

Alfred Skorupka*

ORCID: 0000-0002-0360-6564

Silesian University of Technology

What is the Identity of Western Civilization?

Co jest tożsamością zachodniej cywilizacji?

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Abstract

In the article, the author wonders what the identity of Western civilization is today. To answer this question, he analyzes the views of, among others, Fernand Braudel, Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama. The conclusions of the paper say that the identity of the West consists of Christianity, Western culture and democracy; however, the author states that this identity is something „ephemeral/ fleeting” both in relation to individual nations and in the lives of the inhabitants of Europe and America.

Streszczenie

W artykule autor zastanawia się, co jest dzisiaj tożsamością cywilizacji zachodniej. Aby odpowiedzieć na to pytanie – analizuje poglądy m.in. Fernanda Braudela, Samuela Huntingtona i Francis Fukuyamy. W konkluzjach pracy jest powiedziane, że na tożsamość Zachodu składa się chrześcijaństwo, zachodnia kultura i demokracja. Jednak autor stwierdza, że ta tożsamość jest czymś „ulotnym” zarówno w odniesieniu do poszczególnych narodów, jak i w życiu mieszkańców Europy i Ameryki.

* Alfred Skorupka, dr; adiunkt w Katedrze Inżynierii Produkcji, Wydział Inżynierii Materiałowej, Politechnika Śląska; e-mail: alfskor@onet.pl.

Introduction

The concept of „Western civilization” appears quite often in political, historical, social and other discussions and articles, especially when it refers the states of Europe and America to other civilizations – Chinese, Orthodox, Indian or Islamic. Therefore, it is worth making a philosophical reflection on what this Western civilization is, what its identity is today – that is, what its characteristics are. It seems that the West is often spoken imprecisely – what the Democrats in the US say about it and the Republicans say it differently; in turn, in European countries there is also a dispute about what belongs to the essence of Western culture. A philosophical reflection on the notion of the West can clarify this problem for us.

By Western civilization in this work we mean the European Union, Great Britain, United States, Australia and New Zealand. However, it is debatable whether Latin American states should also be included in Western civilization; some researchers support this position, others are against it. We will not solve this problem in this article, because it is not its topic, but we will focus on the West understood as the countries of Western and Central Europe and the United States.

Classics of research on civilizations

In this section, we first briefly outline the views of Western civilization by the classics of civilization research – Oswald Spengler, Feliks Koneczny, Arnold Toynbee, and Fernand Braudel – and then comment on them.

Oswald Spengler (1880–1936), whose views on civilization are more poetic than scientific, argued that every great culture has its period of birth, flowering and death, and the West (Europe) is not the most important because other cultures are no less important from us¹. According to this German researcher, the youth of culture is a heroic, feudal and rural period when epics and great myths are created; while the maturity of culture is associated with urbanization and excessive intellectualization of life, when the bourgeoisie begins to dominate. War is supposed to be the basic means of making politics. During the decline of culture, i.e. the period of civilization, money becomes a political force, and its service is the press and parliamentarism. In civilization, there is a „reevaluation of all values.” According to Spengler, a fundamental element of Western morality

¹ Cf. O. Spengler, *Zmierzch Zachodu. Zarys morfologii historii uniwersalnej*, Warszawa 2001.

is the will to change and extend one's beliefs, which are treated as universal. According to this scholar, the West is at the stage of decline of civilization, the end of which is inevitable. However, one should not be pessimistic about this, but be optimistic and set himself „ambitious tasks”, which he saw especially for the German people. Although this researcher was not an ideologist of Nazism, his works contain some seeds of thinking characteristic of the supporters of Nazi Germany.

