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# Why is Kwame Anthony Appiah's proposal to dismiss the concept of "The West" premature?

**Abstract.** This paper is a response to Kwame A. Appiah's article "There is no such thing as western civilisation" published in *The Guardian* of 9 November 2016. Appiah's proposal to dismiss the term 'western civilisation' seems premature since it is strongly established in the humanities and social sciences. Discussing selected models representing systems of civilisations (Spengler, Koneczny, Toynbee, Huntington) as well as Fernand Braudel's concept of *longue durée* history, this paper demonstrates the importance of the term 'western civilisation' in academic and political discourses. Moreover, referring to post-colonial studies, it is impossible to avoid the term because without it, any discussion on the colonial and post-colonial reality would be devoid of substance.

**Keywords:** the west, western culture, western civilisation, civilisation, term.

## Introduction

The terms "western culture", "western world" or just "the west"<sup>9</sup> are often intuitively accepted without much consideration. "The west" is taken for granted, even though the connotations it evokes may result in a large spectrum of emotions: from pride and admiration to bitter criticism and even outrage. Surprisingly, it is not easy to find a clear definition of the term. Even studies dedicated to the western civilisation evade concise definitions, instead informing readers how to understand the concept. An attempt at such a brief clarification has been made by Gregory S. Brown:

What do we mean by "the West"? Though the West is defined primarily by its physical borders, the term denotes more than a geographical location. For our purposes, the West refers to the peoples and territories of Europe and the lands of the Americas and antipodes (i.e., Australia and New Zealand) settled by Europeans. The territorial heart of the West comprises those lands west of the Ural Mountains (which are traditionally considered the dividing line between Europe and Asia), and the area extending from

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<sup>9</sup> Throughout the article the terms "west" and "western" are not capitalized, in accordance with Appiah's spelling, except quotations of other authors.

Norway in the north to the southern tip of Spain, and to the Turkish border in the southeast. The West generally corresponds to what was once called Christendom. (Brown online n.p.)

Brown emphasises that the west does not only refer to “the peoples and the territories” but it is also “a cultural concept”, comprising a set of values which have developed over the centuries. The cultural elements of the west which he identifies include:

monotheism – the belief in one god, the basis of the Judeo-Christian Tradition (although other major non-Western religions, such as Islam, are also monotheistic)

separation of political and spiritual authority – often called the separation of Church and State

empirical investigation and mathematical explanation of the material world, formerly known as “natural philosophy,” now referred to as “science”

confidence in the capacity of science and technology to transform the human environment, and a general belief in progress based on rational thought (though this confidence has been qualified in recent years by the increasing evidence of human-caused damage to the environment)

respect for human rights, such as freedom of worship, freedom of expression, and the rule of law (although these rights were extended slowly to different segments of the population)

codification of political rights, such as the right to enjoy representative government, freedom of assembly, equality before the law, and the right to vote (although these were also gradually accorded to minorities, women, people of color, and the landless)

a high value on the sanctity of private life, family, and free economic activity, observable in the right to freely accumulate and transfer property without intrusive regulation by political authorities. (Brown online n.p.)

Brown notes that these values developed gradually, in different historical periods. “For example, faith in science emerged in the 17th century, the emphasis on tolerance only in some countries in the 17th century, the idea of human rights and rights of privacy in the 18th century, and the belief in progress and universal political rights not until the 19th century” (Brown online n.p.). The west is, thus, a historical and cultural construct.

The term “western civilisation” is so rooted in the language of present day humanities that hardly anyone sees controversy in, for example, the 9th edition of Jackson J. Spielvogel’s *Western Civilization: A Brief History* (2015), or in several other books with “western civilization” in the title. Arthur Hertzberg and other authors of the entry on Judaism in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2017) discuss “Western philosophy”, “Western Europe”, “Western education” and “Western culture” with no attempt to define them. Moreover, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* itself has no such entry as “the west” or “western civilisation”. Bearing in mind the established status of the term which seems so obvious that hardly anyone has bothered to fully define it, Appiah’s proposal of its cessation, appears both thought-provoking and controversial.

Kwame Anthony Appiah (born in London, 1954) is a Professor of Philosophy and Law at New York University, Laurance S. Rockefeller University Professor of Philosophy, the University Center for Human Values Emeritus at Princeton University, and an Honorary Fellow of Clare College at the University of Cambridge. His wide interests include such fields as the philosophy of language

and African and African-American literary and cultural studies. Among his publications is *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006), where, among other things, he attempts to propose the ways to reconcile respect for cultural differences with the condemnation of atrocious social practices. In October and November 2017, the BBC will broadcast a series of lectures given by Appiah, entitled “Mistaken Identities” ([www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles)), which illustrate his most recent area of research.

In his article “There is no such thing as western civilisation”, which is an edited version of his BBC Reith lecture recently published in *The Guardian* (9 Nov 2016), Appiah posits the elimination of the term “western civilisation” from public discourse. Notwithstanding the ideological purpose behind this proposal, its implementation seems highly challenging, if feasible at all, since, as a term taken from geography, it must recur whenever that part of Europe is mentioned, or when Europe is perceived from the perspective of Asia. Moreover, this geographic concept is so strongly embedded in academic discourse of history and social sciences, that eliminating it would result in a considerable terminological problem.

