



European  
University  
Institute

MAX WEBER  
PROGRAMME FOR  
POSTDOCTORAL  
STUDIES

MAX WEBER  
LECTURE  
SERIES

MWP – 2016/01  
Max Weber Programme

Civilizations, Anglo-America and Balances of Practice  
and Power

Peter J. Katzenstein



European University Institute  
**Max Weber Programme**

**Civilizations, Anglo-America and Balances of Practice and Power**

Peter J. Katzenstein

Max Weber Lecture No. 2016/01

This text may be downloaded for personal research purposes only. Any additional reproduction for other purposes, whether in hard copy or electronically, requires the consent of the author(s), editor(s). If cited or quoted, reference should be made to the full name of the author(s), editor(s), the title, the working paper or other series, the year, and the publisher.

ISSN 1830-7736

© Peter J. Katzenstein, 2016

Printed in Italy  
European University Institute  
Badia Fiesolana  
I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)  
Italy  
[www.eui.eu](http://www.eui.eu)  
[cadmus.eui.eu](http://cadmus.eui.eu)

**Abstract**

Civilizations imbue contemporary world politics with pluralism, plurality and multiplicities that must be central in our analyses. Anglo-America and other civilizational communities encompassing nation-states are marked by balances of practice and power in areas as diverse as law, popular culture and finance. They point to a future full of surprises and contaminated cosmopolitanisms rather than recurrent realist and liberal sameness.

**Keywords**

Civilizations, pluralism, Anglo-America, practice and power, clash of civilizations, Huntington

*The lecture was delivered on 9 December 2015.*

*Peter J. Katzenstein  
Cornell University*



## **Introduction**

Civilization is a musty concept. Colleagues with leftist inclinations have urged me to get rid of it altogether, either by inventing a new concept or leaving the cultural complex it characterizes unnamed. They object to the concept's historical association with imperialism, sexism, racism and other bad things in life. The freshmen students I teach in my Introduction to International Relations beg to differ. At the end of the semester I always ask them to rate the best three course readings from among the sixty-odd that I assign. Unfailingly, Huntington's 'Clash of Civilization' article ranks among the top three. It is of course possible that my students welcome the opportunity to get back at their teacher who respectfully, but strongly, disagrees with Huntington in lecture and in an excerpt from one of his articles that is paired with Huntington's article. But I do not think so. For the reading preferences of my students resonate with that of the broader reading public. Huntington's book by the same title was translated into 39 languages and is arguably the most important work in international relations published since the end of the Cold War.

On this particular point, choosing between the advice of faculty and freshmen is simple, at least for me. I follow the advice of my freshmen who give voice to sweet common sense. As for the faculty – I have offered each and every one of my learned critics a bet that no one who objects to the concept of civilization has accepted to date. I tell them to choose their favourite subject matter in teaching or research and compare it to the frequency with which 'East' and 'West' are invoked on the front page of any of the major newspapers of the world for any given week, month, or year. The conventional way of mapping the world in reductionist civilizational categories is deeply engrained – in Cairo and Paris, Beirut and Beijing, New York and Brussels.

Invoked in the title of this lecture, Anglo-America offers one specific way of thinking about the West. This more specific terminology has the advantage of referring to two successful empires that have not lost a major war during the last 300 years. Anglo-America is worth examining because it affords us an opportunity to look at the balance of practices that have made it so successful well beyond balance of power politics.

This talk has three parts. First, I will elaborate on the conceptual approach that I have chosen for understanding civilizational politics. Second, I apply that approach to Anglo-America. Third, I discuss balances of practices and power that characterize three domains of contemporary world politics. I conclude with one general observation.

