

CIVILIZATIONS FOR GLOBAL SOCIETY

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Abstract: The fall of the Berlin Wall and the implosion of the Soviet Union created an effect comparable to culture shock in worldwide public opinion. These events were interpreted as an epochal change: a political revolution that opened a new era of human history. In the 1990s, various theories of global society were proposed. These theories also open news paths for social and political analysis. Viewed with unprejudiced eyes, history does not seem to have reached its fulfillment and turns out to be more complex than a bipolar structure (the democratic and capitalistic Western World vs. the anti-democratic and totalitarian Communist world) or tri-polar structure (the First, Second and Third worlds) of the “Cold War” period. By discussing some of these interpretations through the intertwining of the concepts of “civilization” and “globalization” and through a comparison with non-Western or non-Modern frameworks of civilization, this essay underlines that every civilization has its own idea and its own project for a global society: comparative analysis shows the possibility of dialogue and, at the same time, the risks of conflict.

Keywords: civilizations, global society, human rights, dialogue, conflict.

THEORIES OF GLOBAL SOCIETY

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the implosion of the Soviet Union created an effect comparable to culture shock in worldwide public opinion. These events were interpreted as an epochal change: a political revolution that opened a new era of human history. The most significant example of this way of reading these events is Francis Fukuyama’s, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). According to Fukuyama’s analysis, there were no other alternatives to capitalism. The United States was the only big player remaining in terms of global politics, economy and military.

Fukuyama’s interpretation of this new phase of history is not the only one possible, however. In the 1990s, in fact, other theories of global society were proposed which seemed to be

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more aware of the meaning of history. These theories also open new paths for social and political analysis. Viewed with unprejudiced eyes, history does not seem to have reached its fulfillment and turns out to be more complex than a bipolar structure (the democratic and capitalistic Western World vs. the anti-democratic and totalitarian Communist world) or tri-polar structure (the First, Second and Third worlds) of the “Cold War” period.

During the course of the 20th century, some theories of global society were developed that could be a valid point of reference for the analysis of the geopolitical changes produced by the end of the “Cold War”. The end of Western hegemony in the world in the 20th century has been, in fact, discussed at length. The work of Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, written during WWI, is emblematic of this discussion. In his research on world history carried out over a span of fifty years, Arnold Toynbee constructed an interpretation of global human history based on the paradigm of civilizations. The work of Fernand Braudel follows the same direction but generates different results. Already in the 1970s, Immanuel Wallerstein proposed an interpretation of the formation of modern global society that places itself in line with Braudel.

Among the new theories there is a difference in terms of orientation, aims and methodology. Some approaches put history, philosophy and sociology together in an attempt to describe the formation process of global society while other approaches are generalizations of the results of empirical research. The theories of Immanuel Wallerstein and Samuel Huntington are examples of the first approach, whereas examples of the second type are the analyses of global culture by Arjun Appadurai and the analysis of cultural hybridization by Jan N. Pieterse.

Finally, a third approach brings together the sociology of Weber, Durkheim and Simmel which views global society as a form or consequence of modernity. The most emblematic work using this approach is *The Consequences of Modernity* by Anthony Giddens (1992). It is interesting to note that each of these approaches lead, directly or indirectly, to a political atti-

tude towards global society that is favorable, contrary, critical and in some cases, even apologetic.

The two most “popular” models or at least the ones most well known in arena of public opinion are undoubtedly Wallerstein’s *world system of economy* and Huntington’s *civilization-based world order*.

Wallerstein’s model sees global society as the result of a process made up of historic-economic cycles of about 150 years each. The first cycle (1450-1620/40), coincides with the birth of European capitalism under the Iberian *hegemony*. The next cycle (1600-1750), unfolds under the hegemony of the Netherlands and also, in part, that of France. Around 1750, with the onset of the industrial revolution, another cycle begins under the hegemony of Great Britain. This cycle ends in 1917 when (with WWI) the hegemony of the world passes to the United States. The 20th century is, in fact, the American century. As observed by Eric J. Hobsbawm, however, it was a “short century” for other reasons. America hegemony seems to have run its course already by the beginning of the new millennium. The tragic attack on the Twin Towers in New York on September 11th 2001 was perhaps a sign of this.

