

CIVILIZATION, A GRAMMAR

Imprint, Impress, Imperium

Civilization—a word that sings and is sung in all sorts of scenes. A wandering fairy that evaporates in an iridescent blur. Why should we take account of it again? Because there is no time to be lost—and that vaporous, ethereal, shape-shifting word is covering up a reality that could not be more pressing or more concrete.

WHAT IS A civilization? A brief glance at the disappearance of our own might help us to understand this old question. When did Europe meet its end as a civilization? In the short period that can be seen, symbolically, as beginning in 1919 and concluding in 1996, that is between two major publications, two benchmarks: 'The Crisis of the Mind', by the Frenchman Paul Valéry, and *The Clash of Civilizations*, from the American Samuel Huntington. The difference—the gaping chasm—of views between these two watchmen on the same ramparts, illustrates more than a change of paradigm: it is an astronomical revolution. Between these two dates, the Earth and the Sun switched places. From the CIA to rap, from *House of Cards* to *The Apprentice*, there has been an astonishing permeation of national cultures across the globe by American civilization. Yet what follows is, certainly, no jeremiad. Rather it offers a series of arabesques on the contemporary world linking the small facts of daily life to the long history of cultures, empires and civilizations, and to the particular grammar of civilizations: tracking the transfers of power between three key terms—*empire*, *emprise* (impression or influence) and *empreinte* (imprint, mark or trace)—but beginning at the end of the story, by following the imprints.¹

First, however, a warning: the use of the word ‘America’ in the singular and without an adjective may shock the reader. In the expression ‘God bless America’ or ‘Make America great again’, the part is taken for the whole. In Latin America, they speak more accurately of the Americas—Las Americas. ‘America’ was the baptismal name given in 1507 by the German cartographer Martin Waldseemüller in Saint-Dié-des-Vosges, based on the voyage of the Italian Amerigo Vespucci to only the southern half of the Western hemisphere. The symbolic cornering of its two continents by English-speaking and Protestant America, ignoring the Romance languages and Catholic traditions in the rest of the New World, has since expressed the relationship of forces between them. In what follows, the word designates less a state and a territory than a certain form of civilization.

Imprints

Paul Valéry did not want us to waste too much time defining these vague entities, which he knew to be mortal. Let us grant him that it is easier to identify, at a distance at least, a savage than one who is civilized. The former has red skin, a feather through the nose, earrings; the latter is more elusive. A more serious definition has to stipulate a delimited period of time (stopping the meter) and a confined extent of space (a ‘here’ and no further). Yet the distinguishing characteristic of a living civilization is its capacity for metabolism: it transforms itself as it absorbs and stimulates others. They who would make of it a fixity only mummify a being which in reality feeds on borrowings and exchanges. A civilization also means windows and ventilators, missionaries and merchants. Marco Polo, taking the Silk Road, blew a little Italian air into the Mongol Empire, and a little of the air of Asia into Pisa *intra muros*. The Mexican peon scales the 21-foot fence and learns English; the West Coast must start learning Spanish again. Here, to breathe is to mingle. Isolates are abstractions and isolators do themselves no favours. ‘You don’t belong here, clear off’ amounts to ‘let me decay in my bolt-hole’.

Yet we must also admit that even if we are reluctant to draw their outlines too exactly, civilizations do it for us, by excluding one another—covertly or openly. They mix, but they also abrade. From the friction between

¹ This essay is drawn from *Civilisation. Comment nous sommes devenus américaines*, Gallimard 2017, forthcoming in English from Verso.