Feliks Koneczny (1862–1949) called the Western civilization the Latin civilization² and believed that its foundations were laid by the Catholic Church. The most important postulates that the Church formulates as a requirement for civilization life are: monogamous marriage until death, opposition to slavery, abolition of family revenge and the introduction of courts, and the independence of the Church from public authority. Latin civilization is not sacred, unlike, for example, the Indian civilization. According to Koneczny, only in our civilization are physical forces subordinated to spiritual forces; only here are nations formed and we have great respect for science, which is also lacking in other communities. Latin civilization, however, is to be threatened with „blends” with other civilizations, as a result of which it loses its identity. The threat is the Byzantine civilization (it is mainly a model of exercising power deriving from the Byzantine Empire, where religion is subordinated to the temporal power and bureaucracy), Turanian (including Russians and Mongols, where science is not valued) and Jewish. According to Koneczny, the development of civilization is related to the moral progress of people and nations, therefore the most important thing is religious ethics. This scholar was a conservative who negatively assessed the achievements of the Great French Revolution and democracy, and did not appreciate the impact of the industrial revolution on the life of societies.

Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975) defined civilizations as the smallest units of the study of history because dealing with objects of historical study that were smaller than them prevented a correct understanding of historical processes³. This scholar, similar to Koneczny's, emphasized the importance of Christian science for human life and the proper development of civilization. He opposed Spengler's thesis that the West was in danger of an inevitable collapse because he saw the powerful influence of Western society around the world. Toynbee is one of the radical critics of material progress, believing that the increase in the economic and political resilience of a community, which may manifest itself in its geographical

² Cf. F. Koneczny, *O wielości cywilizacji*, Kraków 1936.

³ Cf. A. Toynbee, *Studium historii*, Warszawa 2000.

expansion, is often a symptom of its decay. Material existence, devoid of deep spiritual content, is supposed to be very superficial and fragile. That is why man should always seek support in religion, and he saw nationalisms as a great threat to the stability of civilization.

Fernand Braudel (1902–1985) believed⁴ that the issue of freedom (liberty or privilege) was always the most frequent topic in European history; it is about the freedom of individual communities, e.g. the freedom of the peasants or the privileges of the townspeople. From the 15th century on, only strong modern states – monarchies – appeared in Europe. These states arise as a need to deal with the continent's constant wars. Freedom, meanwhile, is the ideal to be pursued in Europe. However, even the Great French Revolution would not be able to fully implement the ideals of freedom; anyway, it does not even happen today. Nevertheless, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of 1789 is a turning point because it is the foundation of European civilization. Christianity is also a fundamental element of European thought, even if one argues with it. European thought always exists in dialogue with Christianity, even though this dialogue is sometimes violent. We can see it in the example of humanism, which was a bold march towards the emancipation of man, aimed at improving and changing his fate. We can distinguish three types of humanism: the humanism of renaissance, the humanism of the Reformation, and the humanism of the French Revolution. In turn, exact sciences, medicine, biology, chemistry and physics are the common heritage of the whole of Europe, and not the property of its individual countries. On the other hand, he writes about the United States, among other things, that in America money has always been and remains the king, despite the fact that this country has freedom and democracy as symbols.

As for Koneczny's thesis that moral progress follows with the development of civilization, it is very controversial. It would be good for people to become more and more moral as history progresses. But the facts contradict it: the entire history of mankind up to the present day is a series of constant conflicts and wars. On the other hand, the moral progress of humanity (if it takes place at all) is very slow. Each new generation struggles to assimilate moral and ethical norms, as evidenced by the still high level of aggression and violence in societies.

Referring to Toynbee's critique of materialistic and consumerist culture, one can recall the research by Richard Layard⁵, who stated that in order for a person

⁴ Cf. F. Braudel, *Gramatyka cywilizacji*, Warszawa 2006.

⁵ R. Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Society*, London 2005; cited by: N.G. Mankiw, M.P. Taylor, *Makroekonomia*, Warszawa 2016, p. 30–34.

to feel happy, the following elements must be present in his life: social life, rest, sex, prayer or meditation, eating, exercise physical, watching TV and shopping; Other studies show that the following may be added to this list: level of education, health, marital status, income, professional status, personal aspirations and experiences related to the loss of loved ones. It follows that the amount of GDP of a given country affects the sense of the quality of life and happiness of its citizens. However, some question this kind of usefulness of GDP, pointing out that money and material goods are not the most important. Certainly, they are not the only factor that gives people a sense of satisfaction in life, but the higher the GDP, the more other goods can also be provided to people – e.g. better quality of education, good condition of the natural environment or health.