In addition, Wallerstein’s model has the ability to predict and (even with its internal weaknesses) is more accurate than other models that are purely descriptive. Today, the prediction of the end of the American cycle has been confirmed. Fernand Braudel pointed out its weak points: the construction process of global society, stated Braudel, does not have only one center. There were, in fact, several centers and European hegemony is not so much a product of the Europe’s capacity to expand, but was favored by the retreat of other economic-political powers and above all by the strategic change in Chinese foreign affairs. In the 15th century, after a period of maritime expansion (the explorations during the first part of the 15th century by the Chinese fleet commanded by general Zheng He were important), China retreated from the global scene to take care of its internal issues and, in particular, the Mongolian menace coming from the northern part of the continent. The key concepts of Wallerstein’s model are those of “world economy”, “world empire”, “center”, “periphery” and



“semi-periphery”. With these concepts, Wallerstein tries to describe the change in the system and the ways in which several actors alternatively belong to the hegemonic nucleus of the system. The idea, moreover, that the empires of the past had been “worlds” justifies the possibility of research on the existence of a global society already during antiquity. The “noble fathers” of this theory are, without a doubt, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848) and Fernand Braudel.

The “noble father” of Samuel Huntington’s *civilization-based world order* is Arnold Toynbee. In clear opposition to Marxism and the paradigm based on history as product of class conflict, Toynbee affirmed that history is the history of the *conflicts of civilizations*. Huntington takes up this thesis and builds his own theory of the equilibrium of global politics for the 21st century. The first assumption of the model postulates a plural and multipolar world where the principal actors are the civilizations. If it is true that history is the history of conflicts between civilizations, one must also entrust the building of a new world order to these civilizations. Every civilization has its own space within which exists its own hegemonic state. World order springs from the cooperation of hegemonic states inside of these different civilizations. In order to avoid conflicts that compromise world peace, we must not interfere with the internal workings of other civilizations. Instead, we must recognize each hegemonic state’s role of guiding all cultural and political activity within its own civilization. For this reason, for example, the United States should not interfere with issues between China and Taiwan. This is considered an internal question for this distinct civilization and should be resolved by its own political entities.

One cannot escape from the serious implications of this theory. If it were accepted, the internal balances of each civilization would be resolved without other countries uttering a word and this would expose the weakest to the will of the strongest¹.

In the end, Huntington develops a proposal for the reform of the United Nations and the Security Council where

the balances formed during the course of the 20th century are considered.

Even if the details of the model appear to be somewhat weak, there is no doubt that, at least its fundamental premise, it is realistic. Starting from the acknowledgment of a multipolar political and cultural world is the only way to avoid global conflict and to implement the necessary conditions for the construction of a shared world order.

The analysis of the construction processes of global society is, however, much more complex than these models would lead us to believe. The question that many authors now ask regards exactly that which is now taken for granted: does global society exist? If it does exist, what are its characteristics? Does a global culture exist? What are the lifestyles of global men and women?

The answer to whether a global society exists is usually negative. The concept of “globalization” is used instead to indicate the spreading of European-Western society around the globe. One notices immediately, however, that it is not like this and that, in fact, the construction processes of global society are growing out of numerous “centers” or certainly more than one. A negative response is also given to the question of whether a “global culture” *already* exists. This question has now prompted new research into identifying the characteristics of global society and global culture. A cultural type of approach emerges (actually there are many approaches but they all have the same intention) which attempts to oppose the economic (Wallerstein) and political (Huntington) approaches to hegemony in the study of global society.

Even in this case we must recall a precursor: Marshal McLuhan and his *Global Village*. The cultural approach reveals itself well in the work curated by Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash and Roland Robertson, *Global Modernities* (1995). Along with Giddens’ book mentioned above, it reveals the nature of the approach that puts modernity and global society together.

There are still others path leading to the study of global society. One of these is linked to the study of global migrations (Cotesta 1999, 2009). This involves understanding the

possible consequences of migrations on local societies. The principal aim of this approach was to understand the social and cultural changes caused by migrations and the forms of cooperation and/or conflict that could be created. This implicated revisiting the questions listed earlier on the existence of “global society” and “global culture”.

