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**THE CLASHES OF CIVILIZATION:
SUPERPOWER, CITIZENSHIP, AND SCALE AFTER SEPTEMBER 11**

-- or --

“Liberal Leninism and Communist Liberalism”

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Disinterested intellectual curiosity is the lifeblood of real civilization.

– George Macauley Trevelyan, 1942

American frivolity is one of the world’s joys, the expression of an unprecedented civilizational happiness.

–*The New Republic*, 2002¹

Introduction

After September 11, President George W. Bush declared, "Civilization, itself, the civilization we share, is threatened."² (This idea was echoed, later, has been repeated, in

essence, by Joseph Lieberman and Elizabeth Dole in their pointed condemnation – indeed blacklisting – of academics in America.) Then, in Afghanistan, the U.S. dropped leaflets along with bombs. One leaflet shows a smiling American soldier shaking hands with an Afghani male, bearded and turbaned. “The partnership of nations is here to help,” it proclaims. As during the Cold War, the U.S. is fighting, again, for the hearts and minds of peoples abroad, recognizing and creating one of the global publics in a world in which it is the only superpower.³

In its own way, I see Public Interest Anthropology [PIA] as also fighting for hearts and minds, or perhaps fighting with them. In doing so it enacts the understanding that understanding, itself, entails negotiation and, at times, struggle. Through this paper I explore the possibility that *conceptual clarification* remains a signal means – along with providing ethnography and providing context – for PIA’s negotiation and struggle. There are at least three ways in which PIA-attuned conceptual clarification could proceed. First, it could analyze the concept (or concepts or discourses) at stake. This would be a more typical academic undertaking, but PIA should not ignore or disdain such work, in my view. Second, conceptual clarification could consider the current public use of a concept and then offer a revised “corrected” version of it. This would, indeed, be an

¹ Sept 9 & 16 2002: 7.

² Bush to the UN: “This threat cannot be ignored. This threat cannot be appeased. **Civilization, itself, the civilization we share, is threatened.** History will record our response, and judge or justify every nation in this hall. **The civilized world is now responding.** We act to defend ourselves and deliver our children from a future of fear. We choose the dignity of life over a culture of death. We choose lawful change and **civil disagreement over coercion**, subversion, and chaos. These commitments -- hope and order, law and life -- **unite people across cultures and continents.** **Upon these commitments depend all peace and progress.** For these commitments, we are determined to fight” (emphasis added). If Bin Laden and others want the West out of the East then, in that sense arguably, their plea is not for civilization – the unqualified, unassailable good that must be spread everywhere. I.e., there is no place for “NON-civilization” in the (discursive) world of civilization.

³ A strong definition of “superpower” is a polity which can act at will and impose it easily. A weaker version is a polity whose actions must provoke a reaction (including accommodation) from all other polities of the same (constructed) order. The U.S. is a superpower in the latter sense. (If power corrupts,

attempt to create a (new) normative understanding “out there” of the concept(s), and I will support this approach.⁴ Finally conceptual clarification can be furthered through comparison with the concept’s use elsewhere. Today I offer a very preliminary thinking out-loud – in the context of this anthropological and professional “public” – of what might be involved in doing Public Interest Anthropology.

As a concession to time, I will pursue only the first two approaches above (especially the second) and I’ll attempt to do so with regard to the concept of “civilization,” a concept which has reemerged publicly both in our government and in the circles of policy pundits, those arenas within which anthropological insights are often ignored. Focusing on “civilization” in this context, moreover, reflects my sense that PIA takes its cues -- its objects and its projects -- from actors and representations that are, as it were, already “out there” in the world, rather than, in the first instance, from either ethnography or theory (though both – especially ethnography – would be central to the work). Public Interest Anthropology seeks to understand public discourses, and to learn from them, so as to endorse or advise against them.⁵

what of superpower?)

⁴ Again, research is central: teaching, whether inside the academy or outside of it (in the public sphere), cannot proceed with accuracy or energy without research.

⁵ Should PIA always begin by defining the public it is participating in (on any given occasion)? If so, such defining and delimiting of “public” should take into account the media of its creation. Which is to say: the nature of “the public” (or “a public”) has and will change *essentially*, not just superficially, with the media forms associated with it. See, e.g., Arvind Rajagopal’s *Politics After Television* and Arjun Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large*. The (nascent) argument, here, about anxiety and scale owes much to Appadurai’s essay on ethnic violence entitled “Dead Certainty”

Conceptual Clarification as Analysis/discourse

What use does “civilization” have and what are the effects of its usage? Is it about better technology, better culture, better behavior – or all of these at once?⁶ Is “civilization” to be set against terms such as “savagery,” “barbarism” or “primitive”? These are some of the ways the concept is currently used.