them, aggravated by migration, comes eczema. Here and there, faced with refugees, demands arise not for borders but their opposite—for barriers of cement, if not indeed barbed wire. The sedentary does not want the nomad; the WASP the *Chicano*; the Turk the Armenian or Greek, and so on. It is a long road from globalization to ‘happily ever after’. All is nomadic, all is criss-crossed, all is diffused, yes. But not everything can go everywhere. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, and the proof of civilizations is that they do not digest just anything. Braudel observes that civilizations have invisible customs posts, filtration systems without filters. No bull of excommunication or deportation order is in any way required, so spontaneously does allergy do its work. Italy and the Iberian Peninsula did not let the Reformation in. Shiite Persia blocked Sunni incursions, Arab or Ottoman. Marxism could not be grafted onto the Anglo-Saxon world, with the exception of a few academic enclaves. After two centuries of Anglican occupation, Christians number a mere two per cent of the population of today’s India. With the exception of the Syro-Malabar Catholics of Kerala, Hinduism held fast: the Gospel made no dent on the Vedas. Hindi has not been defeated by English, and India will remain singular as long as it remains plural, with its twenty-three official languages and some five hundred dialects. The ‘American way of life’ may have covered the body of Mother India with a mantle of malls and screens, bars and music videos, ringroads and fast food, but it will not find it easy to abolish what amounts to the soul of this breakwater of humanity: wonder at the cosmos, laughter at the joke that is life, which makes of death, for each individual, a comma, not a full stop. In spite of the global market and of consumerism, India has some chance of remaining a civilization, instead of becoming a mere folk culture among others.

‘Concrete’ comes from the Latin *concretus*, meaning solid, consistent, thick, and from the verb *concrecere*, to solidify slowly, binding together disparate elements, mortar or stones. The concrete is complicated; and the complicated, discouraging. Hybrids produced by a *mélange* of epochs have no good press; the mixed bloodlines of early days offend the bearers of glorious titles, who like to assume clear borders and pure origins, when they themselves are confluences. Soldiers of Christ the King are liable to grimace when told that Christianity is a swarthy Eastern religion, or that it was Islam which introduced them to the Aristotelian legacy on which they pride themselves, received by Muslims from Syriac translators, themselves Christians, from Baghdad. *Ex oriente lux*. Of the Jewish

people themselves, to whom we owe so much, but who in turn owe a great deal to Mesopotamia, which gave us writing and the Creator, it can be said that they were born in Egypt, acquired their identity in Babylon and wrote their history in Alexandria. A memorial lineage requires a straighter line. And from what a mishmash comes our Father Christmas with his hood and his white beard, whose effigy was burnt as pagan by a bishop in the forecourt of Dijon Cathedral on 25 December 1951, as well he might have been. Santa Claus arrived from America in great style, but he had disembarked there long ago from Scandinavia—and further back from Roman Saturnalia, and yet further from prehistoric cults like that surrounding the Druidic mistletoe. How many tributaries for a little Christmas tree!

And what zigzags for a proud and pure ‘Christian civilization’! From the start, three sedimentations. At the beginning, a Jewish ritual practised by Joshua, later called Jesus, namely the reading of a passage of Scripture given a contemporary interpretation, in a homily of the Sabbath in a synagogue. Then, in the second century, a philosophical movement that integrated this Judaic dissidence into the sphere of Hellenism, in the language and categories of Greece. Then, third stage in the third century, the incorporation of this theology into the language and law of Rome, allowing it to become the candidate to succeed ‘Roman civilization’. This process of growth through transposition, which generated such a successful amalgam, was no obstacle to a denial of debts, bleaching of colours, annexation of creditors, a false birth certificate, all part and parcel of the work of the self on selfhood. If it did not transfigure its history into legend, with beautiful lies and the fabrication of far-fetched, improbable founding heroes—the Japanese goddess Amaterasu, Aeneas or Vercingetorix—a civilization would not be a place of belonging, a home, but an academy of the sciences.

Where does the blur that makes us cautious about them come from? These nebulae are not to be seen with the naked eye. They are meshes of tenuous thread, like a collective unconscious all the more shared for not being conscious; unlike a military alliance or a political confederation, a system without any parts; an unseen, all-encompassing entity, an *ethos* without ethics, a brotherhood without brothers. Civilizations possess a persistence that can harden beyond expectation when a foreign body attacks them from the outside (witness Arab Islamic or Slav Orthodox reactions today) and soften beyond imagination when torn from within

(Shiites and Sunnis; Russians and Ukrainians). What insists, persists and *refuses to sign*, is a creature that snaps its finger at our attachment to copyright law. The continuing action of what has ceased to exist—Christendom, the Ming dynasty, the Ottoman Empire—is an offense to common sense. There is something in the very notion of a civilization that is an affront to the forward-looking, emancipated mind—as if it were an unformed thought mistakenly cast in plaster, a hindrance to the freedom of the consumer, or some other millstone.