From this research emerges a vision of global society as a structure composed of different elements – a plural and multidimensional structure.

The first characteristic of this vision of global society is the interdependence of local societies. With the idea of “interdependence”, one tries to highlight the fact that, “elements that were once separated are now in contact with each other, but [...] [that] from the moment in which [...] [they] enter into a global perspective, anything happening to one element of the system will have repercussions on [all] the others” (Cotesta 1999: 94). “Local societies” are defined as all societies, big or small, who have networks of relations with other societies. To avoid falling into the unsolvable ethnic contradictions of the nationalistic paradigm, these societies are considered as complex structures where the social actors have different visions of the world, different essential aims and different lifestyles. Therefore, forms of cooperation and/or conflict may verify themselves independently from the persons belonging to one or another society, social group or national state. There could be, for example, an interest to guarantee the possibility of workers from the peripheral countries of the global economic system (Africa, Asia or Latin American countries) as well as an interest on the part of businessmen and/or families from the central societies of the system (the United States or Europe, for example) to migrate. Workers with low levels of professional qualification and possibly also their unions could be opposed to this objective alliance so as to protect themselves from the competition of immigrant workers in the labor market. Conflicts may also arise from cultural questions connected to religion and people’s cultural identity. This approach is inspired by the sociology Max Weber, Georg Simmel and Talcott Parsons.



According to this approach, inside the network of interdependent relationships of global society one must distinguish economic interdependence from political interdependence. The underlying idea is that different spheres of society are not global in the same way or that, independently from their level of “globality”, these spheres can act in different or even opposing ways. For example, economic integration with other countries may be desired, but not cultural or religion integration. This is true both in relations between countries and in the relations of single individuals with social groups and institutions. It is also the case with migrants who desire economic integration in their host countries while still maintaining their cultural traditions, social and religious values and lifestyles. Sometimes, in one individual, tendencies can be found that are both favorable and contrary to forms of global life.

“Culture” is another dimension of global society that needs to be clearly distinguished from other dimensions. Some authors, such as Robertson, Featherstone, Ritzer, Pieterse and Appadurai, have studied global culture. One question asked in the 1990s was whether global culture was just the “Americanization” of lifestyles and cultural symbols (for example: Coca Cola). From the sum total of the research of the authors listed above emerged the conclusion that inside of each local society, there had been an increase in “cultural variability” and, for these individuals, a newer and richer offering of possibilities (Cotesta 1999: 96). In short, “cultural pluralism” increased in every society.

One aspect of global society that has been studied is the absence of political integration, that is, the difficulty of creating a “global societal community” (Parsons). One consequence of this missing integration is the impossibility of addressing the question of equity in global society. In the current state, the question of an equal “division of global resources” cannot be addressed because the “moral models of reference” for a shared evaluation of justice and equity are still too diverse. Only if the different ethics of the world can work together to develop a group of shared values will it be possible to begin providing answers to the questions of equity and justice in a global society (Cotesta 1999: 100). In the meantime,

social inequalities continue to grow and feed the mistrust and resentment of global citizens.

This research highlights another dimension of global society: the communications infrastructure that makes it possible. All the people, goods, messages, cultures, religions and visions of the worlds travel through a global communications system (roads, airports, maritime ports, telecommunications satellites, etc.) This system has a fundamental importance for global society and we need to study it meticulously in order to understand the direction in which we are headed.

Finally, this approach directs its attention towards the *actors* of globalization in order to answer the question: *who* produces global society? In the scenario where the actors of globalization are large states, companies and international institutions (the United Nations, World Bank, International Monetary Fund) we must add the consideration where individuals, social groups and global public opinion are also acting on the global scene with relevant effect. Migrants are also important actors of globalization and produce cultural pluralism inside of the local societies where they live.

The conclusion of the collection of studies conducted according to this approach is that we are headed “towards a plural world” (Cotesta 1999: 99). In fact, if a structure of interdependent relations emerges on the *societal level*, the difference persists on *the level of the visions of the world*. Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined community” is very important in order to understand this aspect. Robertson applied this concept to all of humanity in its entirety. Now, the question is whether a “global human community” already exists or if it needs to be configured. The answer is that there are attitudes of opening and dialogue with others but these are opposed by pressures to close and refuse relations with people, groups and societies different from one’s own. “The processes of globalization configure a plural world, more ‘possible worlds’, real and imagined with strong capacities to adapt to each other” (Cotesta 1999: 100).