Appiah is not the only author who doubts in the validity of “the west” as an intellectual concept. Even those American academicians who teach courses on western civilization seem far from treating it as a concrete entity and a source of identity. On the contrary, many of them underscore the fluidity of the concept. For example, Peter N. Stearns in the conclusion of his *Western Civilization in World History* (2003) asserts:

We need active comparisons, a sense of how global forces and contacts have shaped the West, rather than the West in isolated glory or seen as an independent agent in world affairs. The challenge, in terms of new curricula and new teaching combinations, is exciting. (Stearns 2003: 133)

On the other hand, in his article “What is Western Civilization?” Laurence Birken, critically reviews several proposals of the concept, opting for that reduced to the geographic western Europe and dismissing ancient Greece and Rome (Birken 1992: 453). However, no critic went so far as to dismiss the term itself. For this reason, Appiah’s text has been singled out as the most radical and controversial.

The objective of this article is to discuss Appiah’s criticism of the very concept of “western civilisation”, especially the points which may evoke certain controversies. Being a commonplace term used by historians, sociologists, anthropologists of culture and politicians, and understood practically all over the world, “the west” and its culture or civilisation causes surprisingly little confusion whenever used in academic, political and popular texts. Philosophers of history as well as historians employ the term as a mental shortcut for a complex set of phenomena and factors. Defining its components has never been easy, but hardly anyone, either apologists or adversaries of the political, economic and cultural forces known as “the west”, have ever considered the term problematic. As a working term, it has played a very useful role in several areas, such as sociology and several types of history: political, economic and cultural.

The ideological and, consequently, political purpose of Appiah's proposal seems clear: believing in "the west" implies its superiority, which is ethically unacceptable, and as such should be eradicated as the source of its evil implications. Instead, he suggests thinking in terms of universal human civilisation. However noble and recommendable his idea might be, at the moment, for several reasons, it will be demonstrated why it seems impossible to implement.

In section 3 of the article, I shall briefly discuss certain issues the term "western civilisation" caused, including models proposed by Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee, Feliks Konieczny and Samuel Huntington. Moreover, section 5 will present a call for the term in studies of international relations, where it has not apparently been used so far. I shall attempt to dismiss them as insufficiently grounded. Afterwards, however, I shall refer to the position partly based on the approach of the French historians grouped in the well-known Annales School, particularly on Fernand Braudel's theory of *longue durée*, which provides serious arguments for retaining the term "western civilisation".<sup>10</sup> The last part of the article will contain my own observations on the working utility of the concept.

### **A problem with definition: geography, culture, politics**

In his article "There is no such thing as western civilisation", Appiah commenced his criticism of the very concept of western civilisation with a short outline of two different ideas of culture proposed by two British 19th-century authors, Edward Burnett Tylor and Matthew Arnold. Whereas for the latter, culture was the "pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world", Tylor understood it as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Appiah 2016 online n.p.). Appiah observes that nowadays these two antagonistic approaches are unthinkingly combined into one idea of civilisation that would have occurred to neither Tylor nor Arnold and proposes "to untangle some of our confusions ... of what we have come to call the west" (Appiah 2016 online n.p.).

It is important to note that for Appiah, the mutual exclusivity of the definitions of civilisation is a sufficient reason for eliminating the term "western civilisation". He seems to disregard any possible other proposals. In fact, it is difficult to find evidence that those who discuss civilisations or use the concept of "the west" ever refer to Tylor or Arnold.

### **Geographic confusion**

Furthermore, the author of "There is no such thing as western civilisation" points out that as a geographical term, "the west" seems really confusing since it is used for different purposes. He

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<sup>10</sup> The Annales School was a group of French historians who emphasized long-term social history. The name of the group comes from the academic journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* founded by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre in 1929. Since 1994 it has been issued as *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*. One of the prominent representatives of the Annales School was Fernand Braudel (1902-85).

lists such usages of the expression as Rudyard Kipling's opposition of Europe and Asia ("east is east and west is west, and never the twain shall meet"); NATO versus the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War, where the former was a synonym of democracy and freedom as inherent 'western' values, whereas the other parts of the world seemed irrelevant; and the latest sense of the term, which includes Europe, the United States and Canada. All other parts of the world are treated as "the global south" regardless of the European origins of South American societies. Simultaneously, in such countries as Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, 'western' "can look simply like a euphemism for white" (Appiah 2016 online n.p.).

Appiah then goes on to analyse the sources of the European sense of uniqueness in order to point out further inconsistencies in the concept of Western civilisation. Herodotus, for example, distinguished three continents: Europe, Asia and Libya (Africa). His division had no societal implications since the Greeks dwelled in both Europe and Asia. The ancient Greeks and Romans could use the term 'European' as an adjective and not a noun with a cultural reference (Appiah 2016 online n.p.). In the Dark and Middle Ages, the term "European" appeared as an opposition to the world of Islam, even though when Charles Martel stopped the Arab conquest of western Europe in 732 CE, most of Europe had yet to be converted to Christianity. However, scholars did not use the expression "west" because parts of western Europe (Spain) remained under the control of Muslim rulers.

Islam, in the form of the Ottoman Empire, also annexed vast tracts of Eastern and Central Europe. Its expansion was stopped in 1683 at the battle of Vienna. At that time, the fragile European unity was built around the opposition Islam-Christianity (Appiah 2016 online n.p.). It is worth noting that this European unity was psychological rather than real, since the siege of Vienna was both preceded and followed by a series of wars within the world of Christian powers. Appiah's assertion that "the move from 'Christendom' to 'western culture' isn't straightforward" seems difficult to rebut. On the other hand, the presence of such a category as culture or civilisation manifests in conflicts, where differences between the enemies are not only emphasised but also constructed. Even though in practice the European unity based on Christianity never worked, it was present in the declaratory language of politicians and diplomats building the Holy League in 1571 and the Holy Alliance in 1815.