## **Civilizations**

The most important book published in international relations since the end of the Cold War has been Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*. It has resonated deeply with readers around the world while also being criticized severely from all angles. Sam was neither a teacher or colleague of mine. But we respected each other. When I began to write on civilizational politics, he was already very ill and unable to engage the work. I dedicated the second volume of a trilogy on civilizational politics to Sam in the full knowledge that he would have disagreed as strongly with my approach as I do with his. Sharp disagreement in this case is paired with deep respect for a great scholar who has always succeeded in writing lucidly about important subjects throughout his career. In *The Clash* Sam was totally frank about his project. He wanted to shape his readers' views of the nature of world politics after the end of the Cold War. The book is wrong-headed, even dangerous. Yet I very much respect both its ambition and honesty.

*The Clash* rests on the assumption that civilizations are homogeneous crystallizations of values that motivate actions and that help explain events in the world. This essentialist view of civilizations is wrong and leads analysis astray. Like gender, race and other social categories *The Clash* is a

construction and a very idiosyncratic one at that. For the map of the different civilizations in *The Clash* is monochrome and depicts civilizations as existing apart from one another. On Huntington's map civilizations are internally united, and in their plurality constitute world politics. That pluralism makes it impossible to impose human rights or other values as liberals are inclined to do. Furthermore, the thin veneer that global modernity offers lacks the authenticity and compelling quality of civilizational attachments. People do not live and die for Lady Gaga or Gucci bags. They live and die instead for their civilizational attachments.

In contrast, I argue that civilizations are pluralist and heterogeneous, not unified and homogeneous. They are not defined by core values (the essentialist position of *The Clash*) but by multiple traditions that constitute them in rich diversities (as in different versions of Confucianism, Liberalism, or Islam). It is the internal disagreements that are most remarkable and noteworthy about civilizations – not the putative crystallization of values around a common core. Furthermore, while I agree with Huntington that this is a world of plural civilizations, I disagree with him on the irrelevance of global modernity. Civilizations do not exist side-by-side but are placed in a common context, in a global civilization of modernity. To overlook that placement is to overlook a central aspect of civilizational politics.

My disagreement with *The Clash* had grown slowly, over a period of more than a decade. But in the course of the project, a mere three years or so, I realized that the project was also engaging critically central precepts of cosmopolitan liberalism. That view holds, correctly, that civilizations are pluralist, internally divided into multiple traditions. But it denies that this is a world of plural civilizations. Instead cosmopolitan liberalism only recognizes the civilization of global modernity. And it insists that the core standards and values of that global civilization are those of cosmopolitan liberalism.

In brief, Huntington's cultural realism and cosmopolitan liberalism both offer deficient maps for navigating the complex territory of civilizational politics. Both are overly simple and overlook aspects of world politics that are absolutely central. We get purchase on civilizational politics only by insisting that civilizations are both plural and pluralist and that they evolve in the common context of one global civilization of modernity.

The concept of civilization complements globalization and internationalization as our preferred shorthand descriptions of contemporary world politics. Civilizational analysis is indispensable because it adds to these two sparse characterizations an important ingredient – contestation over different meanings as an important dimension of world politics. Globalisation is the preferred conceptualisation of sociologists who insist that global processes are reconfiguring identities, including state sovereignty and a number of competing and complementary social identities. Anthropologists insist on processes of localisation that combine the global with the local in new ways, thus helping to remake actor identities. Internationalisation is the preferred way for economists and political scientists to talk about the world in terms of the increasing density of exchanges of various sorts across national borders.

Thinking about world politics in terms of globalization and internationalization offers us a very sparse conception of politics, one not shared by the actors whose practices we seek to describe, explain, understand and interpret. Civilizational analysis adds to this sparseness the dimension of meaning with which actors imbue their practices. In short, globalisation and internationalisation operate in communities of meaning of which civilizations, including the global civilization of modernity, are the most encompassing ones.