These theoretical acquisitions are the departing point of researches made in the following years. The cultural climate has changed, however. Thanks to a decade’s worth of work,

now (we are hovering over the millennium) we have an interpretation of a general character, a theoretical canvas on which to plan and carry out other research.

New research is moving in the direction of integrating and developing the conception of society and the global world². Essentially, there are two aims we are working on: “the first has to do with the reconstruction and of the historical-cultural context in which the image of the global world is created; the second, the attempt to interpret [the global] world as a human field open to new possibilities of life for individuals” (Cotesta 2004: v).

The investigation is divided into three parts. The first is dedicated to the exploration of forms of “global life”. This has to do with recognizing the symbols and forms of “global” life in the daily lives of people. Then the different spheres of global life are described: economy, politics and culture. The types of political conflicts are constructed (local, geographic area, worldwide) and the possibility or the difficulties of creating a global order is explored.

The second part of the investigation is dedicated to the interpretations of global societies. Before looking at the merit of different modern and contemporary perspectives of global society, we ask the question (already evident in another form in the previous research): is global society only a modern or contemporary form of life or were there global forms of life and thought already in the ancient world? The answer is that in the ancient Greek world and in the Hellenistic world there were investigations into understanding the form and consciousness of a global life. An example of this thesis is the reported analysis of the “inhabited world” (*oikoumene*) by Herodotus and Claudius Ptolemy. Something analogous was also found in the Islamic world as proof of the existence of an *Islamic view* of the global world: for example, see *al-Muqaddima*, the masterpiece of Ibn Khaldun. In the next part of the analysis, the interpretations of global society proposed by 20th century historians and philosophers are considered. The most important paradigms of the 20th century are those of Arnold Toynbee on history and the conflicts between civilizations; that of Fernand Braudel on the unity and plurality of



civilization and that of Carl Schmitt on “Der Nomos der Erde” (the Law of the Earth), that is, the history of *Jus publicum europaeum* as a model for interpreting the creation of European hegemony over the world and of its decline in the 20th century.

The third part of the research dialogues with three interpretations of global society proposed by contemporary authors: the paradigm of identity and of the order of civilizations (Huntington); the paradigm of the worldwide economic system (Wallerstein) – already considered as very important in the previous study; and the philosophical “discourse” on empire (Hardt, Negri).

These interpretations offer wonderful ideas and suggestions but, taken as a whole and for other reasons, are criticized during the course of research. On the basis of the multi-dimensional model developed previously, the essential points are traced with regards to economy, politics (we must remember that we now find ourselves post-Twin Tower attacks of 2001) and global culture. The answer to the question: does a global society (or world) exist, is positive. The question of whether a global culture exists is also positive. In fact, all social actors aspire to live a universal and shared life while at the same time respecting and valuing one’s own ethic, cultural, religious and sexual differences – our different lifestyle choices. The affirmation of the particular in the universal is desired (Robertson 1992a: 104), or otherwise said, we want human life to maintain a universal character while at the same time making it possible to cultivate individual differences.

The most important theoretical acquisition of this period seems to be – once again – the awareness that our world is a plural world. It is this for two equally important reasons: on one hand, different local societies possess different values, institutions, religions, lifestyles; and on the other hand, *inside of every single local society* exists a cultural pluralism that has never before been seen in history except in some large cities of the ancient world.

This conception of global society does not belong to the “optimistic” type. In fact, there are three questions that create distance from this naive perspective of global society. “The

first regards the enormous inequality of resources needed for living that are available to people. The second is related to the high number of conflicts that exist inside of global society. The third highlights the return of religion and civilization as means for the justification of these conflicts” (Cotesta 2004: vi). The formation of a *single world* is accompanied by the display of an “imperial” form of power that does not leave much space for optimism. In the face of our findings, we have three alternatives. The first “consists of aiding the processes of unification in order to search for globality without plurality; the second consists of pushing away globality in the name of plurality; the third consists of putting together the search for globality in plurality, or on the contrary, maintaining plurality in a world that is increasingly global” (Cotesta 2004: 200-201). In this context, there can be the temptation to seek out global hegemony. These attempts have already been repeatedly defeated throughout history and seeking to re-propose them might be dangerous. Another temptation consists of closing oneself within the fence of nation-states and this today seems weak-willed. The most realistic outlook foresees forms of global or universal life (the human race as its basis), building dialogue for peace and a world order starting from shared values (and there are more than we can imagine) and from the differences that undeniably exist between people, groups, state and civilizations.