The worst is that this is a conspiracy without a conspirator. It is impossible to shout ‘Death to Charlemagne!’, who embroiled us with Byzantium, the second Rome, and so eventually with Moscow, the third, over a fairly bizarre controversy (the Holy Spirit—did it just come from the Father or from the Father *and* the Son?) ‘Down with Mohammed!’, the Bedouin who came to slaughter our sons and our priests? Or ‘Damn Confucius!’, who made China incomprehensible, if not impenetrable, to us? Such outbursts would be of little effect. We understand that this ball and chain has often been judged reactionary or fatalistic. Yet those who would make a clean sweep of civilization regularly break their teeth on this thing that is not a thing—elusive, tough and stubborn.

Robespierre and Lenin could have redoubled their efforts, without their activism changing either language or climate, national diet or modal family—indeed, all that the passage from the horse to the high-speed train, from the abacus to the computer, from capitalism to socialism and back again, has left fundamentally unaltered. The Soviet Russian never bade farewell to St Sergius or borscht, any more than a priest-hating Frenchman to the division of the lunar month into four weeks, a biblical inheritance, or the hour into sixty minutes, a legacy from Babylon. And we are not going to see a Sixth Republic in France abolishing the Gregorian calendar (the First got nowhere with its republican calendar).

A civilization, wrote the historian Charles Seignobos, is a grid of ‘roads, ports and quays’. It is also the way time is divided, and space demarcated; a main course, a favourite colour, a head-gear. Kemal banned the headscarf and the veil, but while the fez disappeared, the hijab resurfaced. The mark of a civilization is a culinary base that no act of will, good or bad, can prevent from rising to the surface of the sauce. Colour prints of Stalin were not presented as icons, nor statues of Mao as a new version

of ancestor worship—nor indeed our own Mariannes as so many Virgin Marys without their halos. It would kill the effect to reveal its source, but without the paleo, there is no neo. A futurology without genealogy is no more than a ripple in a children's pool.

If pure calculation of interest were to govern our alliances and affinities, it would be logical, to use a contemporary example, for the Russian Federation—rejected by Europe and surrounded by NATO—to make common cause with China, but as even certain Russians say themselves: a marriage of convenience, yes, we can imagine that, but little chemistry—‘we are not of the same family’. As for those who have fabricated a Europe united on paper, pink or blue, ignoring the faultline that runs from Riga to Split, a fracture inherited from the *Filioque* quarrel that has separated West from East since the eighth century, they have not achieved and will not achieve anything for their pains. No peace conference will dissipate an underlying mistrust and animosity between Arabs and Persians, Hindus and Muslims, even Lutherans and Papists, not to mention South and North Americans. Since every new religion is a heretical version of an older one—Buddhism of Hinduism, Christianity of Judaism, Protestantism of Catholicism, and so on—there is no civilization which has posed its claim somewhere in Babel without opposing another one; the dead lie heavy on the neck of the amnesiac. This *affectio societatis* offers no comfort to beaming notions of world improvement, global governance or any of the other United Colours of Benetton—or for that matter, talk of collective security or cosmopolitan homilies. Everything that unites us also divides us, and it is about as likely that a human civilization will come into being—anywhere other than the podiums of the United Nations or UNESCO—as that an extra-terrestrial with two heads and four legs should deign to land on our planet. Tomorrow is not that Sunday. Plurality is the law of the Earth, Hannah Arendt maintained. Fine. We would do well to remember its promises as many slammed doors as open windows, as many knives pulled as hands shaken.

Impressions

Let us first distinguish, then, between *culture* and *civilization*, these ‘sets of attitudes and skills learnt by men as members of society’, as Lévi-Strauss termed them. They are often confused (Hegel took the one for the other). In the Age of Enlightenment, Mirabeau and Voltaire invented

Civilization as proper noun, the exit from Barbarism. Germany, a short while later, would oppose *Kultur*, a living particularity rooted in a people and a soil, to *Zivilization*, inert and deracinate, its procedures applicable anywhere. 'Today it is the duty of man to ensure that civilization does not destroy culture nor technology the human being', warned the Berlin historian Theodor Mommsen. Anglo-Saxon anthropologists who with good reason translated moral idea into social fact, reserved 'culture' for primitive societies and 'civilization' for modern societies. So there is a good deal of interference on the line and fog on the road. Let us try a clarification.

