



Is Putin's War a Civilizational War or a Cultural War?

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Putin's invasion of Ukraine has complicated the narrative the West had built up after the Cold War and in the wake of 9/11. The new aggressor of the West is no longer some fanatic weirdo hiding in a cave in the middle of nowhere, but a clean-shaven, calculating, and "civilized" individual quietly operating from a country that is most commonly believed to be a part of the European cultural sphere. In 2006, Thomas Friedman quoted in a *New York Times* editorial the psychiatrist Wafa Sultan who had said:

The clash we are witnessing (...) is not a clash of religions, or a clash of civilizations. (...) It is a clash between a mentality that belongs to the Middle Ages and another mentality that belongs to the 21st century. It is a clash between civilization and backwardness, between the civilized and the primitive, between rationality and barbarity. (Friedman 2006)

In the face of the new "enemy," this rhetoric takes on a slightly different feel, as it is the 19th and early 20th century that Russia is compared with, rather than the more thoroughly distant Middle Ages. Russia is unfree, oppressive, and disregards some of the Enlightenment principles that

Western democracies have been taking for granted for close to a century. But Russia is not a complete “other,” especially not from the perspective of many Europeans. In contrast, the world imagined by ISIS is much more clearly diametrically opposed to Western civilization. Despite his strange diatribes against the west, Putin still looks “civilized” to many. In contrast, whether or not Islamist extremists are rational, large segments of the West’s population cannot but see them as fundamentally uncivilized. Whatever Putin does, he remains the president of a big European country, which makes it that much more unlikely that Westerners dismiss and brand him a terrorist. Many continue to believe we can talk to him or must try to talk to him.

In this short article I want to relate the Ukrainian war to the terms culture and civilization. The distinction between culture and civilization is not very well embedded in the English language but has always been meaningful in other European languages. Civilization refers to more material, technical, economic, and social facts, while culture refers to spiritual, intellectual, and artistic phenomena. Norbert Elias finds that civilization has always had an expansive character (Elias 1978: 5) whereas culture delimits. Civilization is intended to be universal whereas culture tends to be the expression of a people’s individuality. Thomas Mann defines culture as “national” and civilization as “the liquidation of nationalism” (1920: 179). In the nineteenth century, the French (following the Germans) began seeing culture as closely associated with the arts, which restricts culture to a more intimate sphere.

Alternative Cultures and Alternative Civilizations

The world imagined by ISIS is opposed to Western civilization. I say: *Western*. Islamic extremists call for an alternative civilization, and Putin is not doing that. Though from a Western point of view, the terrorist project is not leading forward but backward, Islamic extremists think of their new Islamic utopia as more modern and “more civilized.” Of course, they can do so only by looking through a very ideologically tainted lens, but their *intention* is to replace Western civilization with a new one. In contrast, Russia does not necessarily seek to dismantle or destroy Western civilization. If anything, Putin may even see himself as a more legitimate inheritor to it. As such, his disagreement with the West plays on a different register than Islamists. The latter have a civilizational disagreement with the West, whereas Putin does not have a problem with Western *civilization* but rather with Western *culture*. The first reason is that Putin has no

alternative civilizational project to offer. Eurasianism is neither a cultural nor a civilizational project but merely a vague idea. Islam has an alternative project, but Putin can, in terms of civilization, only follow the West.

In the above quotation, Wafa Sultan understands civilization as progressive and modernizing, while Islam is depicted as opposed to progress. She sees religion as anti-progressive. Similarly, Richard Dawkins is convinced that religion – not just extremism and fanaticism but any religion – is the enemy of science. Sultan and Dawkins see religion as culture. Cultures (no matter if Western or Eastern) can indeed be opposed to civilization. Local cultures can resent globalization and innovation. Local food traditions can be annihilated by a multinational like Nestlé, which creates a clash between culture and civilization. Both culture and civilization can have good or bad functions. “Bad” global civilizations have destroyed local cultures. Vice versa, from a “civilizational” point of view, the insistence on culture can delay or stop civilizational progress. Correspondingly, Terry Eagleton, when reacting to the phenomenon of Islamic terrorism, establishes a clear border between culture and civilization: “The line runs between civilization (in the sense of universality, autonomy, individuality, rational speculation, etc.) and culture if we understand by this all those unreflected loyalties and spontaneous convictions” (Eagleton 2008: 46). Eagleton establishes the religious view as a “merely cultural” view determined by “unreflected loyalties and spontaneous convictions” to which he opposes the “civilizational” view based on Enlightenment principles. The problem is that the religious sentiment of terrorists attempts to replace Western civilization with another kind of civilization, which means that religion is here not merely culture but also – or even mainly – a civilizational project. The terrorist objective is not to protect local religious culture against Western civilization but rather to create another, better civilization.

