


A New Wave of Research on Civilizational Politics

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Abstract

A new wave of scholarship has made major advances in how we understand the politics of civilizational identity by drawing powerfully from conceptual tools developed over the years to study other forms of identity. What unites this wave is treating civilizations not as distinctive “things” that might “clash” but as meaningful social imaginings. This growing body of work is far from monolithic, generating alternative theories that should structure scholarly debate going forward. Central issues include whether civilizational identity is primarily elite led or mass driven, whether it inherently involves conflictual human impulses, what the role of religion and values are in driving it, what its relationship is to nationalism, and how similarly we can expect the countries and people who share civilizational identity to behave. We also find emerging debates on what this newly conceptualized civilizational identity explains in contemporary world politics. Social scientists are now only beginning to apply important tools of social science to this question, with even public opinion research in its infancy. Early findings suggest civilizational identity may be shaping not only elite foreign policy making but also patterns of domestic politics, including the recent rise of populism and levels of democracy and authoritarianism more generally.

Keywords: civilizations; identity; international relations; populism; authoritarianism

For many, when the topic of world civilizations arises, thought immediately turns to the work of Samuel Huntington (1990, 1993), whose “clash of civilizations” thesis touched off a fierce debate on whether and how civilizational identity matters three decades ago. This does serious injustice to a new wave of scholarship that has made major advances since then. In this article, we examine this new wave, which builds on novel theoretical foundations to supply fresh insight into what civilizational identity is, what explains it, and why it matters for politics. What unites these studies is that they draw coherently from new conceptual tools that researchers have developed in recent decades to understand the nature of identity generally and nationalism more specifically, treating civilizations not as distinctive “things” that might “clash” but as social constructs that are changeable, heterogeneous, interactive, and flexible.

At the same time, this new wave of scholarship is not monolithic, generating alternative theories that should structure scholarly debate going forward. Central issues include whether civilizational identity is primarily elite led or mass driven, whether it inherently involves conflictual impulses, what the role of religion and values are in driving it, and how similarly we can expect the countries and people who share civilizational identity to behave. These different perspectives also generate diverging views on what civilizational identity explains in contemporary world politics. Fortunately, part of this new wave is a series of empirical studies employing sophisticated methods to identify civilizational identity’s impact. This new empirical research, while still in its infancy, makes a strong

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prima facie case that civilizational identity not only may be shaping international relations in unexpected ways but also may be influencing everything from the rise of populism in the Western world to how individuals understand the domestic politics of their own countries. This research, however, remains at an early stage, and it is here where we see the most inviting green fields for researchers in the time ahead.

After a brief history of the field, we examine the answers that this new wave of research supplies to the core questions of what civilizational identity is, where it comes from, and how it impacts world politics. We conclude by suggesting an agenda for future research.

Theories of Civilizational Identity in Politics: A Brief History¹

Coined from the French term *civiliser*, which shares roots with familiar terms like city, civility, and civitas, European thinkers in the 18th century largely understood “civilization” in the singular, referring to a process of moving away from barbarity. During the first half of the 20th century, the concept took on a plural dimension, referring to different worlds or realms that represent different values.

While the idea of competing civilizations had thus long been present in work by historians, macrosociologists, and geographers devoted to the long *durée* of history (e.g., Braudel 1995; Flannery 1972; Wallerstein 1984), Huntington (1993, 1996) was instrumental in catalyzing interest in the concept among observers of world politics. He posited that processes related to globalization would bring civilizations into closer contact, which would lead them increasingly to clash, generating wars along their “fault lines.” Journalists frequently reached for this theory when trying to make sense of wars they were covering, and some politicians embraced it as justifying their rejection of Western norms like democracy. But when a wide range of social scientists tested the theory rigorously through quantitative methods, the results were almost always negative (e.g., Breznau et al. 2011; Fox 2001, 2002; Henderson and Tucker 2001; Neumayer and Plümper 2009; Russett, Oneal, and Cox 2000). While the ideas are sometimes revisited by scholars in retrospective essays, most are critical, and few social scientists today follow the research agenda Huntington laid out (Orzi 2018).