GLOBAL SOCIETY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Research on global society opens more problems than it solves, however. Research on the current situation can be in depth if, in the analysis, we include past forms of society with their horizons opened or closed towards globality. This comparison can serve as critical reagent towards the tendency to consider the present as the only form of life possible for human beings. Sociology of history or sociology of culture and images of the world in different civilizations can serve this purpose.

From the analysis of culture and the values of global society also emerges the question of what can be the common values on which to base a dialogue designed to avoid the risk of conflict that is increasing worldwide. The idea that all people have unalienable rights seems to be the point of convergence between different cultures, religions and civilizations. The “dignity of the human person”, in fact, can become the foundation of shared values on which to construct dialogue between civilizations. The question, however, is not so simple and deserves more close attention.

First of all, we must consider some events that contest our way of considering the “dignity of the human person”, our way of understanding human rights and our concept of humanity. Among these events it is necessary to include: *a) The Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights* (1981); *b) the validity of “asiatic” values as basis for “human rights” proclaimed by the Bangkok conference* (1993); and *c) the Arab Charter of Human Rights* (1994). From these events it is clear that every civilization interprets the idea and practice of human rights in a particular way. Human rights and the idea of man as a universal being are a battlefield rather than a meeting place where one can build dialogue between civilizations. The sociology of a global world must take on conflicting interpretations of the fundamental ideas regarding humanity as its own object of analysis. Its principal task is to try to develop a universal point of view in order to avoid the trap of cultural relativism. If every person has his own idea of the dignity of the person and if everyone has his own idea of man, his rights and his dignity, then building dialogue becomes an impossible task.

But making headway into researching this field is difficult work. Surveys and exploratory inquiries have been made in different directions: *a) on certain aspects of Islam; b) on the idea of human rights and on democracy in contemporary African culture; c) on the return on Confucianism as a means of legitimization of the new Chinese society.* The aim, in fact, consists in verifying if there is a common ground in terms of values that could function as a base for a normative structure, a new *nomos der Erde* for a global society. The research is thus

concentrated around several central themes: *a)* common European values; *b)* the claims of other cultural traditions of being just as valid and deserving of consideration with regards to the foundation of human rights; *c)* the analysis of the proposals of some important intellectuals of these cultural traditions on human rights and democracy. The results of this work converge in the volume *Società globale e diritti umani* (2008) and in the English edition *Global Society and Human Rights* (2012) where there are studies which do not appear in the Italian edition. Some other aspects are contained in the volume *Kings into Gods. How Prostration Shaped Eurasian Civilizations* (2016) and *Max Weber on China. Modernity and Capitalism in a Global Perspective* (2018a).

With regards to the criticism of Eurocentrism – present in all the positions analyzed in these studies – the clearest formulation is found in Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (2000): “European history is no longer seen as embodying anything like universal human history” (Chakrabarty 2000: 15). European culture is now the aim of criticism as well as its scientific paradigms and its “universal and secular vision of the human” (Chakrabarty 2000: 16).

The criticism of Chakrabarty is turned against the unilaterality of European social and political sciences that has systematically ignored the existence of other worlds. What is more is that they have even ignored the existence of different ways of life that are an alternative to the capitalistic types of hegemony existing in Europe. European social sciences have, however, created a patrimony of concepts and theories that can help these other worlds to understand themselves and human society in its universality. The epistemology of Chakrabarty, however, is not a complete alternative to European social sciences. Their theories, though, may still claim to be true if, and only if, they open themselves to these other vibrant worlds that were previously negated and neglected: societies and cultures other than Western, such as Indian or African, or even *subaltern* groups such as workers that express universal needs opposed to the specific needs of hegemonic capitalism. Chakrabarty’s theoretical proposal wants to build *truly universal* social sciences that are able to explain the

whole structure of global society and not just one side of it (European-Western capitalist society).