One must agree with Braudel that the central theme in the development of Western man's consciousness was, and in a sense still is, the problem of „freedom“. This issue led to the creation of a modern liberal democracy, which is a hallmark of the West. In other communities, people tend to have less freedom, and when certain civil liberties emerge, they are modeled on the model of Europe and America. For example, in Muslim countries women have far fewer rights than in the West; it is not just about the Afghanistan of the Taliban, because even in modern Saudi Arabia, women have only recently been able to drive a car. Many restrictions, for example in terms of clothing – also women in Iran, and in general in Muslim countries it is practically impossible to abandon Islam and become an atheist, which, in the light of Western law, is an unprecedented violation of human rights. In China, citizens also have less freedom than in Europe or America, for example, they are not allowed to openly and publicly criticize the government and the communist party. In addition, the PRC authorities use artificial intelligence to monitor what citizens do on the Internet, which judges their degree of credibility (i.e. whether they are „good citizens“). The low credibility of a PRC citizen may result in various repressions of the authorities against him, e.g. limiting his journeys by rail. In this way, the Chinese authorities somehow shape/ model society, in a sense – they „educate it“ in their own way, which we may not like, but in general it is in line with the Confucian philosophy, which for centuries has assumed that „the state is to educate citizens“.

Huntington and Fukuyama

We now turn to the views of two modern scholars – Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama. Samuel P. Huntington⁶ (1927–2008) lists the following characteristics of the West: Catholicism and Protestantism, European languages, separation of spiritual and temporal powers, the rule of law, social pluralism, representative bodies and individualism. He considers Latin America as a separate civilization, although of course culturally close to the West. He regards religion as the most important factor in any civilization; it also includes language, history, customs, social institutions and people's self-identification. Huntington argues that civilizations are cultural, not political, organisms, so they don't maintain order, establish justice, collect taxes, wage wars – only governments. According to the American researcher, we are currently witnessing a „clash of civilizations”, i.e. a rivalry between the weakening West (which for many centuries dominated the world politically and economically) and other communities, especially Chinese and Islamic ones. The main premise behind the hitherto dominance of the West were technical means – methods of navigation that made it possible to traverse the oceans, and military means that made the conquest of other countries easier. Huntington, referring to the model of periodization of the history of civilization by Carrol Quigley, claims that the present West is in the stage of a universal state, which is bound by democracy. It is hard to expect wars between the states of Europe and America; rather, the West focuses on economic development. However, civilizations begin to decline when they stop using the surplus for innovation, that is, they lose their „instrument of expansion” (as Quigley argued). In the West today, the investment rate is falling, a lot is consumed, and civilization is slowly entering a stage of decay. While the West is still prosperous, it has low rates of economic growth, savings and investment, especially compared to Asian countries. We also have a low birth rate, but immigration may be a salvation here. However, according to Huntington, the decline of the West could continue for many more centuries, because history does not make the difference. Moreover, possible close cooperation between the European Union and NAFTA could, for a long time, reverse its economic and political record for the benefit of the West.

Huntington refers to the model of periodization of the history of civilization formulated by Carrol Quigley⁷; this scientist showed that in the development of

⁶ Cf. S. P. Huntington, *Zderzenie cywilizacji i nowy kształt ładu światowego*, Warszawa 2011.

⁷ Por. C. Quigley, *The Evolution of Civilizations. An Introduction to Historical Analysis*, Indianapolis 1979.

any civilization the following stages can be distinguished: crossover (when two or more cultures join), gestation, expansion, age of conflict, universal state, decline and foreign invasion. A question can be asked: is this model still valid and adequate to current civilizations? It seems that this model describes the history of ancient civilizations (Roman, Maya or Inca) well, but does not fit well with modern times. It is unlikely that the great modern civilizations (Western, Chinese or Indian) will be in danger of decline and some „foreign invasions”. There are, in fact, very few great civilizations in the world, and rather they are not so much in danger of decline or annihilation, but various transformations. As a result of economic and political changes, including technical inventions in the world – modern civilizations are subject to numerous transformations – sometimes they are beneficial to them, and sometimes they are unfavorable. Some civilizations increase their influence, while the influence of other communities diminish. Today, however, no civilization is threatened by some „barbarians”, because there are no such societies in the world anymore. It is only „barbaric” that a country uses an atomic bomb, which, hopefully, will never happen again.