Putin takes an entirely different route. First, he is not against democracy. Of course, he does not have an ideological position in support of democracy, but rather lacks a good ideological – or civilizational – argument against it. Civilized democracy is the only legitimate idea he can imagine; he can never afford to admit his anti-democratic actions. In his speeches he talks about Enlightenment principles such as truth, freedom, and justice that would be the very nature of man and accuses the West to suppress these principles. The “golden billion” theory, a staple of

Russian conspiratorial thought, is meant to criticize the division of humanity into first- and second-rate citizens. Putin suggests that the West is not “western” enough and that he can do it better. However, he can do so only by imitating (or apparently imitating) Western civilization.

Putin does not want to (or cannot) “civilize” the West in the way in France once intended to “civilize” Algeria. Of course, whether this is based on ideology or simply on an inability, matters. If he *wanted* to civilize the West, he would be like Islamists. He would be like ISIS that wants to civilize the Iraqis who have fallen, in their view, into a state of “ignorance” (*jahiliyya*). If he *could*, he would be like Chinese who *could* Sinicize Africans and teach them Confucian values but have no interest in doing so. But he is doing neither. When Norbert Elias says that civilization has always had an expansive character, we find that this expansive model matches neither with Putin’s ambitions nor with his capabilities. So, what motivates his expansive actions? The answer is that Putin has a major problem with Western *culture*. Islamic terrorists criticize Western civilization and offer an alternative civilizational vision; Putin *can* only offer a critique of culture.

What is “Western Culture”?

Despite a colonialist and imperialist history, Western civilization has also fostered democracy, pluralism, and human rights. Such principles emerge in parallel with science, a more liberal education permitting critical thinking, and, more recently, the free use of information technologies such as the internet. The West has implemented these civilizational achievements and created a corresponding *culture*, and this is the culture that Putin abhors. Part of it is the *woke* culture that Putin has referred to repeatedly in his speeches. But he also resents the culture of startups and meritocracy, as well as the transgressive movements of subcultures. He is against the cultures of individual freedom that Western civilizations have enabled. In a word: he wants to stay in line with Western civilization by implementing a pseudo-democracy, but he rejects the culture. Gutenberg’s book printing press was a civilizational invention, but what would be written in these books was a matter of culture. Putin is not against the printing press but he hates the contents that these presses could print. Therefore, the war in Ukraine is not inscribed in a logic of ‘culture against civilization’ nor in one of ‘civilization against civilization’, but it is a war of ‘culture against culture’.

The Western world's distinctive force is not its civilization but its culture. Russia is, by and large, part of Western civilization, but it does not have the dynamic democratic cultures that one finds in the west. So, how do I define culture? The English art critic Clive Bell defined culture as "tolerance, receptivity, magnanimity, unshockableness, and taste for, and sympathy with pleasure" (Bell: 168). He also referred to a certain kind of aesthetic sensitivity, insisting that the cultural man "will be highly perceptible to aesthetic impressions and to aesthetic impressions not of one sort only" (124). Enlightening in this context is also the definition of the nineteenth century English poet Matthew Arnold who wrote that culture "is best described by the word interesting" (Arnold: 170). Culture is interesting because it provides subtle reflections on the world as well as on ourselves. Interesting phenomena are those that can be submitted to critical examination. We do not have to agree with them, but we perceive any contact with them as beneficial for our personal development.

Civilization is self-affirming, clear, and fast, whereas culture is slow, intriguing, and... interesting. Interesting things are often those things that are subtle or flexible. Culture is soft, fluid, delicate, and open, that is, the contrary of rigid. Arnold's "interesting" culture is suspicious of all forms of prophetic revelations, transcendental purities, as well as immediate truths or unmediated self-certainties. The immediate source of culture is neither rational Enlightenment nor God, but simply culture itself, which manages to be interesting just because... it is culture.

This is the culture that Putin hates. To his annoyance, this culture has always attracted the world's brightest minds. Many people emigrate for "civilizational" reasons: they want material values, good management, and security. But the brightest minds are attracted by culture because they find it interesting. Putin cannot offer this culture. He has long lists of what he dislikes in other cultures, but he is not able to create an interesting alternative cultural vision. The paranoiac identification of some Western cultural phenomena and the insistence on their incompatibility with some general cultural guidelines does not represent a cultural project. Even radical Islam has attracted people (though perhaps not the brightest) because it also offers a cultural vision: Islam is a way of life. Putin cannot even offer that. As a result, the best and the brightest are

streaming into Western countries. Nobody (apart from a few Central Asians) streams into Russia and this is the real *cultural* problem that Putin faces.

Culture as it is understood in western societies, is supposed to settle on a critical middle-ground capable of accommodating different positions and constantly considering all sorts of human ingenuity. By avoiding religious, political, and scientific dogmatisms, culture manages, in the best case, to remain subtle and interesting. Putin goes in the opposite direction.

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