Another point Appiah makes concerns the role of ancient Greek and Roman inheritance treated by influential European philosophers (e.g. Hegel) as the core of civilization, "a precious golden nugget", as Appiah (2016 online n.p.) likes to call it. Here, he observes that during the collapse of ancient thought in western Europe, it was the Arab Muslims who preserved the ideas of the Greeks, especially those of Aristotle, whose status in philosophy was restored due to Ibn Rushd, the Arab scholar born in Muslim Spain in the 12th century, and better known in Christian Europe as Averroes (Appiah 2016 online n.p.).

Appiah points out the weakness of the idea of an essence of culture/civilization on the grounds that any set of qualities changes dramatically over time and no essence can be traced to have passed through the centuries.

What was England like in the days of Chaucer, father of English literature, who died more than 600 years ago? Take whatever you think was distinctive of it, whatever combination of customs, ideas, and material things that made England characteristically England then. Whatever you choose to distinguish Englishness now, it isn't going to be that. Rather, as time rolls on, each generation inherits the label from an earlier one: and, in each generation, the label comes with a legacy. But as the legacies are lost or exchanged for other treasures, the label keeps moving on... Identities can be held together by narratives, in short, without essences. You don't get to be called "English" because there's an essence that this label follows; you're English because our rules determine that you are entitled to the label by being somehow connected with a place called England. (Appiah 2016 online n.p.)

In this way, Appiah actually demonstrates the impossibility of any collective identity, especially an identity that seems to survive over long periods of time. A similar deconstruction of a collective identity can be found in, for example, Shlomo Sand's controversial book *The Invention of the Jewish People* (2009), where the author denies the historical continuity of the Jewish ethnos. Such an operation is possible with reference to any nation, ethnic group or even local community. The problem lies in the fact that the mental constructs of identity are, for so many people, essential and thus resilient.

Appiah is certainly right in claiming that "the very idea of 'the west,' to name a heritage and object of study, doesn't really emerge until the 1890s, during a heated era of imperialism, and gains broader currency only in the 20th century" (Appiah 2016 online n.p.). He also cogently observes that Oswald Spengler, one of the first philosophers of history, refused to value the idea of a direct continuity between the ancient Hellenic and Latin cultures and his contemporary western "Faustian" civilization (Spengler 1926: 78). Unlike the former, the civilisation reduced to geographic western Europe is characterised by "a type of Faustian personality overflowing with expansive, disruptive, and imaginative impulses manifested in all the spheres of life". Moreover, "[t]he expansionist dispositions of Europeans were not only indispensable but were themselves driven ... by an intensely felt desire to achieve great deeds and heroic immortality" (Duchesne 2014 online n.p.).

Appiah observes that the difficulties in finding an essence in the concept of "the west" also lie in political and cultural differences in the present day territory defined as such. For example, Franco's regime coexisted with liberal democracy for forty years, while 'non-western' countries, such as India and Japan, embraced democratic systems of government. Moreover, Appiah shows examples of hip-hop in Tokyo as well as the influence of Indian cuisine on the dining habits of British people. Thus, Appiah proposes to abandon organicism, which can be explained as follows:

Well, by fusing the Tylorian picture and the Arnoldian one, the realm of the everyday and the realm of the ideal. And the key to this was something that was already present in Tylor's work. Remember his famous definition: it began with culture as "that complex whole". What you're hearing is something we can call organicism. A vision of culture not as a loose assemblage of disparate fragments but as an organic unity, each component, like the organs in a body, carefully adapted to occupy a particular place, each part essential to the functioning of the whole. The Eurovision song contest, the cutouts of Matisse, the dialogues of Plato are all parts of a larger whole. As such, each is a holding in your cultural library, so to

speak, even if you have never personally checked it out. Even if it isn't your jam, it is still your heritage and possession. Organicism explained how our everyday selves could be dusted with gold (Appiah 2016 online n.p.).

Appiah's deconstruction of organicism does not explain much and actually cuts both ways. Thinkers looking for both deep structures behind the surrounding phenomena, as well as webs of connections between them, may easily fall prey to charlatanry or, on the contrary, reach conclusions of scientific value. Since in the humanities there is no universal meta-platform guaranteeing the truth, our only choice is confined to faith, intuition, common sense, critical thinking, or a certain combination thereof. Consequently, Appiah's proposal consisting in the existence of random phenomena, is as credible (or controversial) as the concept of closer interconnections between them.

The approach to such phenomena as civilisations depends on the distance of the observer. One person may compare the process of observation with perceiving a painting, while another may use the metaphor of constellations. The former will sooner or later realise that although close observation reveals nothing more than a great number of brush strokes, a certain perspective allows them to see shapes set in the intended order. The latter would see that the apparent order is just the optical illusion of the flat surface of the firmament, since the celestial bodies are scattered all over space, and their interrelations, if there are any, are of a completely different nature. Moreover, looking at the same picture, even from the same perspective may result in different visual effects.

## **The west in the mosaic of civilisations in theories of philosophers of history**

Discussing the legitimacy of the term "the western civilisation" it seems important to briefly review certain concepts of history as a mosaic of civilisations, which are born, develop and die. In the 20th century civilisations and their relations became a field of interest of several thinkers who proposed their concepts of cultures or civilisations and models in which they placed the west. The criticism they received resulted from their speculative nature, teleological approach to history and treating civilisations as ontological entities. However, their views still have their adherents and therefore in the discussion on the western civilisation, three are worth mentioning: Koneczny, Spengler and Toynbee. The first is interesting insofar as his model demonstrates that even in the conservative system of this 20th century philosopher of history, the geographic concept of the west was treated as accidental rather than essential, since he attributed the most important role in creating civilisations to religion, which is not geographically determined. The others, however, constructed models where the west has an established position on the map.