Francis Fukuyama (born 1953) in 1989 wrote the famous article *The End of History?* for the magazine „The National Interest”, in which he argued that the view of the superiority of liberal democracy over other regimes (monarchy, fascism, communism) wins. Liberal democracy is to express „the final phase of the ideological evolution of mankind”, be „the final form of government”, and thus it is to constitute the real, in the sense of Hegel – „the end of history”. While this thesis has gained great popularity, it has met with devastating criticism because it contradicts the facts of contemporary politics, such as authoritarianism in China and Russia, or religious fundamentalism in Muslim countries.

Although Fukuyama rarely uses the term „civilization,” he has also written two extensive books: *The Origins of Political Order. From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* and *Political Order and Political Decay. From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy*⁸, in which he explains the origins of political institutions in societies that today take them for granted; these three categories of institutions are: the state, the rule of law and the political responsibility of the authorities. There he argues that European societies were individualistic at an early stage in the sense that it was individuals, not their families, that made the important decisions about marriage, property and other personal matters.

⁸ Cf. F. Fukuyama, *Historia ładu politycznego. Od czasów przedludzkich do Rewolucji Francuskiej*, Poznań 2012 and F. Fukuyama, *Ład polityczny i polityczny regres. Od rewolucji przemysłowej do globalizacji demokracji*, Poznań 2015.

By contrast, states in Europe were a late product of societies in which individuals already enjoyed considerable freedom from social obligations to relatives. Therefore, in Europe, social development has preceded political development. This was largely the result of the teaching of the Catholic Church. This church respected the separation of spiritual and temporal powers, which paved the way for the emergence of a modern secular state. The rule of law began to emerge in Europe as early as the 12th century. A special case of the Western world is England, where all dimensions of political development have been successfully institutionalized: the state, the rule of law and political responsibility. Thanks to these three elements, which were present in different proportions in different European countries, the way was paved for a capitalist economy. In modern America, however, we observe, according to Fukuyama, the regression of many political institutions, which is not the same as the decline of America, because America's power has never been specifically in the government, but more so in the private sector of the economy.

Fukuyama's view of the alleged triumph of liberal democracy in the world is questioned by many scholars. For example, according to Katarzyna Dereń⁹, the United States and the EU will not succeed in introducing the model of Western democracy and respecting human rights in China, because China is the heir to a civilization that existed several thousand years earlier than the European states or the United States were founded. The Chinese are proud of this fact, they are also the most numerous nation. So they will not accept appeals for human rights from the states that humiliated China in the 19th and early 20th centuries and contributed to great crises. The Chinese are proud of their achievements; believe that they have created a unique model of statehood, significantly different from that adopted in Western countries, while achieving phenomenal economic growth. China is gaining more and more respect in the world and wants to lead its own way.

Other researchers indicate that democracy itself has many disadvantages, so it is certainly not an ideal system. For example, Wojciech Lamentowicz writes¹⁰ that we can distinguish the following four paradoxes of liberal democracy:

1. Shortening the time horizon limiting the strategic imagination of leaders and the social effectiveness of government. The fundamental principle of

⁹ K. Dereń, *Stosunki UE–Azja. Wzrost znaczenia Azji we współczesnym świecie*, [in:] *W kierunku azjatyckiego przywództwa*, ed. J. Marszałek-Kawa, Toruń 2012, p. 70; cited by: H. Chołaj, *Kapitalizm konfucjański. Chińskie reformy ekonomiczne a globalizacja*, Warszawa 2014, p. 118.

¹⁰ Cf. W. Lamentowicz, *Paradoksy liberalnej demokracji*, [in:] *Transformacje demokracji. Doświadczenia. Trendy. Turbulencje. Perspektywy*, ed. L.W. Zacher, Warszawa 2011, p. 45–63.

liberal democracy is freedom of choice and the rule of majority; this majority decides in elections. The election calendar (every four or five years), however, has its social costs, as it dictates the shortened time horizon of the ruling elite's decisions, subordinating them to the logic of the struggle for power, and not long-term goals, a permanent struggle for variable public support and cheap popularity. Thus, both economic markets and the peculiar political market are being theatrical. In this theater, playing symbols often replaces strategic challenges, and key issues of socio-economic development are lost when dealing with tertiary issues. Strategic reason is seldom rewarded by the public; rather, politicians are rewarded for expressions and gestures rather than for thoughts and actions.