More recently, however, something of a revival has taken place in the study of civilizations. Focusing on the big picture, landmark works of macrohistory and geography interpret civilizations as relationships between humanity and the natural world that have major implications for human welfare (Diamond 1999; Fernandez-Armesto 2002) or essentially use it as a framing device for presenting world history (Christian and McNeill 2011). These treatments frequently portray civilizations as something like objective social entities that, as in Huntington’s works, have names (i.e., “Islamic civilization” or “Western civilization”) and are there to be studied even as their nature, origins, and moral qualities are to be debated (Kumar 2014). Other historians hark back to the original singular notion of civilization, effectively presenting the West (especially its concepts of nation, state, and religion) as something like an absolute yardstick for world order (Ferguson 2012; Morris 2011; Pagden 2008). Of more relevance for social scientists interested in politics, however, is another part of this revival of civilizational research: an emerging wellspring of new theories with the potential for reshaping how we understand the role of civilizations in politics. It is to these that we now turn, organizing our discussion by first examining new theories of what civilizations are, what explains them, and what political phenomena they explain.

What Are “Civilizations”?

Works comprising the new wave of scholarship on civilizations are diverse in theoretical roots as well as definitions. They nevertheless tend to concur in rejecting the treatment of civilizations as “things in the world” and instead approach them in broadly the same way that Benedict Anderson (1991) looks at nations: by focusing on how are they imagined.

A first conceptual step these works take is to recognize, following Katzenstein, that world civilizations are “configurations, constellations, or complexes” (2010, 5) rather than clearly defined, objectively existing entities. They are changing and heterogenous, with not static but contested identity, evolving over time and interacting with each other.

A second step is to question the very idea that civilizations are a “they.” As Hall and Jackson argue, civilizations are better treated as “ongoing processes” (2008, 6) than as things. By implication, scholars do best when they shift focus from “civilizations” per se to the political and other actors who articulate civilizational identity. In Jackson’s words, therefore, one must distinguish between “a scholarly delineation of a social object (such as a civilization) and a scholarly effort to trace and explain how actors themselves delineate that social object” (2010, 187). Much of the new wave of studies on civilizational politics, therefore, concentrates on articulations of civilizational identity by elites (Linde 2016; Mjør and Turoma 2020; Katzenstein and Weygandt 2017; O’Hagan 2008; Rivera 2016; Stepanova 2015; Tsygankov 2003; Zevelev 2009). For such works, civilizational identity remains mostly a top-down perception: civilizations are imagined and governed by political and intellectual elites, with little room allocated for mass-level social values and perceptions.

Other work takes a third conceptual step, building theory of civilizational identity up from basic principles of human psychology and notions of common sense that apply to the mass level as well as elites. For Hale (2014), civilizations are simply one among a multitude of cognitive categories (or personal points of reference) that help individuals make sense of and navigate an otherwise hopelessly complex social world.² Accordingly, civilizational identity is inherently situational, potentially multiple (that is, it can involve identification with more than one civilization simultaneously), defined by different boundary markers at different times, and not necessarily involving any conflictual impulses with outgroup civilizations. It can, though, become cognitively useful in certain situations for making sense of given conflicts. Hale and Laruelle thus define civilization as “a high-order identity category based on cultural (as opposed to physical) attributes that occupies a level of abstraction between ‘human being’ and ‘ethnic group’ or ‘nation,’ tending therefore to subsume multiple nations and ethnic groups but not all of them” (2020, 587). Civilizational identity, then, is meaningfully expressed not only by elites but also by masses, and elite articulations can be generally expected to reflect, express, and shape mass dispositions in a complex process of mutual identity co-constitution.

