



The Civilizational States and Liberal Democracies

Christopher Coker, *The Rise of the Civilizational State* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

At the beginning of the 21st century attempts to historically re-evaluate the past and redefine key social values took place in some of the leading world powers. Such efforts are especially noticeable in two countries that are today the main opponents of the global pretensions of liberal democracy: Russia and China. In the second decade of the 20th century these two states began to see themselves as separate civilizations and as “civilizational states”, and to view the West as the main threat to their existence. In 2019, Christopher Coker, British political philosopher, war theorist and professor of international relations at the London School of Economics and director of LSE IDEAS published the book entitled *The Rise of the Civilizational State* that offered anatomy of this type of state.

Although in the West there is no adequate example of the civilizational state (цивилизационная страна in Russian), there is a tradition of understanding the West as a type of civilization. The so-called liberal or Euro-Atlantic civilization would be one such concept that includes an important difference because it does not define an individual state as a civilization, but a group of nation-states that claim to share similar values.

However, the author points out that this type of civilisation has faced serious challenges regarding its pretensions to universal application and

challenges have come both from non-Western societies and its own citizens who are not rich. In the section entitled "the myth of liberal civilization" he warns that the West "no longer looks robust enough to carry the intellectual fright it once carried." Echoing Freud's book *The Civilization and its Discontents* the author writes of liberal discontents and points out that the liberal internationalists came to realise that "many remain largely unmoved or uninspired" by their message at the same time when Western intellectuals "have begun to question whether civilization itself is even an ethically acceptable category".

The book identifies Imperial Japan of the 1930s as the first example of the civilizational state. The change of the school program clearly outlined the ideals of such a state. "The Bureau of Thought Control" then published a textbook entitled *Kokutai no Hongi* in which Japanese students were taught that their emperor represented the essence of the nation. The people could not have any special will, but only unconditional love for the emperor and readiness to sacrifice for the royal family. Thus, the ethos of the samurai was reworked, and Buddhism was transformed into a warrior Zen in which the idea of overcoming the self was transformed into an unconditional commitment to sacrifice for the emperor. Such a system led to an incredible identification with Japanese civilization, but failed with Japan's defeat in World War II in 1945, and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's attempts to revive it failed due to the cultural and political influence that the United States still has in Japan.

The book is primarily focused on the contemporary incarnations of the civilisational state. The concept was renewed in China and Russia at the beginning of the 21st century. Statesmen, spiritual leaders and some prominent thinkers and opinion makers in the two countries have no doubts on whether there is a category called civilization and believe that their countries are and should remain separate civilizations.

Considering the endurance of China's existence in various forms, Prof. Coker was surprised not by the fact that this country decided to see itself as the civilizational state, but rather by the fact that it took so long for China to do it. At the heart of this Chinese self-perception is the notion that the concept of the West is dangerous. It is claimed that a Chinese path has been quite opposite to it. It is a peaceful, non-expansionist and non-imperialist path. Xi Jinping presented exactly what this concept looks like at the 19th Congress of the Communist Party of China, when he presented a combination of Confucianism and Leninism as an alternative model to the West. This was certainly a surprise to many because the attitude towards Confucianism as a religion was defined by the atheistic nature of the Chinese regime, but the leader of the Chinese Communist Party changed that in 2014 when he attended the commemoration of Confucius' death. The tradition from Japan has continued. It is only that in this case research centers for Xi Jinping's "thought" have been introduced instead of the Bureau of Thought Control. Part of this "thought" is that China's CP is seen as an "unbroken line of Chinese civilization". The

Confucian notion of harmony is singled out, and China is presented as a peaceful country that contributes to a "harmonious world".

The teaching of history is set within the framework of the so-called patriotic history courses in which the central part refers to the "century of humiliation" that began with the Opium War and ended with the victory of the Chinese Revolution and the Communist Party of China (1839-1949). Christopher Coker estimates that two decades of such teaching have led the Chinese youth to "a virulent strain of nationalism imposed by the state". Behind everything, there is a great fear of Western values. Chinese civilizational values are offered instead. In the official version, this civilization is unique. Like any civilizational state, this one is "special" because it is claimed to be the only civilization that has ever existed and that included harmony at home, accompanied by harmony abroad, without colonial pretensions and civilisational missions.