2. Peculiar mechanisms of the destruction of the normative power of law through its instrumentalization.

Of the three main strategies for doing politics in a democracy (conservative, reformist, and revolutionary), none usually achieves its goals:

- conservative players instead of stabilizing the structure – they often create bureaucracy and an anarchy following it that destabilizes the structure.
- reformers, rather than using law to change social relations, often end up using the law as a tool to consolidate their power.
- revolutionists often fall into the trap of a double nihilism of law and tradition; because they have a negative attitude towards the past law, but also do not respect their new law, although they brutally enforce it.

3. A high risk of oligarchization of public and private authorities causing crises in the legitimacy of formally democratic authority.

The oligarchization of power is the process of transformation of the ruling group into an elite that closes itself off from new people, isolates itself from the rest of society and often alienates itself to such an extent that it loses the ability to care for public interests and the common good, because it is concerned only with the particular interests of the most economically powerful groups and / or culturally dominant. R. Michels proves that in every party an oligarchic elite of leaders must arise, even when democratic principles are formally guaranteed there. The process of power oligarchization is particularly present in totalitarian and authoritarian dictatorships.

4. The paradox of armed protection of human rights.

There is a contradiction between the protection of human rights and the integrity of the state (where these rights must be demanded by force). The paradox is as follows:

- International protection of human rights is the goal of Western countries, as well as the explanation for the use of armed forces outside their territory.
- Human rights undermine the legal protection of the sovereignty of states where these rights are violated.
- Violation of the legal principle of state sovereignty weakens the authority of international law.
- In this way, by protecting human rights through military interventions, the authority of international law is being undermined.
- The conflict of values and legal principles is therefore clear, and its source lies in the radical interpretation of liberal-democratic ideas treated as universally important for every state.

The West in a globalized world

In our work, we will briefly recall the views of the West in this subsection – by Benjamin Barber, Niall Ferguson and Zbigniew Brzeziński. Benjamin Barber (born 1939) put forward the thesis¹¹ that in the modern world we see a confrontation between the so-called Jihad and McWorld. Jihad means the return of humanity to local, almost tribal groups, fundamentalisms (not only Islamic) and nationalisms. On the other hand, McWorld is a process of globalization, i.e. the unification of countries in terms of culture, technology, law, strengthening cooperation and dependence between them. This concept can be interpreted in such a way that, on the one hand, bloody feuds between states and communities (jihad) are intensifying, and on the other hand, the world seeks to create one global civilization (McWorld). According to Barber, both of these processes undermine democracy.

Niall Ferguson (born 1964) claims¹² that the West ruled the rest of the world for centuries because it developed six „killer applications” (in computer science speaking), and they are as follows:

1. Rivalry – Europe was politically fragmented and individual countries were constantly competing with each other, which favors innovation.
2. Scientific revolution – the most important discoveries in mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry and biology were made in Western Europe and were able to use them for themselves.

¹¹ Cf. B.R. Barber, *Dżihad kontra McŚwiat*, Warszawa 2001.

¹² Cf. N. Ferguson, *Cywilizacja. Zachód i reszta świata*, Kraków 2013.

3. Rule of law and representative government – the best social and legal order has emerged in the English-speaking world, for example, the attitude towards private property.
4. Modern medicine – Europeans were at the forefront in inventing drugs and vaccines against various diseases.
5. Consumer society – resulted from the industrial revolution.
6. Work ethic – in the West, efficient work has been combined with greater savings, which has allowed for the sustained accumulation of capital.

According to Ferguson, the position of Western civilization is weaker today than it used to be, and it continues to weaken as other civilizations have started to „download these six applications”, and as a result are catching up with the countries of Europe and America, and even better in some ways.