The Polish pre-war historian, Feliks Koneczny (1862-1949), treated civilisations not as rigid geographical entities, but as a certain set of values which may be distributed in a somewhat sophisticated way. His Latin civilisation generally overlaps the geographical west, but does not have anything to do with a particular race or territory (Koneczny 1962). Collective life embraced a wide

spectrum of components including law and its role in society and the position of a scholar in the community. The Latin civilization, according to him, was characterized by the role of western (Latin) Christianity, which embraced Roman Catholics and also Protestants. The clear distinction between private and public, as well as the priority of ethics before law, were the main qualities making it different from other civilizations. For example, Germany, according to Koneczny, adopted the Byzantine political mentality along with the marriage of Otto II to the Byzantine princess Theophano (Wise 2010: 223). He strongly believed that:

Nations in this meaning exist only, until now, within the sphere of the Latin civilisation, because only here have the conditions for their development been present. Even peoples of alien cultural spheres, which became embraced by the West and in consequence fell under the influence of the formative forces of Latin civilisation e.g. the Finns and the Hungarians—became nations.

A nation must as a cultural entity belong only to one civilisation; it cannot belong to two different civilisations (Koneczny 1962 online n.p.).

Koneczny was not the first thinker who attempted to discover mechanisms determining historical processes. One of the best known representatives of philosophy of history was Oswald Spengler, who expounded his pessimistic vision of the history of civilisations in *The Decline of the West: Form and Actuality* (1926).

The German philosopher of history Oswald Spengler (1880-1936) saw little connection between ancient Greek/Roman civilisation(s) and modern western civilisation. The British historian Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975), on the other hand, built an intricate system of civilisation structures where each element (particular national culture) played a similar, if not the same, role as a parallel culture did in another civilisation. Those ideas were based on a strongly teleological approach with an inevitable faith in progress, which has already been challenged and criticised (Iggers 1958). All of them have little empirical basis and are the results of the authors' personal convictions and prejudices which drew on and reinforced the fundamental tenets of the period in which they lived and wrote their texts.

Much as Toynbee's model of various civilisations, with their life cycles and the roles of smaller cultural entities within them, may be criticised, his analysis of the mutual relations between them shows that certain regularities can be observed not in the existence of ontological units called cultures but in the confrontations of people coming from different regions, for there are certain phenomena that manifest themselves in contexts. Encounters with other systems of values, other mindsets, as well as other approaches to structuring society and economy reveal differences which, as a result, determine definitions. Arnold Toynbee in his work *The Study of History* dedicated a considerable number of pages to encounters of western civilization with particular other cultures (Toynbee 1957: 151-187). If there were no significant differences, there would be nothing to discuss. Be it Peter the Great's Russia or Japan in the period of the Meiji restoration (after 1868), nobody can deny that the models those countries adopted came from western Europe and that they were considerably different from their original lifestyles and social structures.

## Appiah's proposal in the context of Said's *Orientalism* and Huntington's *The Clash of Civilisations*

The idea of mutually hostile civilisations was adopted by Samuel Huntington (1927-2008) in his article *The Clash of Civilisations* (1996) which he later extended into a book. Edward Said (1994), on the other hand, strongly opposed creating concepts antagonising inhabitants of different parts of the world. Discussing Appiah's suggestion of eliminating the term "the west" from public discourse, it is inevitable to refer to their approaches when conceptualising the conflict between "the west" and the Muslim world.

The most controversial part of Appiah's article "There is no such thing as western civilization" is the claim that having abandoned organicism we should also renounce the faith in any essence controlling our behaviour. Actually, there would be nothing strange with this statement if not for the example the author uses to illustrate this claim: "No Muslim essence stops the inhabitants of Dar al-Islam from taking up anything from western civilisation, including Christianity or democracy. No western essence is there to stop a *New Yorker* of any ancestry taking up Islam" (Appiah 2016 online n.p.). Appiah is right inasmuch as his renouncement of the 'essence' is simply a criticism of hypostatizing or taking an idea for an ontological entity. However, quite a large number of Muslim clergymen would be astonished at this easy permission to convert to Christianity or adopting the idea of liberal democracy, for although the 'essence' does not exist, it is enough that a group of the powerful believe in it and is able to impose this notion upon their followers.

Appiah mentions one of the fundamental concepts present in Islam since its beginning: *Dar ar-Islam* (the home of Islam) and *Dar al-Kufr* (the realm of the heathens). The latter did not, however, particularly embrace Europe or its western part, but everything outside the former. Nevertheless, in the 1980s the concept of the Christian west as the cradle of all the evil that afflicts the Muslim peoples, gained popularity and now is part of radical Islamist propaganda.

The Palestinian-American literary theorist Edward Said (1935-2003), in his "Afterword" to the 1994 version of *Orientalism*, rejecting the title concept as lectured by western academia, literature and politics, warned against developing an analogous approach to the west. In the conclusive paragraph of his milestone work he asserted:

I hope to have shown my reader that the answer to Orientalism is not Occidentalism. No former "Oriental" will be comforted by the thought that having been an Oriental himself he is likely – too likely – to study new "Orientals" – or "Occidentals" – of his own making. If the knowledge of Orientalism has any meaning, it is in being a reminder of the seductive degradation of knowledge, of any knowledge, anywhere, at any time. Now perhaps more than before (Said 1994: 328).

