

A New Universal Order? Civilization(s) Strike Back? *

TAŞANSU TÜRKER¹

Ernesto Laclau's 1992 article, "*Universalism, Particularism, and the Question of Identity*" is still timely at the age of transition of World order nowadays. While mono-, bi- or multi-polarity debates have been the main issues of international politics for the last two decades, Brexit and especially the strong wind of Trump and beyond himself, Trumpism -which was internationalized, as well- have brought up new questions and new realities despite the triumph of Biden at the presidential elections of 2020 and pledge of the conventional -if we call the post-cold war hegemonic arguments so- in new ways to be called back. Since the promises of Biden on international politics and what the world has seen until today were not in harmony, even in contrast in some areas. Hence, the debates of the Trump era are still fresh, and the question of a world order still needs to be inquired.

The last decade was an era when the main basis of Western societies and international system were challenged by; i. the internal problems motivated by the transformation of technologies, capitalism, society, government and international politics, ii. international rivals at regional scales and iii. a total rivalry from China. It is obvious that those three factors have created a complex picture for the West, which was crystalized in anti-systemic challenges – the terms "right or left populism" cannot explain the complicated situation-. Those have been argued to be a spontaneous change or a serious diffraction in the history of the West and the world. However, the pandemic, the election process in the US -including the raid to the Senate on 6th January 2021-, international political discourses and events have shown up that the world is at an era when *the old could not die, and the new could not be born and we fight with monsters*, as says Gramsci.

Those three layers above deserve to be explained briefly. About the internal problems of the West, at the Likhachev Forum in 2017, I had mentioned Bauman and Bordoni which

*Paper submitted (April 2022) to the Likhachev Conference (lihachev.ru/chten_eng/) on invitation and to be published in Proceedings and presented in June 2022.

¹ Professor Doctor, Head of the Department of Comparative Politics, Faculty of Political Science, Ankara University, Türkiye.

E-mail: tturker@politics.ankara.edu.tr

I assume it is needed to be repeated here: “Bauman and Bordini’s “*liquid modernity*” term referring the current crisis of modernity was at the center of my report since modernity itself could be founded as a *status quo* during and after the long 19th century and 21st century is again a period of obscurity, a quest for a new *status quo* or the with the description by Umberto Eco, “*a trespassing for tomorrow’s unsettled contingency, yet.*” Bauman and Bordini in their book “*State of Crisis*”, were arguing that a two-way crisis is actual for modernity, where the first is the impotence of the states and the second is the radical change in social structures. And the results of the crisis of modernity can be categorized as political and social. The most prominent political result, which I want to underline, can be titled as the loss of *identity* or a collective consciousness which was created by the *nation-states* for their continuity and the whole international system depending on those again. That identity or collective consciousness has two faces: The local one describing the particularity referencing nation, language, religion, history etc. by providing cohesion inside the borders of the country, and the universal one referencing security, justice, democracy, human rights, etc. by providing the continuity of the values system and even international system, as well. Except for the debates on universalism vs. particularism here, I guess it is acceptable that the particularity of nation-states is depending on the universality of values which creates the international system, meaning that huge erosion for universal values is another important fact. Another side of the political result can be summarized as the weakness of the state against the political demands of the masses where legitimate and effective ways for governance are still searched. Here, throughout the demands of the masses, social results can be linked to political ones. It can be argued that the demands of masses have transformed as well. In current social debates it is observed that masses do not know what they want, but they know very well what they do not want, which makes those social wishes less governable throughout modern ways like representation, parliament or parties, even civil society. The other side of social results is the mass hunger for consumption. As authors’ conceptualization, a *consumer society* is the new fact for all social and political spheres instead of citizens and that makes the consumption is the current *telos*. The crisis of modernity and the current liquidity which are summarized above are actually indicating the crisis of sovereignty and the crisis of democracy for the modern world. Post version of modernity was generally founded on those evaluations by the claims of postmodernity as supranational organizations and micro nationalisms will be replacing nation-states and nations even, updated versions of democracy will be improved by the means of social

media, civil society, etc., number of blue collars will be reduced by white collars and economy will depend on more technology and innovation.”