What distinguishes 'the first and most complex of the permanent forms of social life' from others that might at first glance appear more readily visible, like the tribe, the nation or the state? First, spatially—by the range of their diffusion: Islam in lower case extends from Dakar to Jakarta. Here foundations are wider than the structures that are built on them. Then, temporally—by their longevity: Rome lasted a thousand years, China is nearing its third millennium. Their depths are not easily broken. China has seen many a dynasty, many a massacre and many a great helmsman, and may see others. But its pagodas will still be there. Storks pass; steeples remain.

No culture without agriculture, no civilization without a city. The etymology distributes their vocations. Here a *locus*, there a *topos*—in each case, a mould capable of accommodating, and of shaping, several substances. Even if the most intensive cultivation is under the walls of a city, or close by one, it can always return to compost—it is rural. A civilization, on the other hand, is carved in stone—it is urban. It needs centres of accumulation and redistribution, and urbanization cannot occur just anywhere. The shores of the sea and the banks of great rivers, which allow the cheap transportation of goods and commodities, attract it quite naturally. More propitious for cultures, *stricto sensu*, are mountainous zones difficult to access. Steppes, massifs and high plateaux encourage a particularist resilience. Geography, for the one, is a home port, for the other, a springboard. A culture is celibate, while a civilization has children. The first is to the second what a kingdom is to the empire—or a retrenchment to a propagation. There is, for example, a Basque culture, bringing together seven provinces straddling the border of the Pyrenees, but it stops north of the Adour and south of the Ebro: it does not seek to encroach on Gascony or Aragon. Many Basques have emigrated, and

their descendants have populated Latin America; Ignatius of Loyola and St Francis Xavier were not sedentary; but the *pelotari*, *chistera* and *trinquet* (player, glove and court of the game of pelota) the *makila* (shepherd's staff), the *pastorale* (psalmodic theatre), smuggling, berets, *piperade* (pepper dish) and, first and foremost, the enigmatic Basque language, the true criterion of belonging, have one kingdom and only one: the Basque Country. Basque culture, like Yezidi, or, more accurately, Kabyle or Aymara, does not want anyone treading on its sandals, but equally doesn't step on anyone else's. Basqueness adheres to Basques, and no one else. It seeks no sphere of 'co-prosperity'.

No need, on the other hand, to be born in Italy or a partisan of the *Pax Romana* in order to speak Latin, and think like a Roman—as St Augustine, a Berber, or Thomas Aquinas did. No need either to have an American passport, or even speak fluent English, to adopt US manners and customs. As a mother tongue irradiates into regional dialects, so a civilization decompartmentalizes the culture from which it originates—the Sinosphere includes China, Japan, Mongolia, Tibet, Korea, Vietnam, Singapore. A civilization contracts when its forces begin to decline. This retraction or clenching, which signals a retreat, is called a culture. Hellenic civilization extended to the Indus, Christian from Patagonia in the west to Kerala in the east, the faith of Hejaz spread across Byzantium and Persia to North India. Buddha, born in India, crossed the Himalayas into China, but the Mediterranean was forbidden him, Zoroastrian Persia blocking his missionaries to the west. A civilization is not made by spontaneous generation. A culture constructs sites; a civilization builds roads. It presupposes and requires a foreign policy. A civilization acts; it is offensive, unlike a culture, which is defensive and reacts. The correct term would really be *civilization*.

Let us take heed of this *-ion*, the suffix of action, the action of the great city on its hinterland, the *urbs* on the *ager*. There is no civilization that is not rooted in a culture, but it does not become a civilization unless it also has a fleet and an ambition, a great dream and a mobile force. In that sense, Pericles represented the moment of culture and Alexander the moment of civilization in the Greek world. A little empire, that of Philip II of Macedonia, father of the great Alexander, was necessary between them. English Puritanism, a local culture, planted the seeds of a civilization across the Atlantic, and American neo-Protestantism has now crossed the ocean in the opposite direction, to spread the American

way of life in Africa. When a root acquires wings, it can create premises *extra muros*. Such wings do not grow all by themselves.