How do we recognize a civilization? First, by its urbanity, language, literature, and religion broadly conceived, including secular religion. Secondly, by the fact that no civilization is self-contained. This was a central point in the writings of the founder of modern Islamic studies in America, Marshall Hodgson. William McNeil, author of *The Rise of the West*, a path breaking book published a generation before Huntington's, was a colleague of Hodgson's at the University of Chicago. In a dispassionate and magisterial review of his own work which he had published about 30 years earlier,



McNeill conceded that his book suffered from one central weakness. He had not heeded Hodgson's advice and placed the West into a larger context. Thirdly, civilizations do not act as they do throughout most of *The Clash*. They are contexts for practices. Civilizations are not a voice telling us what to do. They are town hall meetings in which we argue about our options. Even in moments of fear and panic, as after 9/11 or the 2015 Paris attacks, multiple traditions will give actors the material with which to fashion different arguments about what needs to be done. Finally, civilizations are inhabited by a multiplicity of actors: empires, states and governments, stateless politics, diasporas, multinational and transnational corporations, coalitions, groups, movements and individuals.

My conceptualization of civilizational politics reveals the common trope of East (in its incarnation of either a rising China or a jihadist Islam) clashing with West as a political construction and little more than a misleading caricature that impairs our understanding of world politics. Kipling's famous poem *The Ballad of East and West* invokes that trope in its much quoted first stanza: 'Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet, till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great judgement seat.' Less well known but more accurate is the poem's second stanza. 'But there is neither East nor West, border, nor breed, nor birth, when two strong men stand face to face, tho' they come from the ends of the earth!' The outcome of East meeting West is not reducible merely to clash. This truncated vision blinds us to many other outcomes that also deserve our attention – among them encounters and engagements that spawn a hybridization in the balance of practices.

### **Anglo-America**

Anglo-America is marked not by one liberal tradition as Huntington argues but, following Roger Smith, by multiple traditions – liberal, republican and racist. Since the argument developed in *The Clash* pitted 'us' against 'them', Huntington was often asked 'who are we'? Lacking a good answer, he offered one in his last book with the same title. For Huntington the answer rested on the difference between settler and immigrant. The United States is a country of settlers not immigrants. And settler identity was shaped by a Protestant creed that has moulded successive waves of immigrants. Huntington's creedal argument was fully congruent with his civilizational analysis. It posited a single tradition view of culture in which values crystallize around one uncontested core. This argument, however, failed to convince many of his readers. The original Protestant settlers held different creeds. And Blacks, Jews, Catholics, Latinos and other groups of immigrants do not think that they are shaped by and adhering to a Protestant creed. The argument was theoretically necessary but did not fit the facts.

Huntington's stipulation of the West as a singular entity encounters similar problems. Is it really true that there is only one West? Or do we invoke that term to reference numerous contexts? Anglo-America as the civilizational complex that encompasses both the British and the American empire is one manifestation of the West. But so are North America, the Americas and the Euro-American community organized around the North-Atlantic. Together with Washington, Chicago and San Francisco, Mexico City, Toronto, Rio and Buenos Aires, Brussels and Paris all have a rightful claim to be part of some version of the West.

The West differs across time as much as it does across space. What constituted the Anglo-sphere at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was empire, contested liberalism and race. What constitutes Anglo-America at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are complex sovereignties, contested liberalism and multiculturalism. Enormous changes have reshaped the contested values of the West over the span of only one century. The West can be reinvented because its empirical referent is changeable and its core values are unstable. What drives those instabilities are political victories and defeats, different political practices, and acts of forgetting and remembering.

The Anglo-American version of the West has a distinctive view of international relations that differs from the European version of the West. Because of the racial differences that the settlers encountered

when they reached 'New England' and, subsequently, other parts of the world, a community of race linking the settlers back to the metropole was marked by feelings of security while in their new societies the settlers encountered racial difference and insecurity. The international system approximated a Lockean security community, the domestic system Hobbesian anarchy. Across vast oceans the 'self' that existed in London was familiar; the 'other' watching from the edge of the beach where the settlers landed was not. This way of looking at the world differs dramatically from how we teach international relations to our students. In the Hobbesian view of an anarchic world the 'external other' confronts the 'internal self' which is united by religion and nationalism.