A more radical *challenge* to Europe, its view of the world and its claims of universality arises from the so-called *African Renaissance* and the return of political Confucianism.

The *African Renaissance* presents two aspects that are intimately connected: the criticism of political colonialism and the criticism of cultural colonialism. The most eminent figure of both aspects was the great poet and first President of Senegal, Léopold Sédar Senghor. His concept of “negritude” gathers the criticism of Western culture that had been going on since the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century by Edward W. Du Bois. In his thought, William Blyden’s concept of “Afrocentrism” and the reclaiming of Egyptian civilization as an “African” civilization (in the work of Cheik Anta Diop) come together. Other works to add to these contributions are the radical criticisms of Western culture made by authors more familiar to us such as Edward Said (1978) and Martin Bernal (1987). More recently, the *African Renaissance* has received a new push from other intellectuals (philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists). Their works have two aims: on one hand, they criticize the European-Western view of the world and its values; and on the other hand, they propose their own model of society and political government (Cotesta 2012: 125-150).

The *African Renaissance* movement is still animated by different intentions and projects. The unifying element certainly is the rejection of the Eurocentric conception of culture and civilization. Opinions are divided, however, on how to build an autonomous African society. There is, in fact, a different attitude towards democracy and human rights. No one, for example, rejects the idea of the existence of universal human rights. Everyone has the idea of basing them on African cultural traditions. Important contributions following this line of thought are those of Kwasi Wiredu (*An Akan Perspective on Human Rights*) and Anthony K. Appiah (*In My Father’s House*). Regarding forms of government, there is a general rejection of liberal democracy which is identified with the *winner take all* system, or, as some say, with a purely quantitative

way of considering and evaluating opinions. In its place – this seems to be the most widespread position – a type of democracy based on unanimous consensus has been proposed. For the African intellectuals considered here, “Human rights are universal and democracy is paramount; however, the concept of democracy needs to be expanded. On a global scale as well as within single states, the method of decision-making needs to be based on unanimous consensus, not on the principle of majority” (Cotesta 2012: 137). Being a member of the universal human community cannot involve sacrificing one’s own cultural identity. On the contrary – and here emerges their own claim to hegemony – the method of consensual democracy coming from traditional African culture can and should be the governing method of *all* societies.

We encounter an analogous trend in the *main stream* Chinese political culture of the last two decades. Confucianism was banned for over a century because it was deemed to be “complicit” with traditional Chinese society. During the 1990s, however, with an innovative impulse from Deng Xiaoping, it was rediscovered and valued as a founding value of Chinese identity. The emerging opinion the 2000s is clearly expressed by the philosophy of politician Zhao Tingyang: the Confucian tradition of “everything under the Heavens” (*tian xia*) should dialogue with the Greek tradition founded on the *agorà*.

According to Zhao Tingyang, “the historical process, under Western hegemony, has led to the creation of a global world that is physical, not human. The world is a geographical expression, but there are still no global institutions capable of governing it. This is because Western thinking and political practice have viewed problems in terms of state and internationalism without seeing that, if you seek to create a universal human world, it is necessary to adopt a global perspective. Think of the world as a world”. First of all, then, it is necessary to adopt a global perspective of the world. The Confucian approach is more suitable for this purpose than the Western European philosophical and sociological theories. The empirical reference of “everything under the Heavens” (*tian xia*) must be changed. For the ancient Chinese, *tian xia* only re-



ferred to China; now the concept must refer to the whole world.

The *tian xia* institutional model, “everything under the Heavens”, includes different political bodies. It follows a precise hierarchy: “everything under the Heavens,” states, families. As such, it is the opposite of the Western European model, which is centered on the categories nation-states, communities, individuals. “The world, states and families need to be governed in a coherent way, in order to represent the many expressions of one, sole institution” (Zhao Tingyang 2008: 17). This “coherent way” means governing “from top to bottom, from the largest to the smallest, because the smallest political societies are always conditioned by the largest” (Zhao Tingyang 2008: 17).