Imperium

A language or a religion, or still better a mixture of the two, can create a lasting encampment: Hebrew and Judaism are a case in point. A civilization demands more: an empire (Abbasid, Carolingian, Spanish, British, American . . .). And whoever says empire also says armed force, as whoever says army says war and conquest. Local cultures also sometimes have to take up arms, to survive or to be reborn, but these are wars of necessity, defence or liberation. A civilization practises war by choice, wars of invasion or colonization. No Hellenism without hoplites, no Islam without cavalry. No Christianity without Templars, no Ottomanism without Janissaries. Funny paradox: the antonym of 'barbarism' always has pools of blood in its baptismal fonts, days of St Bartholomew without which civilization would not be what it is. Like every other, Christianity has an embarrassment of choice in matter of ethnocides: from the massacre of the Hierosolomites (1099) or of Albigensians (1209) during the Crusades, to the annihilation of Pre-Columbians in the middle of the sixteenth century and extermination of Amerindians three centuries later. Civilizers with clean white hands do not exist: all have a black book in the drawer. A regional dialect could, at the end of the feudal era, attain the status of national language by equipping itself with cannon and a centralized monarchy (as with François I in France). But the inventors of cartography (a mark of civilization) would sooner or later need triremes, gunboats or aircraft not just to reach, but to camp on other shores. That's expensive. Taxes have to be levied, ports opened, forests planted, engineers recruited, along with blacksmiths for the cavalry.

'Imperial civilizations' are a pleonasm. Just as an empire is multi-ethnic, a civilization in the prime of its life needs every talent available and will make satellites out of a number of cultures, be these enclaves, outposts or relays: Nepal and Indonesia are not India, any more than Vietnam or Mongolia are China, or today's Italy, France or Mexico are America. A Spaghetti Western is lightly augmented, primaries in France cost less than in the States, our 'participant finance' (dinners at a mere €7,500 a head) is fundraising on the cheap. The modulator can be modulated; to each partner their unit of measure. A nebula requires more than one star.

The American model is a paradigm in this respect, in its capacity to project both forces and forms outwards. Beyond the first circle of the family (Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States—the absolutely trustworthy countries sharing a single intelligence system, the *Five Eyes*), its centre of diffusion radiates in all directions, with bridgeheads on five continents, and a rosary of skylines, megalopolis new or renovated, functioning as antennae—or so many ‘free zones’, gated communities in the global village. Tokyo, Singapore, Dubai, Tel Aviv, Lagos, Lima . . . In addition to these ‘civilized’ coastlines, some above them, others behind them, are cities that subsist on culture, from Kyoto to Kuala Lumpur, Mecca, Jerusalem and Cuzco. For all that is globalized requires its local colour. If a civilization has its multiples, these are neither clones nor mere replicas. When a civilization is at full strength, it acts like an inflected language where every stranger can create their own hyphen and ending (Italian-American, Chinese-American), without even putting their bags down. Of the current formula that globalizes a particular local profile, we have an Arabic version, abstemious and deluxe (Abu Dhabi); an Israeli version, high-tech and muscular (Tel Aviv); a Sino-Asiatic version, crowded but orderly (Shanghai); a Latino version that is borderline and disorderly (Panama); a crazy, congested African version (Johannesburg). This archipelago is united by business and commerce, but since an economy by itself has never made up a civilization, it must satisfy a certain number of other requirements: a film festival, a museum of contemporary art, an annual art fair, an economic forum, architectural feats (the highest tower, the longest bridge), shopping malls and six-starred hotels. The United Arab Emirates, in just thirty years, have fulfilled all their obligations, save one: no love parade.

To return for a moment to the hard kernel of a civilization: military force, which is a necessary but not sufficient condition of one, always needs the enhancement of an imaginary to fire hearts, storehouses to fill stomachs, and a magisterium to occupy minds. Imposition by force—military, financial or both—is ineffectual without the radiance of a symbolic code which alone has the power to make of dispersed pieces a whole. The equation for ‘empire’ is Aristotle plus Alexander, Thomas Aquinas plus Louis IX, Descartes plus Louis XIV, Adam Smith plus Admiral Nelson, Kissinger plus General Westmoreland. A form of thought, plus a *force de frappe*. If Attila had brought a philosopher along in his baggage-train, the grass would have grown after he passed over it. Why didn’t fulgurating

charges of cavalry leave a furrow? Because the Hun, the Mongol and the Tatar were better at mastering space than traversing time, which requires a lute as well as a spear and a horse. The artist or architect, writer or musician or gardener may all be needed.