The evolution and growth of Anglo America beyond the English-speaking people relied on military conquest, market penetration and cultural insinuation. The two leading Anglo-American powers have not lost a big war in more than 300 years. They have marshalled military power, sometimes on an enormous scale. They have never ceased to press for a lowering of barriers to facilitate international exchanges of all sorts. And they have mobilized their very considerable cultural resources to attract others, including former enemies. Post-World War II Germany and Japan offer fascinating case studies of how these different processes have worked mostly in parallel, sometimes at cross-purpose. And yet, despite momentous changes, Germans remain German and Japanese remain Japanese, thus illustrating the capacious looseness and decentralization of the political orders that are organized within and around Anglo-American civilization. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century China, global Islam, and perhaps Russia, will provide new tests for the political capacities of Anglo-America to both shape and adapt to new contours of world politics.

At any given moment in history it is easy to underestimate the dynamism of Anglo-America, the military prowess of its polities, the competitiveness of its economies, and the cultural attraction that mark its societies. To be sure, Anglo-America can provide the context for the actions of the United States as a traditional empire, for example in its numerous interventions in the Middle East. And when it does, Anglo-America ends up being despised, even hated. But Anglo-America can also provide the context for America as a white, untested brand, a subversively incitement of the imagination that asks 'if there, why not here'? That America impressed Columbus when, in a letter addressed to the Spanish king, he mixed sex and religion in one pregnant image that likened America to a 'ripe pear with its nipple pointing to heaven'. And that America impressed a disbelieving world when it voted for Barak Obama as the first African-American President of the United States in 2008.

### **Balances of Practice and Power**

Balances of practice and power offer an instructive way of looking at civilizational communities and the context they provide for actors who encounter, engage or clash with one another in world politics. These practices entail two kinds of power not captured by our conventional understandings of that term. Control power works through coercion, institutions or structures; protean power through acquiescence, resistance and innovation. Civilizations provide the context for the shifting balance of control and protean power embodied in different practices.

Law offers ready illustrations. The growth of a transnational epistemic legal community around insights generated by the law and economics perspective has created new legal and political possibilities, for example in the field of international commercial arbitration. For many decades a compromise-oriented and justice-dominated European approach to arbitration was left in the hands of European law professors. In the 1970s American lawyers proposed a set of practices informed more by the American adversarial process and litigational style that, they claimed, would be more efficient and effective. Within a couple of decades Europeans had come around to the American point of view. Arbitration practices changed significantly.

A second example points in a different direction. Half a century ago American constitutional law was the global trend-setter. No longer. American courts have become increasingly isolated, self-absorbed

and uninterested in the evolution of constitutional practices in the rest of the world. The cutting edge in the global evolution of constitutional law in recent decades has been South Africa.

Furthermore, Europe plays a privileged part in the increasing judicialization of global politics. Important aspects of international law circulate primarily around a European node. The legally binding liberalization of global financial markets, as Rawi Abdelal has shown, is the result of European rather than American demands and practices. And so are various innovations in the area of human rights law.

In short, legal innovation clusters around different nodes, takes many different forms, and opens the door to a legal syncretism operating on a global scale. Scoring Anglo-American successes and failures in such a polycentric system of innovation and adaptation yields mixed results. Striking failure over many decades in the export of the rule of law, a mixed record in democracy promotion, and success in many areas of private law indicate both variegated balances of practice and shifting balances of control and protean power.