Prof. Coker provides analysis of Russia, the other major contemporary civilisational state. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, there was a number of analysts in the West who believed that Russia, as a transitional state, could, sooner or later, become a part of the Euro-Atlantic world. Even Samuel Huntington was among those who thought it was possible. After Yeltsin's resignation as President of Russia in 1999, the civilisational state gradually began to emerge in Russia. Like China, Russia has returned to religious tradition, and even the Russia's secret service - FSB got its own church of St. Sophia. The leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church was equally embracing and Patriarch Kirill called Vladimir Putin a "miracle of God". In the second decade of the 21st century, there was a renewal of messianic ideas that were absent from the Russian cultural mainstream for about a quarter of a century. Anti-Western rhetoric was renewed, but sudden attempts to deny Russia's Europeanness failed. When the Russian Ministry of Culture drafted the Basics of Russian Cultural Policy in 2014, it also contained the claim that "Russia is not Europe", but it had to be withdrawn. Six years later, the Russian National Security Strategy included the following assessment: "it is necessary to adopt a sublime attitude towards historical memory".

The West has once again become a central antagonist in Russia and has begun to be seen again as decadent, as a set of nation-states having no values, as opposed to Russia that contains them. According to Christopher Coker, that made it easier for Russian President Vladimir Putin to oppose exactly those values that stood in the way of full consolidation of power: liberty, freedom and democracy. In this he found a ready ally in the church and Patriarch Kirill, who considers human rights to be a "Jewish-Protestant invention".

The attitude towards Russians outside Russia has been defined as a matter of special concern for the Russian civilizational state. Thus, Dmitry Medvedev, during his time as President of Russia, defined a new foreign policy goal related to the sphere of "civilizational privilege". Russian President Putin was clear that Russia was ready to pay a high price

for such goals, so after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, he said that sanctions against Russia were the price she had to pay “to preserve herself as a civilization.” He reiterated that the protection of Russia’s cultural heritage outside Russia was one of the country’s priorities. As Christopher Coker correctly and prophetically noted in 2019, the idea that Russia must protect Russians outside Russia is “bad news if you happen to be a citizen of a neighboring country with a large Russian minority.”

What one may conclude from this insightful and far-reaching book is that there are several features that are common for the two contemporary civilizational states and their predecessor in Japan. Each considers itself to be unique and the only one of that kind, and each sees itself as self-sufficient. They all feel threatened by the West, and only a departure from Western values is seen as a path to save them to continue to exist as separate civilizations. All civilizational states are anti-liberal, with a complex relationship to modernity. They accept the technical-technological aspect of modernity, but reject the political philosophies of the Enlightenment and liberalism that came with it. These states are particularly repulsive to the postmodern ideas, and are afraid of its de-essentialization which easily calls into question the very foundations of the civilizational state.

Along with Russia and China, Prof. Coker has identified other candidates for civilizational states, namely India and the Caliphate, which could rise again from the ashes of ISIS. Turkey under Erdogan had similar pretensions.

Thinking of the logical conclusions that this book brings is that the division to free, partly free and no free world is not sufficient anymore. Within those countries that belong to “not free world” there is now an additional category that should be taken into account: that of the civilizational states. That is why the world today, following the findings of this book, could be recategorized and divided into three groups of states: liberal democracies, illiberal nation-states and civilizational states. What happened after the publication of this book was that the Liberal Club suffered a heavy blow in 2021, when India, after many years, was assessed as partly free country by the Freedom House, thus losing the attributes of liberal democracy. From that moment universal pretensions of liberal democracies have faced a new severe blow.

The book ends with a warning to the liberal West. And the author has warned Western liberals since the publication of his brilliant book *Twilight of the West* in 1998 that the concept of the West was in crisis. He ends the book with two warnings. The first is about Western liberal arrogance: “We are still far from being as civilized as we like to think. In fact, even a rudimentary study of history suggests that a huge gap has always existed between civilization and its pretensions to civility”. The second is about postmodern rejection of essentialist notions. Similarly to the concept of culture, that represents a huge bone of discontent among scholars, but that cannot be abandoned, civilisation is another contested

concept. In spite of that, the author claims, the idea of civilization is: “indispensable if we aspire to become more civilized”.

Along with his previous books, among which I would single out *Twilight of the West* (1998), *The Future of the War* (2004), and *Can War be Eliminated* (2014), this book puts some of the most disturbing questions that the Western (Liberal) camp or civilisation has faced including: how universal the values of the West are, how can the West reconcile its increasingly fluid ideas with essentialist realities, and how can it protect its values in the world that indeed becomes less and less unipolar? Finally, if war has its almost certain future among humans, as Prof. Coker has claimed, then what is the predicament not only of the West, but of human civilisation in general? The rise of civilizational state coupled with the idea that wars would continue provide another double and far-reaching warning by this author.

*Slobodan G. Markovich**

* Slobodan G. Markovich is a Full Professor at the Faculty of Political Science of the University of Belgrade, S.Markovich@lse.ac.uk