I would propose (in an analytical register) that the idea(s) of civilization, as currently deployed, is (are) intertwined with assumptions and anxieties in the U.S. about the scale of humanity and the global order -- and in a way all the more punctuated after September 11. The American (U.S.) imagination, in its link to American power (including capital), is one, which needs to inhabit the entire planet. September 11th, in America, has driven home the sense that scale must be both acquiesced to and fought for.⁷ This is, indeed, a different (new?) idea of both “territory” and “temporality.”

This “globalism” of the imagination, however, and the realities it confronts, recursively undermine the sense of the U.S. as a unified, viable nation-state. Conflicts abroad are (taken as) disorderly. State-side, the privileges of citizenship are (taken to be) under pressure.⁸ (In such a global vision, a particular sculpting of global order, who is the immigrant -- and therefore *not* the citizen?)⁹ States, I think, are no longer able to so assuredly “nationalize” its own (and to solidify its legitimacy thereby, witness Timothy McVeigh). In this world a small group of actors with grand schemes (terrorists, CEOs)

⁶ Each of these involve “freedom”: technology is freedom from want (nature), high culture is freedom from vulgarity, and behavior is freedom from offence. Certain practices – such as writing – have often been seen as central for all three.

⁷ The point about scale, appropriately and perhaps necessarily, was rendered in epic fashion Sept 11th, with heroes and pathos and so on. It is, in this context, the *triviality* and banality of reports of Fire and Police Department looting at the WTC site that makes these reports repugnant.

⁸ See Peter Shock, of Yale Law School, and especially his Davis Center presentation.

⁹ The contemporary concern, in anthropological studies, with “diaspora” likewise raises this question: if

can have massive global effects. (It is striking how many of my students feel, in my view, utterly disempowered with regard to the social and political order of things.) It is in this context that the discourse of civilization arises, as an attempt to sort through and manage these concerns and anxieties.¹⁰ Of the options that therefore remain the one that is apparently being pursued is to seek to create a sense of citizenship-in-civilization, in which one belongs to civilization.¹¹ Comparable to how Benedict Anderson understands nationalism, civilization is promoted as the answer to questions of belonging and of collective trajectory.¹²

Samuel Huntington's influential "clash of civilizations" article reflects this anxiety. Having abdicated the idea that all people(s) will modernize (and that, of course, in a Western mold) he concludes therefore that difference entails conflict. This presumption/conclusion of conflict belies an underlying sense that there really is one true universal civilization, even if others irrationally adhere to competing world-ordering visions. Why, otherwise, the conviction about clash?¹³ In my view, the discourse of civilization -- which is attempting to make sense of a global and globalizing process -- contributes to "clashes" rather than clashes being than encounters between existing,

"majority" and "minority" are not territorially defined, then what?

¹⁰The argument here is resonant with Arjun Appadurai's on violence, see "Dead Certainty..." Civilizational discourses do seem to arise in times which are seen as uncertain -- which is not to say that they emerge in the same way or with the same content. See Spengler *The Decline of the West* (1918) and Toynbee.

¹¹ This is evinced most markedly, I have argued, in the discourses of diasporic peoples: irredentism, today, is about claiming civilizational stature rather than territory. See also my reference, years ago, to the creation of citizenship-as-consumerism.

¹² Though Anderson's exegesis of the latter, in particular -- i.e., trajectory, progress etc -- is insufficient to say the least. See my "'God is a Refugee': Nationality, Morality and History in the 1947 Partition of India" *Displaced Peoples in South Asia*. Sage India forthcoming. (Reprinted from Ghosh (ed.) *Partition, Unification, Nation: Imagined Moral Communities in Modernity*. Special Issue of *Social Analysis* 42(1) 1998: 33-62.)

essentialized civilizations (as seen by Huntington -- as entities, really). Civilization is a concept, which, ironically, promotes conflict, and the war on terror can be seen, in part, as such a consequence. Civilization_S (whatever that may mean), do not clash. Civilization does.¹⁴

I will leave here my analysis of “civilization” and move onto some normative claims. Ideally, analysis like this (above) will help with the normative project, and vice versa.

Conceptual Clarification as Establishing a Norm

Should PIAntthropologists work, then, to banish the notion of “civilization” (and the like)? I think not. After all the anthropological notion of “culture” was intended, in part, to do just that, and has had only limited success.

If Public Interest Anthropology takes its cue from realities beyond itself -- certainly debatable -- it is engaged without being *utopian*: the aim is not to erase and replace, but to reflect upon and resist or build along with agencies that are “already there,” beyond the academy.¹⁵ [As James Fernandez says: “Anthropology is in the academy, but not of it.”] This means, furthermore, that if Public Interest Anthropology is to offer normative meanings for concepts (in the pursuit of conceptual clarification) it

¹³ In my view, Huntington’s anxiety is fundamentally about migration, linked to the ways in which superpower sovereignty is less and less rooted in territory per se. The large cross that stands, alone, over the World Trade Center site exemplifies this, I think. But that is for another time.