In this context Appiah's proposal does not seem new and it is hardly possible to challenge both his and Said's noble intention. In the same edition of *Orientalism*, after Samuel Huntington's article *The Clash of Civilisations* (but before the book of the same title was published), Said wrote:

... this was one of the implied messages of *Orientalism*, that any attempt to force cultures and peoples into separate and distinct breeds or essences exposes not only the misrepresentations and falsifications that ensue, but also the way in which understanding is complicit with the power to produce such things as the “Orient” or the “West” (Said 1994: 347).

Insofar as Said was right that the “Orient” included cultures as different as Arab, Indian, Chinese and Japanese, it should also be obvious that serious differences similarly occur between such cultures as German, French, Spanish, Italian and those which developed on the basis of the English language. However, no one can deny the fact that for thousands of years Chinese civilisation developed absolutely free from Greek and Roman cultural influence. It is also true that South Asia is home to several different languages and cultures. However much we would like to deny the existence of one Indian culture, as long as the Gujaratis want to feel an emotional-cultural connection with the Punjabis or inhabitants of Kerala, they should not be deprived of the right to this sentiment. It is also possible to refer this way of thinking to Europeans.

The ontological validity of collective identities may be challenged or even denied, but as long as humans feel an affinity for certain general concepts that give them a sense of belonging, such identities cannot simply be dismissed. The west is not just its “hard core”, which we can understand as the old colonial powers. It has also peripheries, where the affiliation to “western civilisation” is of the highest importance. Poland, Czechia or Hungary, as “cultural clients” or “poor relatives” of the west, may tend to underscore their western tradition even more than the geographic west itself. Potential consequences, such as mutual hostility towards the representatives of different identities, should be defined, discussed and eventually eliminated. Denying the differences may not only fail to solve possible problems but actually deprive us of any discursive tools to achieve this goal.

Samuel Huntington, accused by many, including Edward Said himself, of spreading the idea of conflict between human beings, admits that:

The causes of this unique and dramatic development included the social structure and class relations of the West, the rise of cities and commerce, the relative dispersion of power in Western societies between estates and monarchs and secular and religious authorities, the emerging sense of national consciousness among Western peoples, and the development of state bureaucracies. The immediate source of Western expansion, however, was technological: the invention of the means of ocean navigation for reaching distant peoples and the development of the military capabilities for conquering those peoples. (Huntington 1996: 51)

He quotes Parker (1988: 4), who argues that “in large measure ‘the rise of the West’ depended upon the exercise of force, upon the fact that the military balance between the Europeans and their adversaries overseas was steadily tilting in favour of the former; ... the key to the Westerners’ success in creating the first truly global empires between 1500 and 1750 depended upon precisely those improvements in the ability to wage war which have been termed ‘the military revolution.’” Huntington adds that

The expansion of the West was also facilitated by the superiority in organization, discipline, and training of its troops and subsequently by the superior weapons, transport, logistics, and medical services resulting from its leadership in the Industrial Revolution. The West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion ... but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence. Westerners often forget this fact; non-Westerners never do (Huntington 1996: 51).

When Huntington wrote about the expansion of the west, what did he mean? Whose expansion, actually? Arnold Toynbee could be wrong creating his model of world civilizations throughout the history of humankind, but discussing encounters of the western civilization with Indian or Chinese civilizations, what did he write about?

## **A call for a conceptualization of the west**

The concepts of thinkers believing in civilisations as clearly distinguishable entities endowing their members with a sense of identity (Spengler, Toynbee, Huntington) are still vivid and have their enthusiasts. For example, in her book *Conceptualizing the West in International Relations*, Jacinta O'Hagan proposes introducing the concept of the west into the academic discipline of International Relations:

International Relations primarily theorises the world as one of states. However, the West is not a state, but most commonly conceived of as a civilizational entity. The paradigms of the discipline provide no explicit category into which civilizations can be placed. Consequently, civilizations have been largely absent from International Relations theory (O'Hagan 2002: 2).

Influenced by the champions of conflicting civilisations, the author seems to miss their terminology in the language of her area of interest:

The term 'the West' peppers the language of commentary and scholarship in world politics. It appears in an abundance of books and articles, such as *Islam and the West* (Lewis, 1993), *'The West and the Rest'* (Mahbubani, 1992) and *Twilight of the West* (Coker, 1998). The West is often invoked in antithesis to a similarly broadly constituted 'other' – the East, the Orient, Islam, Asia, the Third World. The West, meaning the antithesis to the communist East, was central to the language of Cold War politics. Despite the collapse of this East, the West remains central to the language of post-Cold War politics, illustrated by references such as those to the West's role in the Balkans, or the West's position on human rights. In the late 1990s, the decision to extend NATO to include Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic was discussed as bringing former Eastern bloc states under 'the protection' of the West. In the 1999 Kosovo conflict, NATO was frequently referred to as 'representing the West'. In media debates, it is not uncommon to hear discussion of how the West should respond, for instance, to the conflict in Chechnya or Central Africa, or other such locations (O'Hagan 2002: 7).

O'Hagan's proposal represents a position exactly opposite to that of Appiah. Being aware of the importance of the term in social sciences, she attempts to convince scholars dealing with international relations to extend their professional vocabulary with "the west" as an important term enriching their discourse and introducing more precision thereto.

In this context, Appiah's arguments referring to the lack of clear borders and definitions of the term in question seem sufficiently cogent to undermine O'Hagan's stance. If international relation studies have been able to operate the terminology based on precisely defined states and their alliances, the term derived from humanities and social sciences seems to add an additional factor of conflict rather than solve international problems.