These statements could be read in essays published by Zhao Tingyang in French and English in 2008 and 2009. In the following years, other “Confucian” authors have continued the debate between the Western democratic system and the Confucian meritocratic method. Already in Zhao Tingyang’s positions one finds the criticism of liberal democracy as a regime that exalts pure quantity, responsible for Hitler’s atrocities and national socialism. Joseph Chan (2014) develops a theory of a harmonious Confucian society through a dialogue with American philosopher of justice John Rawls. Chan seeks to combine the Confucian tradition with democratic values. His overall position can be resumed in the following way:

Confucian perfectionism tends to build society around the virtues of individuals. “According to this perspective, political authority exists for the people and is partly justified by its ability to protect and promote the people’s well-being; But the authoritative relationship between the governed and those who govern is also constituted by mutual commitment on both sides – those who govern are committed to serve the people, and the governed willingly and gladly accept and support the governance” (Chan 2014: 19). The goal is the well-being of all in a well-ordered, harmonic society, where the “grand union” of all human beings is achieved. This ideal vision, alas, exist nowhere; not even in Confucian lands. Therefore, it is necessary to think of real-world alternatives (Cotesta 2018a).

It is a merely ideological position that, however, contains clearly authoritative elements in the moment in which it takes the people's consensus and support of its rulers for granted.

Daniel A. Bell has argued for political and social Confucianism for some time: for at least 20 years, according to his publications. In *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (2015) he demonstrates the limits of democracy and claims the superiority of meritocracy, that is, the superiority of Chinese society and the Chinese system of government. It would take too long to illustrate the single passages in Bell's work where he argues in favor of the superiority of meritocracy with respect to democracy. His model, like Chan's, on one hand shows the "ideal" side; while on the other it resembles that which *already* exists in China. According to Bell:

Like earlier practices in Imperial China, the political system aims to select and promote public servants by means of examinations and assessments of performance at lower levels of government. Chinese-style meritocracy is plagued with imperfections, but few would deny that the system has performed relatively well compared to democratic regimes of comparable size and level of economic development [...] And the world is watching China's experiment with meritocracy [...] In twenty years' time, perhaps we will be debating Chinese-style political meritocracy as an alternative model – and a challenge – to Western-style democracy (Bell 2015: 4).

The Chinese, however, only give democracy a small role at the local level. According to Bell, they are not interested in voting. They look at democracy in a functional way. What is important is that the rulers work for the common good of the people (Cotesta 2018b).

From the work on African, Indian and Chinese political cultures as well as some forays into the panorama of Islamic politics, emerges a double criticism of our approach to studying global culture. The first is an epistemological criticism regarding the fact that in our social theories, other worlds – as Chakrabarty says – either do not exist or are considered inferior. The second has to do with our system of values (human rights) and democracy as a form of government. No one open-

ly contests these values. In general, all perspectives propose their own interpretation of global society. With regards to the system of values, there is a convergence in considering the “dignity of the human person” as the basic value. There are different views on how to concretely establish what is dignified or undignified. Different traditions compete with each other or are even in strong opposition to each other. The same thing happens – except in the Confucian perspective – with democracy. Everyone reformulates the concept of democracy in his own way. In political Confucianism, democracy is considered useless and in any case inferior to meritocracy or only as an aid to meritocracy. However, from a European and Western point of view, democracy is not only the *Westminster model* (*winner takes all*) as the Chinese and African understand it. The European Union, for example, has a confusing decision-making mechanism that is based on the consensus of all participants. The heads of government can be considered as the equivalent of the tribal leaders of African democracies. Even the federal system in the United States cannot be fully aligned with the *Westminster model*. The difference between political systems has to do with the expected role of individuals and the people in collective decision-making. None of these political traditions think of society as a *political* community. From all perspectives (Islam included), European Western society is considered individualistic and selfish in terms of the role of individuals in society and government. The real question is whether the irrelevance of individuals in the government of society can be the norm or whether their role should be considered fundamental to the government of the society of which they are a part.

GLOBAL SOCIETY AND CIVILIZATION

From the research until now summarily presented, emerges the result that each of the great civilizations is the bearer of a vision of the origin of the universe, the physical world, the inhabited world, of society and of humankind. Each presents a claim to universality and each claims that its

conception of humanity is the right one. Are these claims true? Or are they unfounded?