¹⁴ Anthropology accordingly – as well as some Area Studies – is again being invited to investigate the irrationality of the Other. See Pletsch, “The Three Worlds, or the Division of Social Scientific Labor” – regarding anthropology’s relation to superpower confrontation post WWII -- and Blaut, *The Colonizer’s Model of the World*. “Civilization” is itself a concept of enormous “scale” -- in this usage – but can be used against global scale anxiety because it has a normative content, and an Other. The revamped normative definition of “civilization” I will proffer below is one which is, I hope, compatible with preserving difference while minimizing Othering. A comparative reflection on Durkheim’s “solidarity” and “anomie” might repay a revisiting.

¹⁵ In this regard this is not – at least not centrally – anthropology as cultural critique.

might well wish to keep in mind what norms resonate with its public. PIA should be particularly, and ever-cautiously, concerned with providing norms that will circulate, that will have “currency” as it were. This is not, I hope, an “if you can’t beat them, join them” position (though “joining,” in some sense, is crucial.)

The contemporary meaning of civilization, in our polity/public, includes a sense of betterment (“the good”) and also, less overtly, a sense of sharing (i.e., a community of ideals) and even arguably of shared purpose. I imagine that many people in the American public – PIA anthropologists not least among them -- might want to keep some of these ideals, along with their implicit politics. Perhaps “civilization,” as one framework within which people understand activity and authority, could be retained, albeit revised. To invoke an analogy: in much the way we wish to debunk “race” yet preserve “difference,” we could seek to reformulate “civilization” to retain its sense of improvement and community and purpose.¹⁶ In other words: using the use of “civilization” as a window-of-opportunity on the public mind(s), can we keep “progress,” but relinquish progressivism? And can we do it in a way the public won’t ignore or dismiss or attack, but might find provocative or even palatable? (As an aside, a glance at the AAA program did not show “civilization” as a topic.)

I would suggest, inspired by thinkers such as Habermas, Gramsci, Elias, Collingwood and others, that “civilization” be seen as a process, in the same way “socialization” is.¹⁷ More precisely, we may talk of “civilizing behavior” and

¹⁶ This is, in some respects, a similar effort as Benedict Anderson’s, who sought to “rescue” the nation from class, race etc. Note that both “race” and “civilization” have long legacies in anthropology and hence, arguably, anthropologists have special obligations to confront them.

¹⁷ Contra “civilization” as an “achieved state” [Raymond Williams, *Keywords*].

“uncivilizing behavior.”¹⁸ The former are those activities that seek to minimize force in the relations within and between polities. The latter are those, which do not do so. “Uncivilizing actions,” however, are neither a survival of our past or the character of others.¹⁹ Every polity has civilizing and uncivilizing practices.²⁰ The responsibility of pursuing civilization rests primarily with the polity’s ruling group, a group that every polity has -- to think otherwise is, again, utopian. (I expect to be lynched for saying this.)²¹ The “civilizing mission” is to widen the entrance to and the terms of rulership, but this is a process and goal, which will likely perdure only if the existing rulers are, in whatever way, participants.²² [Gramsci, hegemony, class traitors vs. revolution]

Yes, I really am proposing (provisionally) that such a re-signification of the concept of “civilization” is possible, publicly. One reason I think so is because I believe that it is in some fundamental sense a *liberal* vision and, in this regard, not utterly out-of-step with the public (or, at least, *how the public sees itself*, which is a crucial consideration for Public Interest Anthropology). This view of “civilization” foregrounds “joint enterprise,” through free(r) association, a liberal principle (though not, therefore, a capitalist principle). It seeks the creation of common grounds on which to act,

¹⁸ I prefer the verb form to the past participle “civilized behavior” because it retains a sense of process, which in turn implies a sense of its opposite (uncivilizing behavior). That is, for example, “fighting” seems to imply its contrary, “not fighting, making peace, cooperating.” But what is the contrary of the noun “chair”? C.f. Stanley Katz on academy’s aim of promoting “civilized modes of appreciation” [*Chronicle of Higher Education 2002?*]

¹⁹ See Fabian, *Time and the Other*.

²⁰ Though these, contra Benjamin, are not always necessarily two sides of the same thing. “Every document of civilization is also a document of barbarism” is also, of course, a reflection of the past’s presence in the present, the past’s repressed dreams of the future.