## **The western civilisation according to Fernand Braudel**

Spengler's vision of the world system of civilisations may be undermined as speculations based on historically ungrounded metaphors, for instance, civilisations being subject to biological processes, such as birth, growth, decline and death (Blackburn 2016: 454). Toynbee, even though he is much better prepared to discuss the world history, posited a model of mutual relations between twenty-one entities called civilisations. Moreover, supported by a great number of historical examples, he also tried to create a scientific system based on "non-scientific, intuitional foundations" (Iggers 1958: 224).

Whereas the philosophies of history proposed by Spengler, Koneczny, Toynbee and others are criticised for their speculative nature devoid of factual foundation, this objection is not applicable to the historians grouped in the Annales School. As researchers, they first examined facts and then formulated general models of historical development.

Fernand Braudel (1902-1985), a leading representative of the Annales, proposed an explanation of the concept of civilisations, including the western one. His model is based on solid studies of economic and social history:

In his major work, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, ...* (1949), Fernand Braudel took as his object a vast geographical area and treated it in terms of three time scales: the long term, the conjunctural, and that of events. The fact that Braudel has, over the years indicated his particular interest in one of these time scales, the long term or long *durée*, has affected the appreciation of his work by critics and admirers alike ... (Santamaria and Bailey 1984: 78).

He elaborated his theory of the long term in his book *A History of Civilizations* where treated historical short-term shifts and political events as accidental and consequently, emphasised the social and economic components of history which lasted a hundred years. It is important to note that Braudel did not treat civilisations ideologically. He was not interested in creating a sense of identity. He also rejected Toynbee's theory of natural determinism of the strength of civilisations, where the degree of difficulty Nature imposed on groups of people decided on the quality of civilisation they established (Braudel 1994: 11). However, he did not dismiss geography as an important factor in creating civilisations. On the contrary:

Every civilization, then, is based on an area with more or less fixed limits. Each has its own geography with its own opportunities and constraints, some virtually permanent and quite different from one civilization

to another. The result? A variegated world, whose maps can indicate which areas have houses built of wood, and which of clay, bamboo, paper, bricks or stone; which areas use wool or cotton or silk for textiles; which areas grow various food crops – rice, maize, wheat, etc. The challenge varies: so does the response (Braudel 1994: 11).

Unlike Spengler, Toynbee or Koneczny, Braudel based his proposal on purely material foundations. He did not reject factors such as religions, ideas or political conflicts, but treated them as secondary in the formation of civilisations.

Western or European civilization is based on wheat and bread – and largely white bread – with all the constraints that this implies. Wheat is a demanding crop. It requires field use to be rotated annually, or fields to be left fallow every one or two years (Braudel 1994: 11).

Having provided the basic criteria determining the category, Braudel outlined the geographic range of the west:

Western civilization, so-called, is at once the ‘American civilization’ of the United States, and the civilizations of Latin America, Russia and of course Europe. Europe itself contains a number of civilizations – Polish, German, Italian, English, French, etc. Not to mention the fact that these national civilizations are made up of ‘civilizations’ that are smaller still: Scotland, Ireland, Catalonia, Sicily, the Basque country and so on. Nor should we forget that these divisions, these multi-coloured mosaics, embody more or less permanent characteristics (Braudel 1994: 12).

Admitting that “[s]ociety and civilization are inseparable”, Braudel went on to explain the concept of western civilisation:

The Western civilization in which we live, for example, depends on the ‘industrial society’ which is its driving force. It would be easy to characterize Western civilization simply by describing that society and its component parts, its tensions, its moral and intellectual values, its ideals, its habits, its tastes, etc. – in other words by describing the people who embody it and will pass it on (Braudel 1994: 16).

Thus, the French scholar based his idea of western civilisation on certain qualities which are passed from generation to generation and are determined by the lifestyles societies adopt to meet their needs. The shared ideals and worldviews are just reflections of the current dynamics of societies’ development. It is worth mentioning Braudel’s observation that “The West’s first success was certainly the conquest of its countryside – its peasant ‘cultures’ – by the towns” (Braudel 1994: 18). Nevertheless, understanding the connection between civilization and society, he asserted that “in terms of the time-scale, civilization implies and embraces much longer periods than any given social phenomenon. It changes far less rapidly than the societies it supports or involves” (Braudel 1994: 18).

Braudel’s approach clearly shows that he treated the west as an extensive term. Based on economic foundations, the civilisation became a concept to which both Christianity and Greek rational thought made essential contributions.

To sum up, it is impossible to deny geographic characteristics of the territories where particular civilisations were born. They determined the way of food production which, in turn, affected the further development of economies, then ideologies initially based on religion but, in the case of the west, also on a secular philosophy. The origins of European societies and civilisations, were simply different from those of China, India or Mali.