A related body of theory, sharing roots in social psychology but adding insights from sociological theories of practice, treats civilizations as a discursive commonplace used by politicians to speak to their constituencies.³ Thus for Brubaker “civilizational discourse refers to a different kind of imagined community, located at a different level of cultural and political space, than national discourse” (2017a, 1211). For Jackson (2006, 42), civilizations belong to a set of “rhetorical commonplaces”—for instance, the notion of “the West”—that help people understand each other. Precisely because these commonplaces are weakly shared and not univocal, they allow for a feeling of belonging to a community that remains plastic in its definition. For Haynes (2019a, 2, 9), this perspective may reflect an understudied original sense of what Huntington meant in saying that his “book is not intended to be a work of social science. It is instead meant to be an interpretation of the evolution of global politics after the Cold War” (Huntington 1996, 13). The notion of civilization helps create a new mental map of the world. It is a “paradigm” or a “framework,” and paradigms “do not have to be ‘correct’—that is, stand up to social scientific scrutiny—but they do have to be widely believed” (Haynes 2019b, 13). This, he argues, could explain the success of Huntington’s notions in the public sphere and their failure in the scholarly world. But even in terms of policy, platforms such as the “Dialogue of Civilizations” do not help resolve feelings of ontological insecurity between supposed religiously unified autochthonous entities (Bilgin 2012).

From all of this, it follows that no objectively existing set of civilizations can be found in the world; instead, there exists only a set of cognitively useful categories or discourses that are sometimes invoked by individuals to comprehend the world or shape how others view that world. It thus makes no sense to attempt to enumerate and name specific extant civilizations. The new

wave of civilizational studies, therefore, does not provide us with lists of civilizations or maps depicting where they begin, end, or overlap. Instead, they map elites' and masses' *perceptions* of what they are and where they begin, end, or overlap (Brubaker 2017b; Haynes 2019a; Katzenstein and Weygandt 2017). These perceptions, it is found, generally do not coincide with any "objective" reality, instead being products of social construction and efforts to simplify and render comprehensible a complex world. Moreover, when used even by those who believe in it, the concept of civilizations continues to be plastic in meaning. In fact, terminological blurriness seems to be an intrinsic property of the notion as it is commonly invoked, and this plasticity is part of what makes it attractive to elites. There is, for instance, an obvious overlap between ideas of "Western," "European," and "Christian" civilization that can be strategically exploited in speaking to different constituencies, potentially eliciting different affective responses by the public.

Because civilizations, in essence, are in the mind, Hale and Laruelle (2020) add one more layer of definitional nuance to the notion of civilizational identification, distinguishing between two types that are sometimes conflated in popular and even scholarly discourse. One type of civilizational identification is *direct*, whereby individuals identify themselves personally with a given civilization (or potentially, multiple civilizations at the same time). This would be a given individual's own personal civilizational identity. But because civilizations are a macro identity category—often seen as inclusive of meso-level identity categories like ethnicity, nation, or country—we must also recognize the importance of *indirect*, or *mediated*, dimensions of civilizational identity. Specifically, this means individuals might identify their ethnic group, nation, or country with a given civilization. While in most cases such indirect civilizational identity is likely to correspond with people's direct (personal) civilizational identity, this need not be the case: for example, a community of Muslims in Russia may identify themselves (at least in part) with a perceived Islamic civilization at the same time that they (a) identify Russia as part of European or a distinct Eurasian civilization *and* (b) identify themselves with Russia. The relationship between direct and indirect civilizational identity has been studied hardly at all and represents, in our view, a highly promising avenue for future research.

What Explains Civilizations?

In locating civilizational identity first and foremost in individuals' imaginings, the new wave of civilizational studies has advanced a number of ideas as to where specifically the particular imaginings we observe in the world come from. All would agree, we suspect, that "civilizations" cannot be created from whole cloth. Notions of civilizational identity resonate only when they somehow help individuals (elites and masses alike) make sense of the world around them, and this can happen only when there is at least some degree of *fit* with individuals' other basic worldviews and experiences—even when the actual fit is highly imperfect and the inaccuracies are obscured by implicit self-serving motivations (Brubaker 2017a; Hale 2014; Haynes 2017).