²¹ Here, again, I think it may be utopian to think that there are communities in which the ruler and ruled relation is entirely absent. This is the case at least with regard to children -- but usually also in relation to groups who are seen as and treated as children. If, then, there are ruling groups, an important question arises: should PIA address itself primarily to the rulers, i.e., target that “public” with the most influence (hegemonic power)?

individually and collectively. This normative approach should, I would hasten to add, imply -- even encourage -- the ability to genuinely dissent, to protest with consequence (not, i.e., irrelevance) without fear of punishment.²³ In short, this liberal view of “civilization” is one that resonates with some aspects of its contemporary usage while eschewing others.²⁴ It may, therefore, have the potential to “take” and circulate.

Conceptual clarification is one possible mode of Public Interest Anthro work. But is a prerequisite of such work that we be clear about our own concepts? It would, I would guess, be a long haul before I could (if ever) convince folks on this panel, let alone in this venue, of the norm of “civilization” above or its practical potential. Let me then pose this as a question, as an aside: do PIAntropologists have to come to some sort of consensus in order to effectively engage the public? On the one hand no: such consensus will be hard to come by, and we will be paralyzed. On the other hand yes: the public will not be interested in watching, let alone participating in, internecine debates.

Conceptual Clarification through Comparison

A third way to clarify a concept would be to compare its use in this public with uses by others. I will skip this, but what I had in mind is how “civilization” [*sabhyata*] is used in India, in the context of migration from Bangladesh, to promote Hindu chauvinism.

²²The responsibility of the ruling community is to help others move towards free choice – ***without imposing strictures about rationality or the content of choice.***

²³It is a framework within which, perhaps, we can judge whether building the World Trade Center over an Arab neighborhood was a civilizing process -- Syrian market specifically (?).

²⁴“Liberal,” of course, in the classical sense. There seems indeed to be some connection between the resurgence of civilizational discourse(s) and outright war. In that vein, perhaps an appropriate slogan for American Anthropology in the Bush era could be “Know Your Empire!”

Conclusions: Conditions of Possibility for Public Interest Anthropology?

I set aside, now, the issue of conceptual clarification, civilization and so on. Let me close with two general comments about what it might take for Public Interest Anthropology to move forward and flourish. Both concerns have to do with having the *credibility* and, to some extent, *authority* required for Public Interest Anthropology to be audible (viable).

Defending Academics as a Condition of Possibility for PIA?

First anthropology and academics must be defended against assaults on its credibility -- insofar, at least, as Public Interest Anthropology is situated in each, which might vary. Much is said about how scholars have isolated themselves, failing at once in language and in nerve, and much of that is true.²⁵ But self-flagellation alone is neither useful nor accurate – it presumes, in some ways, the very insularity we seek to undermine. We should also consider the ways intellectual labor is “ivory towerized,” a hallowed tradition particularly in America, whenever especially the college or university is a site for dissent.²⁶ Our reactions to CampusWatch, to Lieberman and Dole, to Thomas Friedman should be appropriate but vigorous. The academic arena is one of the few, arguably, that conservatism has not yet cowed ... and one can see and expect efforts to change that! Today we are already, in my view, in an exceptionally chilly atmosphere for intellectual reflection. But we should also attend to other modes of pressure (garbed less

²⁵ Though see “Jargon” in Raymond Williams *Keywords*.

²⁶ The U.S. public wants to remain isolated from academics in much the same way it wants to remain isolated from the world. Indeed, academics often bring the world to people ... and that is not what they are interested in. In that sense, arguably, American academics are isolated from the AMERICAN public, but not from other publics [is this true? What influence/profile to American academics have abroad?]. This also implies that the two problems of insularity and isolationism – from the international world and the intellectual world – are connected.

garishly in patriotism). Corporations, for example, should not dictate the contours of our concerns. All of this is to say, too, that in the end, those in the tower will have to get themselves out. Those who want “us” in will certainly not lend a hand, unless it is on their terms.

Broadening Academics as a Condition of Possibility for PIA?

Second, for Public Interest Anthropology to be viable it would help if it were more recognized and rewarded within anthropology and the academy. Will involvement with Public Interest Anthropology or contribute to working towards a job, to renewal and to tenure? It is my impression that there are some exceptional cases where the answer is “yes.” But, as the saying goes, the exceptions prove the rule. More precisely, senior faculty who are committed to Public Interest Anthropology must carry the standard for any such “battle.” Junior faculty are not in a position to do so. If they try they will not, likely, ever become senior faculty.²⁷

Defending anthropology to the public and defending the public to anthropology, both seem to me conditions of possibility for Public Interest Anthropology, ones which will have to be consistently and simultaneously pursued alongside Public Interest Anthropology work. The struggle for hearts and minds must (for it will) unfold both in private and in public, at home and in the world, and in the multiple senses of each and every one of these terms.

²⁷ Needless to say, the two projects – defending and reshaping – are tied each to the other in myriad ways.