### **The need for the term**

The concept of the west as an ontological entity defined by clear solid criteria and borderlines is difficult to defend. However, it would be ridiculous to deny the fact that it was west-European powers that colonized Africa and Asia and eradicated native civilizations in both Americas. Moreover, even though nowadays representatives of Central European countries, such as Poland, can claim that they never participated in the atrocities the western powers committed in their colonies, their ancestors, under the control of foreign invaders themselves, could feel solidarity with the same western powers in opposition to the “savage peoples” of the rest of the world. The Polish 19th century novelist Henryk Sienkiewicz had no doubts about who should rule the Sudan (England!). People in Poland, Czechia, Hungary etc. read French, British and German books. Many of them are familiar with Flaubert’s accounts of his trips in Africa, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* and, once popular with young people, adventures of Kara ben Nemzi by Karl May. They may also know Salman Rushdie’s *East, West*, where the cultural differences are thematised. If they happened to study something Indian or Persian, they looked for exotic elements that reinforced their sense of being fundamentally different. Mostly they read west-European accounts of the adventures of west-European explorers and it was through the eyes of the latter that the former became familiar with other parts of the world. Even though Appiah is right in saying that Europe has never been one homogeneous body, the fact that it was the western part of Europe that was able to impose its narrative on the rest of the continent, all the more demonstrates that the west-European countries were, and still are (having incorporating the United States into “the club”) a force able to persuade their ‘peripheral’ neighbours to acknowledge their point of view in many areas, from pure politics to economics and culture.

Western civilization may be an obsolete concept, even though for many, comprising all those who believe in collective identities, it still matters as a certain ideology or even an ontological entity. Historians (for example the Annales School) use the term all the time. Attempts at creating a philosophy of history based on the idea of a constellation of different civilizations have long been criticized as too intuitive and devoid of a plausible scientific methodological basis (Iggers 1958: 223). Moreover, Toynbee himself revised his views. Initially he believed in his success in finding “fields of historical study which would be intelligible in themselves ... without reference to extraneous historical events”. Later on, however, he had to give up the idea of “self-contained units”, reducing the role of civilisations to serving “the progress of Religion” (Fieldhouse 1958: 132).

The idea of one human civilization is a proposal which sounds obvious in the world of globalization from both practical and ethical points of view. Paradoxically, however, the moment

we abandon terms such as “western civilisation” or “the west”, we have to reinvent them for very practical reasons. Discussing several problems, be they historical, political, cultural, economic or sociological, we need vocabulary to describe certain phenomena. Therefore, a great number of academic disputes are of linguistic nature rather than any other.

### **Appiah’s proposal and its feasibility**

Appiah’s final proposal of universal identity was put in the form of the ancient Roman poet Terence’s maxim which became the motto of Renaissance humanism: “Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto” or “I am human, I think nothing human alien to me”. Optimistic as it sounds, the umbrella term ‘human’ in the popular quote contains as many dangers and unsolved problems as promises of a better future. Atrocities of wars and brutal governments, including ancient tyrannies, slavery and modern totalitarian systems, are all ‘human’ inventions.

The way Appiah proposes his idea (or ideology), implies several problems in both purely academic and practical/political dimensions. For example, if western civilization is to be eradicated from our narrations in favour of a kind of universal human civilization, the points he used to deconstruct the concept of western civilization apply all the more to the general human “universe”. The differences in historical development are so evident that no concept of one universal civilization is able to withstand criticism. Moreover, one can discuss the set of ‘universal’ values proposed by this holistic culture embracing the whole planet in the context of the post-colonial imposition of the western approach to law, politics, ethics, aesthetics etc. upon the subaltern. Within this ‘universal’ civilization conflicts would not only be at the level of individuals, but also at the level of large groups of people who believe in certain sets of principles. In this context, the lexical problem returns for the discussion which inevitably must restore more or less imperfect terms being synonyms or euphemisms for what we now call civilizations. Much as we may detest these terms, without them we simply could not communicate and thus solve problems on a lower level of **Abstraction**. Talking about such things as homosexuality on the one hand, and polygamy or the circumcision of girls on the other, it is difficult to reduce them to each particular case and not to refer them to a broader context. The additional problem is that in the legal aspect of social organization, which requires precise classification of human actions, there is little room for compromise. Finding a universal solution would mean imposing one approach on those who support another. Champions of the supremacy of western civilization have no doubts that theirs is supreme. Therefore they could agree with Appiah’s proposal, provided that western civilization confined geographically to Europe and North America is replaced with itself under the name of universal civilization.

The issues of terminology have inherent aporias, which should inevitably lead to an association with a kōan in Zen Buddhism. The principal problem of the world of western academic thought is occasional ‘discoveries’ of those insurmountable perplexities bringing about conclusions that certain concepts are ‘impossible’. Thus, the impossibility of certain terms makes whole intricate scientifically described areas of knowledge impossible as well. It is enough to deconstruct the se-

mantic field of one term to ruin a vast fragment of what humans believed to be their knowledge. However, in such circumstances arises a fundamental question: why not recognize the Buddhist denial of anything we call reality? Why do we not adopt the general assumption that everything is just an illusion? Is this just *reductio ad absurdum*? Is this more absurd than selecting single terms and depriving them of sense, leaving the public with faith in the validity of all others of the same category? Or maybe the purpose of denying particular concepts is just to keep a great conversation going while everybody cynically realizes that in our postmodern era it is just a linguistic game? On the other hand, if Derrida is right that there is no reality outside the text, what is left to deal with? Therefore, in order to solve real problems, the problems that we ascribe ontological validity, it is not enough to eliminate certain terms and replace them with others of equally dubious validity.