Zbigniew Brzeziński (1928–2017) writes¹³ that in the modern world we observe a shift of the center of gravity of the world from the West to the East, the increasingly faster political awakening of humanity and the insufficiently efficient functioning of the United States since it became the only superpower in 1990. This scholar also writes about „the twilight of the American dream”; namely, for many years the USA was attractive to many people because it combined materialism with idealism. Today, however, we can distinguish the following problems of this country: public debt, a flawed financial system, increasing social inequalities, decaying infrastructure, ignorance in society (i.e. low levels of education in US schools), and a stalemate on the political scene (i.e. a highly polarized political system). In turn, the American strengths are: general economic strength, innovative potential, geographical dynamics, reactive mobilization (i.e. that Americans are able to unite in the same way as, for example, after the attack on Pearl Harbor), the geographical base and the attractiveness of democracy. According to Brzeziński, China is still unable to take global responsibility for the world, therefore the weakening of the United States can only cause crises and chaos in the world. Among China's problems, he lists: the gap between the rich and the poor, the dissatisfaction of the urban population and the possibility of riots, a high level of corruption, unemployment and the loss of social trust. As for the European Union, it is still an unfinished project.

Brzezinski is certainly right when he writes that the center of gravity in politics has now shifted from West to East – to Asia, and in particular to China. Huntington already wrote that „China is the greatest player in the history of

¹³ Cf. Z. Brzeziński, *Strategiczna wizja. Ameryka a kryzys globalnej potęgi*, Kraków 2013.

mankind.” A particular example of China’s economic expansion is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The aim of the initiative is to promote economic cooperation through infrastructure connections (construction of highways, railways and bridges), lead to joint development and close economic cooperation between the PRC, Asia and Europe. According to Xi Jinping’s assurances, the Belt and Road Initiative is to serve all countries, but in practice it is primarily to strengthen the position of the PRC. China is now almost „colonizing” Africa in such a way that the poor African states make them dependent on each other with various credits, which is followed by their political influence (they try to do the same in Latin America). Some economists accuse China of subordinating economic development to the interests of the state and not to the rules of the market economy.

Conclusions

Huntington wrote that civilizations are not political entities, but cultural organisms. Therefore, it should be said that civilization has a humanistic and social dimension. With such a civilization, the identity of the West can be defined by three elements:

1. Christianity – in this religion the „roots” of the West rest in the sense that for centuries its teaching was a reference for the people of Europe and America. Thus, the gospel, the history of the Chosen People, the teachings of the Catholic Church, and various branches of Protestantism are well-known here. Throughout the centuries, Christianity has shaped and continues to shape the basic ways of thinking of Westerners through its teaching.
2. Culture – the West stands out from other civilizations with its specific culture, which is perceived in history through the epochs of antiquity (where the foundations of the West lie), the Middle Ages (where the proper emergence of Western countries took place) and modern times. An important factor uniting the West is the common history of its peoples, although obviously differently understood (e.g. the Spanish look at the discovery of America differently from the English; Napoleon is perceived differently by the French and differently by the Germans). The broadly understood culture of the West also includes science (and the technology that goes hand in hand with it), which, although spread all over the world, comes from Europe and America, especially with its requirements of rationalism and empiricism.

3. Democracy – that is the rule of law, the division into legislative, executive and judiciary power, free elections, freedom of thought and expression, and human rights. Democracy usually goes hand in hand with the capitalist economy, although in different Western countries it takes on a different „color” (e.g. in some countries there is more interventionism in the economy, while others are more „protective” towards their citizens).

These three elements seem crucial to Western identity. But it must be remembered that as a result of the rapid changes in the modern world (the development of education, the Internet, travel) – all these three elements are manifested to a different degree in individuals in their lives, as well as in the scale of individual countries. For example, someone can learn Chinese very well, so even though he is English, he also feels very sympathetic to China. Christianity, of course, does not exhaust all the world-view options of modern man, because we have, for example, in various Western countries – strong atheistic attitudes, Buddhism or various philosophical schools. Finally, we have many immigrants in the West (from China, India, Africa) who, with their presence, also give a new „character” to Western countries. Thus, “the concept of civilization, or rather a sense of attachment to Western civilization, is «ephemeral» – that is, different for different nations at different historical periods, and often also different for individual people at different times in their lives”.

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