It is incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to respond to these questions. There could be a way, though, to circumscribe the arguments and try to give an answer. This way might consist of investigating their origins, their historical configuration and their structure. The project that I have been working on for the last few years is dedicated to this investigation.

The research involves the Greek world as well as Islamic and Chinese society. Three case studies have been made: one dedicated to Greek and Greco-Roman culture; another to Chinese culture and the last to Islamic culture.

The identification of the temporal arch to consider takes its inspiration from Karl Jaspers theory of “axial revolution”. For this reason, in the Greek world we deal with theories on the origin of the universe, the physical world and the *oikoumene*, the conceptions of society, power and man from Presocratics to Claudius Ptolemy. The vision of the world of philosophers, historians and geographers was analyzed to highlight the gradual building process of the universal *vision* of man in Greek and Greco-Roman society.

An analogous study was carried out on China. The analysis starts from the thought of Confucius and concludes with the work of Sima Tian, the great Chinese historian of the second century B.C. Even here, the aim is to see how the Universalist vision of society and man as well as the idea of power and its management was constructed in ancient China.

The question is more complicated for the Islamic world. Jaspers’ approach to the study of civilizations or axial societies is not applicable if one remains completely linked to his programmatic declaration. Already, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt understands “axial revolution” in a more general sense. With this concept, he intends the upheaval of the fundamentals of the vision of the world, society and power in a civilization. Based on this, what happened in the Arab world and then in the whole area from the Mediterranean to Central Asia over the course of the 6th-12th centuries A.D. can without a doubt be understood as an axial revolution. To fully understand the

construction process of the *Islamic vision* of the world, the philosophical, historical and geographical thought from the 9th-14th centuries was analyzed including that of: al-Kindi, al-Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), al-Ghazali, al-Tabari, al-Idrisi, Ibn Rush (Averroé) and Ibn Khaldun.

Unexpected convergences of these worlds emerge from this work as much as foreseeable differences. Convergences appear in the conception of the universe and its origin between Taoism, pre-Socratic philosophy and Aristotelianism: the world for them is eternal and uncreated. On the contrary, notable differences appear regarding the Platonic conception where the world was created by the Demiurge.

A difference also emerges when the conception of society is considered. In the Greek world, despite the presence of slavery and, in some authors, even its justification – the *polis* is thought of as a (possible) community. In Chinese political thought, there does not seem to be any case where political community has a role – not even in Confucianism. Obeying the rulers is expected. In other words, Greek political philosophy sets out to find the best form of government for the political community, while Chinese political philosophy (with obvious differences between Confucianism and legalism) thinks about the “virtues” that the sovereign must possess. Despite the differences between them, for Islamic philosophers, the common aim is to create a theory of the caliphate and to identify the “virtue” of the imam. Avicenna, al-Farabi and Averroes make their accounts with Greek philosophy but their general proposal does not contemplate an active role for the people. Ibn Khaldun had a critical conception of society that is of great interest but, even though he lived when the caliphate was only a symbol, his position is not different than his illustrious predecessors.

The contribution of historians is important in regards to identity and the construction of a vision of the inhabited world (*oikoumene*) in every civilization (Sima Qian for China; Herodotus and Polybius for Greece; al-Tabari for Islam). The analysis of their works show how they give meaning and identity to the history of their people and attempt to insert them

into universal history, or more simply put, to understand it as universal history *tout court*.

The analysis of works by geographers is needed to gradually show how the empirical reference of these civilizations keeps broadening to the point of encompassing the entire inhabited world.

In the end it seems I may provisionally conclude by stating that every civilization has its own idea and its own project for a global society. Comparative analysis shows the possibility of dialogue and, at the same time, the risks of conflict. What is important is to work in the area of common values and interests rather than to exalt differences. The demon of identity has always carried poisoned fruit.

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NOTES

¹ In fact, *main stream* Chinese political thought comes to these conclusions. The bigger influences the smaller. See more on this to follow.

² The concepts of “global society” and “global world”, though sometimes used as synonyms in order to avoid cacophony and repetition with the word “sociology”, do not always indicate the same object or the same social process.

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