All also generally agree that the determination of fit—and the consequent tendency to think in terms of civilizational categories—can be powerfully shaped by elite discourse (Jackson 2010; Katzenstein 2010). Efforts by elites to construct civilizational identity promote fit by making connections for elites and masses alike between civilizational identity categories and the world around them, showing how civilizational concepts can explain this world and prescribe advantageous avenues for action. They also make these concepts cognitively *available* (or *accessible*). That is, they render these notions more visible in the public sphere and hence likelier to be cognitively invoked by individuals at both the elite and mass levels (Kahneman 2011, 129–145). It is in this sense that Hale (2014, 14–15) treats Huntington himself as something of a civilizational entrepreneur, having his most important impact less in identifying any actual reality of civilizations than (instead) in making a certain set of civilizational categories more publicly available for cognition while simultaneously linking them to particular meanings (fit). This, indeed, is one reason why many originally saw Huntington's ideas as dangerous, not just inaccurate (Qadir 1998, 150).

Elites might advance notions of civilizational identity for many reasons. Some may sincerely believe they are identifying objective realities, as with classic works that popularized notions of civilizations among educated publics (see Kumar 2014). Others may seek professional advancement in particular types of regimes. For example, Laruelle (2017) shows how Russia's post-Soviet leadership has long given significant rein to clusters of rival ideological entrepreneurs who compete to advance notions of identity—including civilizational identity—that the Kremlin can situationally invoke to serve its purposes. By no means, however, do scholars presume that elites' civilizational messaging will trump other messages in all, or even most, circumstances. Thus Rivera and Bryan (2019) find that civilizational identity, once a strong influence on Russian elite attitudes to the USA, has declined in importance in the late Putin era: a narrower anti-American xenophobia has dominated discourse in Russia's most influential mass media.

A number of scholars in the new wave follow Huntington (1993, 1996) in positing that certain macrosocial developments have generally enhanced the likelihood that elite efforts to fit civilizational categories to today's reality will resonate among elites and publics. These first and foremost concern globalization, which brings individuals from very different cultural contexts into new forms of interaction while also powerfully altering traditional ways of life (far from always for the better) and challenging state sovereignty (Brubaker 2017b; Mjør and Turoma 2020). Haynes (2019a, 4) would shift the focus more specifically to glocalization, the process through which globalizing tendencies interact with forces of particularism in specific local contexts: civilizational identification essentially becomes a way of understanding—and an expression of resistance to—undesired change. Elites, by these lights, are crucial to “showing” people how civilizational differences in fact constitute threats, often masking vested interests in the outcomes such civilizational politics is expected to promote. Brubaker also notes the impact in Europe of a series of dramatic terrorist acts committed in the name of Islam, arguing they have greatly assisted xenophobic civilizational entrepreneurs in popularizing their view of the world (Brubaker 2017b).

The sources of civilizational identification at the mass level, however, remain almost completely unexplored—at least using mass surveys that can stake a claim to country-level representativeness. Hale and Laruelle (2020) show there is much to learn from such a research agenda. Using two surveys of public opinion in Russia from 2013 to 2014 to examine indirect civilizational identification in Russia, they find strong support for certain propositions advanced by the new wave of research on civilizational politics. Looking at the degree to which Russians identify their country with different civilizational categories advanced by their most influential elites, their study finds strong roles for socialization processes related to age (exposure to the Soviet system, predictive of identification with a distinctive “Eurasian” civilization) and even more contingent factors such as how well individuals believe their country's economy is performing (with those perceiving better performance being more likely to identify Russia with European civilization). Another study drawing on survey data but not using econometric methods to examine patterns concludes that ethnicity and religion are driving the “civilizational choice” of youth in Russia's North Caucasus (Avksent'ev and Aksiumov 2012). These studies, however, have limits in that they are based on surveys that present respondents with a preformed list of named civilizational alternatives and do not deeply or systematically explore the intensity or specific meanings of civilizational attachments. Future research should address these lacunae.