However, the reverse wind of the conventional politics, namely Brexit and Trump first, but the infrastructural dynamics of the conventional society stroke back as a challenge to post-industrial economic relations and conservative values set to the liberal promises of a *fiction* society. In the paradigm of Kojin Karatani -state, capital, society triangle-, it can be argued that capital's enlargement against the state and society has created many areas of *problématique* at that period. Just one example, social media monopolies suspending the accounts of an incumbent American President, should be shocking if it is remembered that the monopoly of violence is the most basic explanation of the legitimacy of the state and the authority of censor in that framework belongs to the state, not to a few capital groups. All the debates about populism at that period should be another strong example of the crisis. At the other hand, especially the warning of Madeleine Albright by her 2018 book about *fascism* should be something more than to be mentioned only.

The second layer, regional rivalries, has been another issue of the crisis. Described as “*Westlessness*” in Munich Security Forum, or described as “*Hobbesian international environment*” at the World Economic Forum; the almanacs for the last decade have written the vacuum and “slight” conflicts in international politics nearly at all the regions of the world. The Middle East, including Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya; Africa, especially the Sahel and East African coast; South American democracy crisis, esp. Venezuela; Eastern Europe, especially Ukraine in 2022, etc. Regional powers with global impacts emerging at that period like Russia, India and Brazil; regional powers like Iran, Indonesia, the Philippines, South Africa, Egypt and Saudi Arabia were the actors challenging the West. Moreover, the split within the West like Brexit, Turkey's quest for a more autonomous foreign policy, France's African perspective or Germany's “*neue Ostpolitik*” were bigger challenges for the Western world. All those “small” crises with millions of people's death or starving or homelessness that happened during the Westlessness, have strengthened it more in the framework of hegemonic decline, and the rivals have ascended more against the descending West.

Although these rivalries frazzled the Western hegemony in international politics, the real challenge, which was a systemic one, has come from China. As mentioned above as the

third layer, this challenge has been a total one and seeking global dominance. Debates on a Chinese character Bretton Woods must be a clue for a total challenge since all the Western hegemonic world system is based on Bretton Woods principally. Of course Bretton Woods created some results to fortify the Western hegemony, but still it was a result of a reality, economic dominance of the US. The Nixon shock was a comma in the sentence, but not a full stop. Three factors, (i. China's fast economic achievements today, ii. the comma mentioned above which made the current economic system invalid and, iii. new actors' -like India and Russia- positions towards a search for a new system) can bring down the dominance of US dollar. Obviously this is a new world.

While during the two decades of "*belle époque II*" just after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the motto was a new free world where "*the history has ended*" according to Francis Fukuyama, for the last decade -especially after Brexit- metamorphoses of China into a global power has been witnessed and free world with free trade under liberal values have been the first ones to be dropped by the West in the framework of a *new cold war-ish* environment -Fukuyama this time writing the "*Identity*" and legitimizing his late professor Samuel Huntington's "*the Clash of Civilizations*" concept-. A summary of last few years' events will contribute to the context at that point. First issue to be remembered should be the general debate between Trump and Biden before the elections. A total contradiction and even a divided society's reflection was the main impression about the American elections of 2020. Regarding domestic politics, Trump was '*conventional*' conservative -the term 'conventional' is used here to distinguish it from the '*neo*' form- and Biden was liberal and even social democratic in the terms of Europe. About economics, Trump was pro-conventional industry while Biden was progressive by supporting the information and service sectors. About international economic relations, Trump was *mercantilist-ish* while Biden was an advocate of free trade. About international politics, Trump was to create a controlled vacuum which made the allies needy for the US, Biden was to call America back to the world stage for strengthened alliances with the old allies. Shortly, Biden has been trying to find the golden middle between pre-election himself (promising a "*Great Reset*" from Klaus Schwab of World Economic Forum, a post-industrial dream, progressive society and American new world order which all were motivated by his liberal *weltanschauung* and ultra-idealistic international politics approach) and Trump's position, promising to *return to American Dream* of post-WWII, an industrial and solid society, a spontaneous world order where

“*America is first*” which all were motivated by his conservative views and ultra-realistic international politics premises. It is clear that this is a quite difficult balance...

Biden -or any other, Democrat or Republican-, today -and in the near future-, has to deal with dual-society problems of the US which are based on the need for a coexistence of conventional industrial and post-industrial societies, huge economic problems -ie. inflation-, divided society, progressive demands and conservative reactions, political stiffness, divided party motivations between generations and even ideologically, challenges for the upcoming elections, etc. However, all those issues may address a more fundamental issue, as mentioned above, an inquiry for a new *telos*, a new *habitus*, a new *modus vivendi*, a new American *status quo*, which can promise a way of being civilized, when “*post-civilization*” term is as valid as the term “*post-truth*”. This inquiry, of course, will be hand-in-hand with the inquiry of solutions on international politics and even a new world order, where Biden was disappointed for not finding the world he left with Obama in 2016.