It is good to revise our repository of ideas and terms, and therefore such texts as Appiah's article are necessary to provoke innovative thinking. From the practical point of view, it matters little if western civilization is an ontological unit. It is a fluid idea serving various, often contradictory purposes. Whereas some politicians and ideologists may treat the idea of western civilization as a pretext to enslave or belittle people from other parts of the planet, others may believe it to be the only possible proposal of positive universal values. Observing the terminology used by different political forces in Poland, for example, a certain schizophrenic situation can be noted. On the one hand, nationalists strongly claim their membership in the western, Latin or Christian tradition. On the other hand, they also strongly criticize 'the west' for its departure from Christian values. This seems to support Appiah's argument. Nevertheless, his statement "if western culture were real, we wouldn't spend so much time talking it up" demonstrates that he wants to reduce an idea to the level of pure semantic misconception. The west or any other civilization should be treated as an idea as much as socialism, liberalism or conservatism. We discuss these terms and try to provide them with new meanings along with the changing time. Certain concepts, such as the left wing or the right wing in politics, have come a long way to their present state and differ dramatically from their original meanings. Does it mean the discussion on them is groundless? Several people would not mind if they were replaced with more up-to-date and more precise terms, but the only thing we can do at the moment is to constantly discuss and (re)negotiate their semantic fields so as to be able to understand one another.

If Appiah just criticized the quite common intellectual fallacy of hypostatizing, nothing can be more true than the theses of his article. If his intention was to refute the idea, his position, from a practical point of view, is somewhat vulnerable. Nevertheless, his dismissal of the discussion on western civilization seems premature. The discussion does not mean the issue does not exist. The discussion means that somebody still cares and is ready to manifest the idea, which is nothing else but its performance.

Reducing various approaches to the very term 'the west' to just two – the heritage of the Judeo-Christian tradition and the legacy of the French Revolution – shows quite clearly that the ideology behind the pride of belonging to "the west" may stem from opposite sources. Nevertheless, here lies another insurmountable problem. If any of the universalisms developed in Europe spread over

the world (which, to a high degree has already happened), would it be the dream all-human civilisation or just western ideologies again conquering the rest of the world?

On the other hand, this question may matter to certain groups of descendants of Frantz Fanon, who proposed rejecting anything that was imposed by the west. Speaking of Fanon, it is inevitable to consider the issue of the language of discussion on world history. Without certain terminology, a description of several events and phenomena seems impossible to express. We can see this problem reading certain passages of *The Wretched of the Earth*.

Since the Third World is abandoned and condemned to regression, in any case stagnation, through the selfishness and immorality of the West, the underdeveloped peoples decide to establish a collective autarchy. The industries of the West are rapidly deprived of their overseas outlets (Fanon 1963: 60).

Now, according to Appiah's proposal, we should eliminate the term 'the west' itself. The subjugation and colonization of the African, Asian and American peoples and imposing foreign control upon them suddenly loses the agent. Whose 'selfishness and immorality'? Whose industries are 'deprived of their overseas outlets' if the Third World did establish 'a collective autarchy'?

Although it is unquestionably possible to reject Fanon's ideological notions and dismiss his whole discourse, the problem of the vocabulary for describing colonial and post-colonial reality remains important. Moreover, humanists and social scientists could certainly describe the reality by presenting a great number of specific 'case studies' instead of succumbing to the temptation of developing certain general rules, and searching for regularities and generalizing from specific phenomena is what science is actually about. Divisions, typologies and models of mutual and multilateral relationships require certain abstract terminology which allows researchers to describe every particular case. Nigeria or Kenya were conquered and controlled by Britain, Algeria by France, Cameroon by Germany etc. Should the mental shortcut "western Europeans conquered vast territories of Africa" be rejected as imprecise? Perhaps historical accounts would be more precise if we used the names of particular European countries conquering and colonizing other particular countries in Africa and Asia instead of using such umbrella terms as 'the west' and 'the Third World'. However, whereas the latter in fact means 'the lands and peoples once conquered and humiliated by certain European empires actually not having much in common', colonizing the rest of the world in the name of civilisation was the idea making the powers of western Europe a gang of accomplices.

## Conclusion

Appiah sums up his article with the observation:

Culture – like religion and nation and race – provides a source of identity for contemporary human beings. And, like all three, it can become a form of confinement, conceptual mistakes underwriting moral ones. Yet all of them can also give contours to our freedom. Social identities connect the small scale where we live our lives alongside our kith and kin with larger movements, causes, and concerns. They can make a

wider world intelligible, alive, and urgent. They can expand our horizons to communities larger than the ones we personally inhabit. But our lives must make sense, too, at the largest of all scales. We live in an era in which our actions, in the realm of ideology as in the realm of technology, increasingly have global effects. When it comes to the compass of our concern and compassion, humanity as a whole is not too broad a horizon (Appiah 2016 online n.p.).

I could not agree more with this statement. However, it is difficult to believe in an easy way to achieve this ideological goal. Reading *The Republic of Wine* by the Chinese novelist Mo Yan (2001), who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2012, whenever I came across a reference to a Chinese legend or myth, I had to look for an explanation on the Internet. When reading a book written by a European or American writer there are indubitably fewer problems of this type. There are certain cultural codes that readers educated in a particular culture are able to decipher immediately. In this context “the golden nugget”, however complicated the way it travelled to our minds (mainly through education!), cannot be dismissed. Most people would love to understand all possible cultural codes including African, Indian and Polynesian, but practically this would take more than one human life. Nevertheless, a wise school curriculum could open our minds to the vast wealth of our planet’s legacy. It is also important to bear in mind that “[t]he cosmopolitan impulse that draws on our common humanity is no longer a luxury; it has become a necessity” (Appiah 2016 online n.p.).

However we understand the term, be it as a source of pride or a source of shame, it is difficult to imagine any discourse in humanities or social sciences without “the west”. Talking about differences, without which no discussion is ever possible, the west is a useful umbrella term explaining, even though imperfectly, the course of history, and helps us understand the present. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that it is absolutely necessary to approach the subject critically and in terms of ideology and political practice to promote the concept of humanity as one world civilisation based on mutual respect and cooperation.

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