What Does It Explain, If Anything?

The money question, of course, is what civilizational identity actually explains, or indeed whether we should think about it as an explanatory factor at all. And here, the proverbial jury is still out—or rather, the gathering of evidence has only just begun. As noted above, a raft of scholarship has found civilizations to be causing hardly any of the phenomena predicted by Huntington and his acolytes, such as wars or ethnic conflict. But the new wave of civilizational theory we discuss here is based on very different theoretical underpinnings, generates different hypotheses, and thus requires distinct tests.

Elite Discourse

Some of these new perspectives—particularly those treating civilizational discourse as an elite product used instrumentally to advance these same elites’ own political purposes—might lead one to question whether civilizational identity has any causal power at all. Perhaps this is all meaningless rhetoric? The well-documented extensive use of civilizational rhetoric by elites, though, does beg the question of why these elites consider it desirable to invoke civilizational identity instead of other concepts. That is, even if we assume elites are completely cynical in deploying civilizational concepts for political purposes, why would they do so if they themselves did not somehow sense this was having some impact that might benefit them?

Most new-wave studies do at least implicitly assume some answers. One set of answers centers around the potential for civilizational rhetoric to justify or legitimate. For example, Linde’s (2016, 616, 624) careful analysis of Russian elite discourse finds that the concept of civilizational diversity became official foreign policy doctrine during the Putin era and treats this discourse as an effort to legitimate policies aimed at limiting Western-normative influence that Russia’s elites desire for other, more narrowly political reasons. Verkhovsky and Pain (2012) see “civilizational nationalism” as a tool used by the regime to justify practices related to great-power status, centralization, and authoritarianism. And to take another example, this one concerning the USA, Eriksson and Norman (2011) find that Huntington’s clash of civilizations thesis was rerouted by the George W. Bush administration during the so-called War on Terror as a new policy paradigm to explain its promotion of liberal values worldwide against regimes seen as not only authoritarian but supposedly colluding with terrorism. The justification of US foreign policy against Iraq and Iran is often referred to with reference to a binary of civilization versus barbarians, supposing a global cultural clash.

Relatedly, other studies of elite discourse posit that civilizational rhetoric is helping elites articulate visions for the future in ways that will generate support. For example, in the case of Russia, the concept of civilization has been used by different political actors as an aspirational project to describe the country they wish Russia to become. The Putin regime has associated civilization mostly with Europe as a way to claim Russia’s legitimate right to be part of European civilization and therefore to have a say in the continent’s affairs, or has asserted Russia’s status as a unique state-civilization that would be immune to Western standards and a bearer of its own value scale (Laruelle 2016; Hale and Laruelle 2020). Even before the Russian state adopted a civilizational language, other nonstate actors, in particular the far right, had been using the term to associate Russia with a racially white civilization, which they portrayed as endangered by the arrival of labor migrants and which they thought should look for support from brotherly nations in Europe and in the USA. While anti-Americanism has been a trademark of Russia’s political language for years—decades if we include the Soviet experience—a rise of a civilizational reference to a white, Christian world to which Russia would belong has allowed for the first time a constituency (albeit a small one) to identify positively with the West (Laruelle 2010, 2019).

Our observation is that, as with many analyses of elite civilizational discourse, these studies of elite discourse do not set themselves the task of actually discerning or measuring the impact of these legitimating, explanatory, or aspirational deployments of civilizational concepts, much less by explicitly using social science methodologies. They thus leave open the important question: Does justifying, explaining, legitimating, or envisioning foreign policy in civilizational terms (as opposed to some other terms) actually result in the policy’s winning more support either at home or abroad, and does this have any discernable impact on the policy’s outcomes?