Concisely, the world of 2020 -which was far beyond the Western hegemony and lacks a stable architecture- was in general view; a total rival -China-, an old rival which is in between the US and China -Russia-, challenging allies -Germany and France-, rising regional powers and their ambitions all over the world. Kissinger plan of the Trump era -articulating Russia and adding India to the alliance of Pacific countries with the core Anglo-American bloc which is formed of the US, Canada, UK, New Zealand and Australia, to contain China- was realistic and promising for Biden administration, as well. Until February 2022... After that time it has been observed that Anglo-American bloc (reinforced by 2021 New Atlantic Charter) has chosen a path of consolidation of trans-Atlantic relations by suppressing the continent and pushing Russia. It is obvious that this process is not a sustainable option because of reasons; i. the need for Russia and its allies (esp., India) in the Pacific, ii. reactions from continental Europe, iii. a global economic crisis threat. Moreover, maybe the most important reason can be the threat of consolidation between China, Russia, India and many others from the Pacific region and maybe the Middle East and even Europe on a consensus for a search of a new world order. Although Russia is not capable of a global challenge, she being together with China is a total game changer.

For the close future, if the US-China rivalry is the main axis of international politics, what kind of rivalry would the world live and what kind of architecture would this create? Since politics are created by material necessities, that rivalry between the US and China should create a political discourse that will legitimize the current positions. At that point, Kissinger's phrase can be a beacon for the debate. He was arguing that through all history, humanity created ways to explain the world around them, in the middle ages by religion, in the Enlightenment by reason, in the 19th century by history, in the 20th century by ideology. In other words, 20th century was dominated by identity and positions based on an ideological confrontation between the US and fascism first and socialism later. The 19th century was the age of nationalisms and was dominated by historical approach, which was the basis of national identities. The masses in the politics have brought the identity issue since then. Identity will be the core point of the politics if still masses will be the actors in politics -although the death of *koinon* and the dominance of *idion* were argued during the pandemic by dystopians-, but the description of identity is the problem at that point. National identities did not fade away while the prior identity was the ideological one. This accumulation, despite replacement, will be the course again. So, national identities will remain, ideological identities will remain -as Biden calls the world to value-based politics-, but the prior and new identity should be more complex and explaining the rivalry and convincing for the legitimacy, also creating cohesion for domestic politics of the West, esp. the US; which can be the concept of *civilization(s)*.

Civilization(s) is an ambiguous, even controversial term. Contrary to the general opinion, the term was used in a singular form for a long time. "We and others" issue, before becoming the problem of modern politics, finds its roots at the *Numbers* chapter at the Old Testament. All "we" were counted and the "others" were gentiles. Antique Greeks used the word "*barbaric*" for the others. Rome used the concept "*Romans versus savages*". So, the concept was based on the universality claims of the identity and it was dichotomic. Rome had become the only source of legitimacy that *four Roman Caesars* reigned at one same period. One in Rome, one in second Rome -Istanbul-, one in third Rome -Moscow- and one in another Rome -Vienna-, for which Voltaire was saying that "it was neither holy nor Roman, but a bunch of Germans." Latin word "*universal*", and Greek word "*ecumenical*" had been the basis of legitimacy until the Westphalian world, which granted particularism's legitimacy and enabled the triumph of nationalisms in the 19th century. At that time the term "civilization" was used to explain "*having manners*" or "*decency*" and

it can be seen well at Mirabeau with the meaning of the *modus vivendi* belonging to the aristocracy. Later, in French again it regained its universal meaning by covering ages in humanity -chronologically multiple civilizations later-, while German language has always preferred “*Kultur*” instead. At the same period, while France was creating a republican political model of nation on Rousseau-aen views, Germany was to form her own nation model on *Sittlichkeit* of Hegel and “*Addresses to the German Nation*” of Fichte -or a combination of von Ranke and Lamprecht from historiography-.