The movie industry illustrates similar dynamics. Big blockbuster sequels like Star Wars aside, the movie business is highly unpredictable. Studios do not know which movies will make money and which will not. In fact the movie business is as unpredictable as the stock market. Consumers are volatile and have distinct tastes that Hollywood producers have enormous difficulties gauging accurately. By most measures Hollywood dominates global markets and yet it lacks conspicuously in controlling fickle consumers under the best of circumstances, in cultural contexts the industry understands. In different cultural contexts the industry faces an even more daunting task. Nobody, for example, predicted the rise of Nollywood, the Nigerian movie industry. Since the early 1990s it has become one of the most important and vibrant sectors of the Nigerian economy otherwise marked by corruption and inefficiency. This is a story of innovation at the margin not control from the center. Yet protean power always interacts with control power. The digital revolution that made Nollywood possible is also being explored intensively in Hollywood which will surely put that innovation to its own best advantage.

Finance offers a third example. Frank Knight in 1921 and John Maynard Keynes in 1921 and 1937 drew a sharp distinction between risk and uncertainty, the world of probabilities and the world of possibilities. The real world mixes elements of both to different degrees in different situations. It is a dangerous conceit of some of the social sciences to assume that the world is only risk-based and thus fully susceptible to risk-based models. Those models proved to be disastrously wrong in 2008. One study reports the error rates of Collateralized Debt Obligations of the mortgage market to have ranged between 10,000 and 35,000 percent. The models were in fact not designed to control unpredictable events in a world marked by both risk and uncertainty. Instead they were conventions signalling to all that the housing market was sound and under control – when in fact it was not. Successful hedge fund managers, like George Soros, developed self-reflexive models of the financial system that took into account not only factors in the risk-based real economy, such as specific macro-economic data, but also factors in the world of uncertainty, such as the behaviour of money managers. These managers take account of the fact that many of the curves depicting financial aggregates do not resemble a normal, Gaussian distribution. In so doing they acknowledge the interaction between control and protean power in the manifold financial practices that mark contemporary markets.

## **Conclusion**

Let me conclude by clarifying the basic point of this talk. There are two kinds of arguments in the social sciences. The first kind seeks to clinch an argument in the vein of a scientific proof that is fully tested against specific facts. Many readers of Huntington's book look to specific big events to argue for or against *The Clash*. Supporters of Huntington, for example, point to 9/11 and ISIS as important evidence in support of the book's main thesis. Critics point instead to the absence of a clash between the West and Sinic civilization as similarly telling evidence that undercuts the book's main argument.

With two major predictions both proving and disproving Huntington we are left with a theory that is wrong half of the time, hardly a ringing endorsement of the clinching power of *The Clash*.

The second kind of argument seeks to vouch for an argument by sharpening our ability of pattern recognition. Despite all of our differences, Huntington and I share in one thing. We are seeking to vouch for rather than clinch an argument. Vouching and pattern recognition is providing us with a map for charting the terrain we need to cross. The map that I have sketched in this talk differs greatly from the one you find in *The Clash*. It is filled with more detail in a trilogy of books I have written together with the help of many co-authors – published under the titles *Civilizations in World Politics*, *Sinicization and the Rise of China*, and *Anglo-America and Its Discontents*. Rather than disprove the central argument of *The Clash*, this talk and the trilogy subsumes it as a special case while offering a map that illuminates other aspects of world politics that Huntington's analysis fails to account for.

The message *The Clash* conveys is wrong-headed and dangerous. For the very thing Huntington would like to prevent, the clash of civilizations, the assumptions and arguments of his book are doing much to promote. My intellectual disagreement with *The Clash* is therefore intellectual *and* political. This talk is a call to battle over the deployment of categories of analysis. Categories predetermine the shape of our arguments and the conclusions toward which they drive. Some scribblers, as Keynes reminded us long ago, create the categories from which grow the conventions that make the world natural so that it can be controlled. Contrary to Huntington's claim, *The Clash* did not introduce a new way of thinking about the world. It merely buffed up an old way with its many falsehoods and inaccuracies that has misled us, often disastrously, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this talk another scribbler is offering alternative categories to offer a more accurate map for understanding and navigating the world. In a nutshell, that was my purpose here, today. Thank you!