Another possibility is that elites genuinely think in terms of civilizational identity categories, meaning that, for example, a country leader’s references to civilizations can be treated either as sincere or as an instrumental appeal to other elites’ sincere beliefs that the leader expects to shape their behavior. Acharya (2020) looks at the case of Donald Trump in the USA, Xi Jinping in China, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, and Narendra Modi in India, all of whom use the term to frame their country’s positioning on the international scene as challenging the current world order. Tsygankov’s

(2016) work on Russian elites, for example, treats their civilizational rhetoric as at least partly reflective of their actual worldviews. In this case, content analysis of elite rhetoric is held to be capable of revealing not only elite strategy but also elite motivations, values, and thought processes.

Ultimately, these are questions for research that currently remain wide open from a social science perspective. Perhaps elite civilizational discourse is nothing more than rhetorical flourish, full of sound and fury but signifying nothing, to paraphrase *Macbeth*. Or perhaps elite discourse can be taken at face value, a true reflection of their thinking. Our own perspective is that the answer lies in between these extremes, that civilizational identity categories can indeed shape elite thinking at the same time that they can be instrumentally (even cynically) deployed in hopes that they will shape (or fruitfully reflect) the thinking of other elites or masses for whom civilizational categories are (or could become) salient.

While we are still at the very beginning of this research agenda, an emergent body of research is now starting explicitly to investigate whether and how civilizational identity (as conceptualized by the new wave of civilizational studies) might influence important political outcomes. We discuss some of these efforts below, dividing our discussion between outcomes in the realms of foreign policy and domestic politics.

Foreign Policymaking

For those in the new wave of civilizational scholarship who treat elite civilizational discourse as either sincere or as responding to what elites believe are the sincere beliefs of others, it follows naturally that civilizational identity should influence foreign policymaking. Thus, Tsygankov (2014, 2016) has found the perception of Russia as a “distinct civilization” to be inspiring foreign policy decisions directly. One of the most prominent resources available for actually testing this perspective is the Survey of Russian Elites (SRE), which has periodically interviewed a sample of influential figures intended to be representative of Russia’s relevant foreign policy elites ever since 1993 (Rivera and Zimmerman 2019). The SRE has regularly included questions related to Russia’s perceived civilizational belonging, and studies based on this dataset have found significant influences of civilizational identity on the thinking of Russia’s foreign policy elite, including perceptions of whose development experience is most relevant for Russia’s own (Rivera 2016; Zimmerman 2002, 178–182).

Studies of civilizational identity’s influence on policymakers are by no means limited to Russia. Yilmaz and Bilgin (2005), for example, argue that many Turkish elites find NATO membership attractive partly because it can help anchor their country in what they perceive as Western civilization. Pantin’s (2010) research, however, cautions against assuming that elite conceptions of civilizational identity—even when they may be influencing policymaking—reflect mass-level identification. In Russia, he argues, elite foreign policymaking does not reflect the civilizational orientations of most Russian people.

The EU’s normativity regarding its Mediterranean and Eastern neighborhoods is also sometimes treated as a reflection of (at least implicit) civilizational identity. Nicolaidis (2014) asks, for instance, whether the EU’s self-positioning as a normative power can be seen as the continuation, in a different form, of a colonial impulse of civilizing the others and establishing normative standards of civilization. Similarly, several works devoted to Russia’s positioning of itself on the international scene approach the question of how Moscow reacts to the notion of “standards of civilization,” arguing that this reaction alternates among acceptance, challenge, and the creation of alternate ranking systems. Kaczmarek (2016), for example, examines how Russia engages with the notion of “standards of civilization” both in the 19th century and today to improve its status in international politics.

The field is also badly in need of bottom-up research designed to study how mass-level civilizational identity is expressed and might shape policymaking. Research into “popular geopolitics” teaches us that this is likely to be an important avenue for future research: discourses capable of shaping state behavior can both emerge and compete at the mass level (O’Loughlin and Talbot 2005; O’Loughlin, Toal, and Kolosov 2005).