The Red Army won the Second World War against Nazism; the United States won the peace that followed. The Soviet Union had a constellation of garrisons and missiles across Eastern Europe and Central Asia after 1945, but no communist civilization capable of transcending and federating stand-offish locals emerged out of it. Moscow lacked nylons, chewing gum and hot dogs, to say nothing of Grace Kelly and Jackson Pollock. The United States lost no time in outdoing the USSR in the matter of arsenals, but if to their 2,000 military installations spanning five continents had not been added 35,000 McDonald's in 119 countries (including 1,500 in France), a language ideal for machine translation, the Gillette razor, vinyl records of saxophonist Lester Young, the 'Prez', and Marilyn's cleavage, there would be no American civilization today. The panoply of weapons is only half of the programme: one cannot sit on missiles any more than on bayonets. A desirable way of life must not repress, but imprint and invent. Stakhanov was not Bill Gates. Able to do ill, but first to do good. In short, a supremacy is established when the imprint survives the impress, and the impress the imperium.

To measure the vitality of a civilization by the yardstick of its industry or its currency is the myopia of an economist. The United States deindustrializes, its trade deficit widens, its social inequalities increase, but its imprint capacity is no more affected than is its firepower, and we can expect that the twentieth century will not be the last to be associated with the name of a nation. Its physical and psychological means of extrojection, military strength and patriotic faith, have in no way disappeared; they remain resilient, are even resurgent. Wealth does not mechanically produce domination: in 1945, the US accounted for two-fifths of global GDP, but its civilization had not remodelled the cultures of the world as it has today. The twentieth century was American: but after the golden age comes the age of silver.

There is too the role of religions in these dynamics of overseas expansion. Yesterday's French empire propelled its colonial projects forward with Catholic missionaries, as did the Spanish empire in the Americas. The English had Anglicanism; Tsarist Russia, Orthodoxy. The American

empire has a plethora of neo-Protestant sects for relay—Mormons, Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses touring the worlds of Africa and Asia. Institutional religions are strategic, playing defence and offence simultaneously, acting both as frontier guards (Poland, Greece, Armenia) and as advance parties (Liberia, Senegal, Indian outposts). They allow a ritual adhesion, not demanding formal allegiance. The pentecostal in Nigeria, as in Aubervilliers, swears no oath to the stars and stripes, but involuntarily adopts a way of life and thought born in California in 1906—a model in turn descending from English Methodist stock of the eighteenth century. Such monotheist cults are tigers in the tank built for export, since preaching and conversion are consubstantial for them. One does not become Hindu, one is born so or one is not. Shamanism does not carry; it remains in Siberia, or in the Sioux reserves. But anyone, anywhere, can become Christian or Muslim. Judaism dropped out of competition after a few centuries of proselytism among Khazars and Ethiopians. Its two scions with all their variants could substitute humiliating allegiance with exalted participation. Universal religions are serviceable as well for irredentist defence as messianic advance, the survival of a culture and the destruction of others.

A civilization has won when the empire from which it arose no longer requires imperialist measures to imprint itself. When it no longer needs helicopter gunships to control what goes on below. Nor a fist on the table to attract universal attention. Victory can be declared when, instead of *one*, there is only *the* civilization, its language a *lingua franca* and its currency a common measure. When it can withdraw to its homeland and still be a beacon. When alien tribes adopt its tics, its habits and its norms, without even being aware they are cut-and-pasting them. When the commander no longer needs to command. A civilization has won when all that it shapes has become natural, and it is unbecoming to try to reconstruct the actions that allowed such civility to impose itself, or ask what system of forces lies beneath established norms. When the particular becomes the universal, the philosopher will say. When domination becomes hegemony, the sociologist will say. Put simply: when there is no longer anything to discuss, and an essay like this begins to seem a little suspect.