pre modern empires, intended to complicate the simplistic equation of the West with modernity and Islam with medieval backwardness. Neil Smith then seeks to diagnose the political-economic projects which are stimulating imperial zeal within the United States and offers his own take on the neoliberal/neoconservative nexus. Alex Jeffrey then charts the ways in which neoliberalism is becoming the key export product of Western civilisation, a pillar of truism which is being seen as a legitimate social formation to visit upon peoples in territories of occupation. Prem Kumar Rajaram develops Jeffrey's argument by revealing the ways in which spatial surveillance and mapping continue to play a role in the enforcement of civilisational ideas; a reminder to Geography that GIS and Remote Sensing technology have the potential to be subsumed into civilisational projects, to become the technology of choice of the conqueror and that Geography too needs to take stock of its complicity with the forces of power. Lynn Staeheli and Elizabeth Mavroudi then chose to critique civilisational thinking by pointing to the urgent need to denaturalise, de-essentialise and deconstruct concepts of pure and monolithic civilisational groupings – not least in terms of the unlikely synergies and alliances which fundamentalist thinking in different civilisations produce. Finally, Julie-Ann Davies points to the value of integrating methodologies used by investigative journalists with more traditional geographical methods, so that the political constituencies which fund, support and promote those engaged in civilisational thinking can be better understood.

Eventually, it will be important to move beyond critique and to begin the task of contributing to peace and stability. The contributions in their own ways set a context for a variety of different kinds of progressive politics. Recently, the concept of the global ethic has erupted as a serious area of academic debate. A number of new institutional innovations have been pioneered with the explicit purpose of *debating* the possibilities of establishing a global ethic, and *gauging* the ways in which such an ethic might restrain the imperial instincts and global pretensions of neoliberal and neoconservative forces. The most famous of these are the 'Global Ethics Foundation' in Tübingen Germany and the 'Institute of Global Ethics' in Maine in the USA, although the recent establishment of the Centre for the Study of Global Ethics at the University of Birmingham and the formation of the School of Applied Global Ethics at Leeds Metropolitan University are also examples. Alert to this trend, Routledge has also just begun to publish a new journal from 2005 titled *Global Ethics*.

The rise to prominence of the 'Global Ethics Foundation' in Tübingen is of particular interest. The President of the Foundation is the famous theologian Hans Kung. Kung has emerged as one of the most radical and revolutionary figures to have risen within the Christian community in the past forty years and his most recent work has sought to build bridges between Christianity and the other world religions including Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. A critic of all fundamentalism, his writings are widely read among a secular audience. From 1991 when he wrote *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*⁹ Kung has articulated a sophisticated account of what a global ethic might look like and what consequences need to flow from it. This book led directly to his drafting of 'The declaration of a global ethic' and 'The principles of a global ethic' which were accepted as the policy of 'Parliament of the world religions' in Chicago in 1993. They were followed up by *Yes to a Global Ethic* (1996), *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics* (1997), and *A Global Ethic and Global Responsibilities* (1998).

Concepts such as the global ethic will undoubtedly incite a hostile reaction among those who would wish to critique civilisational thinking from a more relativist perspective. For the humanist however, the search for common values and moral and ethical arbiters across cultural and religious groups presents a welcome antidote to thinking which otherwise has the intention of codifying difference and emphasising division.

Perhaps in the end civilisational thinking may need to be erased from the academic vocabulary altogether. In the mean time, there may be scope to engage in a cultural war over the ownership of such thinking, with progressive strains – and not least those such as Kung who stand as ambassadors of confessional politics – re appropriating civilisational ideas and putting them to better use.

NOTES

1. See for instance F. Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration in the Age of Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell 1999); A. Godlewska and N. Smith (eds.), *Geography and Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell 1994); D. Gregory, *The Colonial Present* (Oxford: Blackwell 2004); D. Livingston, *The Geographical Tradition: Episodes in the History of a Contested Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwell 1997); T. Y. Rothenburg, *Presenting America's World: Strategies of Innocence in National Geographic Magazine 1888–1945* (London: Ashgate 2007). More generally of course see E. Said, *Orientalism: 25th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Vintage Books 2003).
2. M. Gilmartin and L. Berg, 'Locating Post Colonialism', *Area* 39 (2007) 120–124.
3. W. Brown, 'American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-democratisation', *Political Theory* 34 (2006) 690–714. See also N. Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (London: Penguin 2005) for a call from the right to acknowledge the extent to which US foreign policy is imperialist.
4. For example, Gregory (note 1); D. Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003); N. Smith, *The Endgame of Globalisation* (London: Routledge 2005); D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005).
5. S. P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (London: Free Press 1996).
6. G. Daniel, *The First Civilizations: The Archaeology of their Origins* (London: Book Club Associates 1973).
7. Retort. (I. Boal, T.J. Clark, J. Matthews, and M. Watts), *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (London: Verso 2005).
8. M. Bassin, 'Civilisations and their Discontents: Political Geography and Geopolitics in the Huntington Thesis', *Geopolitics* 12 (2007) 351–374.
9. H. Kung, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* (New York: Crossroads 1991).