Domestic Politics: Influences on Contemporary Populism and Regime Type

Perhaps even more clearly than foreign policy outcomes, new research indicates that civilizational identity may be an important shaper of domestic political outcomes. For one thing, recent scholarship has come to recognize a key role for civilizational identity, or what Brubaker has called “civilizationism” (2017a), in explaining the contemporary rise of far-right, populist, illiberal parties not only in the West as narrowly conceived (e.g., the USA and Europe) but also in places like Russia, Turkey, Israel, and Brazil. For Brubaker (2017b, 2017a), this civilizationism is a commonsensical project that involves a partial shift from nationalism to civilizationism and the birth of an identarian Christianity founded mostly on “anti-Muslimism.” Christianity, in this view, is embraced not as a religion but as a civilizational identity understood in antithetical opposition to Islam. This, he and others argue, lies at the core of the stunning electoral success of new forms of national populism in Europe and the USA (Brubaker 2017b; Kaya and Tecmen 2019).

In a similar vein, a special issue of *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* examines how Islam is “othered” so as to foster a commonsensical European civilization. In the introduction to the collection, Haynes (2019a) asks whether Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” helps explain current Western governments’ responses to Muslim migration and the securitization of Islam. He then contributes an article linking this discourse to Donald Trump’s rise to the US presidency (Haynes 2019b). Fox (2019) shows, however, that discrimination against religious minorities in Christian-majority societies is not the natural result of any actual Huntingtonian clash of civilizations. It has more to do with the securitization of Islam after the September 11 attacks in the USA than civilizational differences per se, he finds. In the same issue, Pasamonik engages with Ronald Inglehart, director of the World Values Survey, who has proclaimed that “Samuel Huntington was only half right. The cultural fault line that divides the West and Muslim-majority societies is not about democracy but sex” (2019, 90). Looking at the New Year’s Eve 2015 mass sexual assaults in Germany, Pasamonik sees a clash between a patriarchal culture of honor combined with an Islamic ethical code and a liberal Western urban culture. In these works, civilizational categories are influencing how people treat other people by linking other people to an othered civilization that is cast as a threat to one’s own.

Another intriguing possibility is that civilizational identity might influence how people expect their own polity to behave. Drawing on 2016 data from the Survey of Russian Elites, Hale (2019) finds that Russian elites who see their country as part of “European civilization” are more likely than are others to expect their dominant regime party (the United Russia Party) to leave power earlier. He interprets this as suggesting that people who identify Russia with European civilization are more likely to believe that their country’s politics will follow norms of behavior commonly associated with this civilization, in this case meaning that Russian politics will demonstrate more democratic behavior in the future. Since such expectations can become self-fulfilling, civilizational identification may play at least some role in shaping long-run regime outcomes.

Something of the flip side of this argument could be that regimes may promote popular identification with civilizational categories that are not associated with widely accepted international norms in order to weaken calls for those norms to be adopted domestically. This most prominently concerns notions of democracy and human rights: authoritarians may legitimate their own violations of democratic and other human rights through civilizational discourse, arguably making these violations less costly, less risky, or more stabilizing.

Relevant studies often do not articulate this explicitly in civilizational terms but instead tend to use close concepts such as “Asian values.” Popularized by leaders of several Asian countries, especially Singapore under Lee Kuan Yew, this notion refers to a supposed cultural specificity of some regions of the world articulating Confucian ethics and a particular vision of the individual and the collective (de Bary 2000). Such notions have often been used to justify authoritarian development and the denial of universal human rights and liberalism (Ang and Stratton 1995; Subramaniam 2010). More recently, this theme has been updated with reference to China’s new digital authoritarianism (Ortmann and Thompson 2018). This literature is rich, with some works even

including public opinion analysis (Wetzel 2011), but it does not directly engage with the notion of civilization, a few minor exceptions notwithstanding (Freeman 1998).