In a search for a modern political identity concept, Alexander II’s reforms which made Count Uvarov’s “Czar-Church-Peoplehood” conception void; Russian Empire created a more suitable and useful formulation for her identity purposes, coherent to her current needs as an Empire. That was the book by N. Ya. Danilevsky, “*Russia and Europe: A Look at the Cultural and Political Relations of the Slavic World to the Romano-German World*” (1875). Danilevsky, in his book, for the first time categorized the civilization-s and created the concept of civilization in a Westphalian *nation-ish* modern model with answers to cohesion of the masses with identity formulations. Of course, as in Mark Twain’s saying, “*history never repeats itself, but often rhymes*”, his formulation rhymed with Uvarov’s by referring Czar and autocracy as an imperial (*Romanic*) loyalty, church as philosophy of Orthodoxy and peoplehood as a more Germanic national essence. (Of course, the term *samobytnost’* (uniqueness) for Russia of *Slavophile* thought which derived from German anthropology and philosophy, helped a lot.) However, it was miraculous in the way that it created an identity which an empire needed for modern politics and transnational domestic and even regional influence. It was so successful that Dostoevsky followed this categorization in the last years of his life, Leontiev’s *Byzantinism* idea derived from this categorization, even Bakunin could argue that anarchy would have been successful only in Russian and Ottoman Empires based on this categorization of civilizations.

The plural form of civilization conception was followed only in Britain, not surprisingly, as another empire’s needs were similar to Russia’s. Spengler, first, in 1919, in his book “*The Decline of the West*” continued to use the plural form of civilization. Later Toynbee, in 1934, in his book “*A Study of History*” based his ideas on civilization-s. (Continental Europe was still using the term singular principally, but like *L’École des Annales* of France with Braudel’s historical related periodical approach with the term “*synthétique*

geographies” or not using at all like in Germany.) This British *Tory* mind was imported to the US by Leo Strauss, who was followed by pupils Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama.

So, the concept of *multiple rival civilizations* is not something the US, the UK or Russia are stranger to. (Although the continental European mind is far away from the concept, the EU itself can be accepted as an example of the concept, esp. with the founding ideas of Alexander Kojève, who was a Russian immigrant. Also, China with the pattern of imperial thinking and self-naming *Zhōngguó*, which means the middle-world, is not unfamiliar to the concept.) However, the reason why today this concept is functional and useful for a US-China rivalry discourse formulation shall be explained briefly more than intuitions or *guesstimates* depending on given situation of the US, China and international politics. First of all, the concept is flexible enough to involve a large area of the world with its meaning larger than *culture* or *nation* and again flexible enough than the terms of ideology. It can be called like a *co-existence pacifique* of cultures and nations under a larger tolerant umbrella. (Although it can be easily argued that *civitas* and *culture* are rivals with a reference to Terry Eagleton) Also, it is not strict like an ideological bloc-forming and welcomes different political patterns with narrow red lines. After it is understood well that post-nationalistic trends are just utopical and democracy should be described wider nowadays, with more applicable approaches and by paying regard to different patterns compared to the Chinese political system; the flexible concept of civilization can be useful to contain larger alliances. Although it is particularistic in nature, by the call for universalism it can be inviting and attractive. It has a basis of nearly two hundred years of westernization for the countries which can be called “*aux bords de l’ouest*” (*on the Shores of the West*) with a reference to Jacques Rancière. It has a larger geographical advantage, from Japan to India; even from the post-Soviet geography by mutating/underlining the meaning of the term Eurasia -which is used contradictory to the West currently- to *Europeanized Asia*, to larger Middle East with an interpretation of “Mediterranean roots” including Islam to Judeo-Christian heritage. Finally, it can be argued that, the need for a new *telos* and the promise for a new *habitus* and *modus vivendi* -which all are the strongest sides for the West in the new rivalry- are probable and accomplishable with a discourse of civilizations. (In this framework, it can be argued that the German use of *Kultur* and even *Kulturkampf* would be the essence of the world in the short term.) Instead of the 19th century alliances based on *nationalisms* and *history* or the

20th century alliances based on *blocs* and *ideologies* -but including nationalism as well-;
21st century world can be founded on *civilizations* and *sociology* (maybe culturology or
anthropo-philosophy) -including ideological heritages and national sovereignties-. What
we should hope is that kind of configuration of world politics would bring a more peaceful
and stable system and would not remind us Bauman's view on fascism that it was a natural
and compulsory result of modernity itself.