The revival of narratives of cultural exceptionalism all over the world and its relationship to a civilizational thinking would thus appear to be a promising topic for future research. Indeed, supporters of many of the world's most prominent illiberal or national-populist regimes today, from Russia to Turkey to China, at least sometimes refer to unique civilizational identities that would allow them to reject notions of universal rights as Western colonial imports. Comparative research on these uses would enrich the discussion on the concept of civilization as an elite framing device for avoiding constraining norms. And in particular what is needed are social science studies that can confidently establish whether civilizational legitimation, justification, or explanation actually influences levels of mass or elite support for the leaders or norms in question and, ultimately, regime type.

Conclusion

The subfield of civilizational politics is now at an exciting moment in its development, with a critical mass of fresh scholarship coming together in ways we believe will add important novel dimensions to how we think about international relations, domestic politics, and identity itself. Now far beyond Huntington, this new wave of scholarship generally concurs in focusing on the constructed nature of civilizational identity, but it frames important debates that will invite new scholarly contributions for years to come. One question that remains is the degree to which civilizational identity is in fact primarily an elite—or at least an elite-driven—phenomenon, as opposed to being mass-led, or otherwise bubbling up from popular commonsensical notions of difference. Some may even question the degree to which civilizational identity is truly meaningful at any level, elite or mass. Debates are surely also to be had over the degree to which civilizational identity is primarily about human drives to differentiate (othering in the service of boosting one's own self-esteem) or a more value-neutral cognitive need for uncertainty-reduction in an inherently complex world.

This calls attention to a second question that remains almost entirely unresearched: What is the nature of mass-level civilizational attachments, including not only what they are but what they mean and how this might change across temporal and geopolitical spatial contexts? Given the degree to which survey and experimental research has shaped so many other areas of the social science study of human behavior, it appears to us that rapid progress would be quite possible for those who undertake this line of inquiry. Survey research alone will not provide a full picture, however, as in-depth interpretive, ethnographic, and other qualitative research can surely flesh out a fuller sense of what civilizational identity means and does for both masses and elites.

One of our central arguments has been that this new wave of scholarship on civilizational identity has drawn heavily from what studies of ethnicity and nationalism have taught us about identity generally, including both its nature and the ways it can impact politics. At the same time, the precise relationship between civilizations and nations has yet to be fully explored. A partial exception includes cases like Russia, where scholars have noted that the boundaries defined by certain civilizational visions essentially coincide with those outlined by certain national visions, making for a civilizational nationalism (Verkhovskiy and Pain 2012). Even here, though, considerable room is left for comparing civilizational and national identity and establishing how the two relate to each other. The nuances and granularity of research on national identity is well positioned to yield insight into where nation and civilization overlap and dissociate. It is our view that civilizational identity is best conceptualized, at root, as a form of relational positioning in the same way as national and ethnic identity. By implication, it will be articulated in close relationship to a whole range of constructed socioeconomic and cultural identities, including national identity, but with meaning that is flexible and inherently context-dependent in ways that can be manipulated by powerful actors.

Finally, with new theory and empirical work now beginning to accumulate on the nature of civilizational identity, researchers would do well to train their sights on precisely how—or, indeed, whether—this identity (in precisely the new formulations being advanced) impacts important outcomes of interest. A few initial works suggest civilizational identity may be shaping foreign policy and patterns of domestic politics in important ways, but these studies remain highly preliminary and suggestive, constituting invitations to future work more than they represent any kind of definitive case for civilizations' importance. In short, we believe that the subfield of civilizational politics, long occupying a tiny scholarly niche after a brief flurry of studies sparked by Huntington, is positioned to be among the more stimulating in social science in the years ahead.

Disclosure. Authors have nothing to disclose.

Notes

- 1 See also Malinova (2020).
- 2 This work builds on the general theory of identity developed in Hale (2004, 2008).
- 3 Theoretical underpinnings can be found in Brubaker (2004).

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