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Reading A Global Landscape

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Abstract

It seems a truism that while our grasp of the world is at best inconclusive, it is attended by a pressing desire to articulate the ultimate context in which our lives are set. Here, my remarks focus on the limits of our ability to explicate that context or landscape, suggesting that any attempt to de-confuse our world will be inherently inconclusive, indeterminate, and undefined. In other words, I want to encourage a little cognitive dissonance regarding our ability to make sense of the globe.

Keywords: Consciousness, Subjectivity, Reification

Introduction

Perusing the announcement for the 52nd International Society for the Study of Civilizations (ISCSC) conference prompted my recollection that a couple of years back I authored an article lamenting the demise of Western Civilization courses on college campuses. In “Humanistic Inquiry: Reconciling Reality, Knowledge, and Imagination,” published in the journal Academic Questions in 2020, I said:

It should come as no surprise that the number of students taking part in Western civilization, humanities, and classics courses has declined precipitously. In fact, in 2011, Inside Higher Education reported: ‘Survey courses in Western Civilization, once a common component of undergraduate curriculums in the United States, have almost disappeared as a requirement at many larger private research universities and flagship public institutions.’

While I lament the demise of the humanities and by extension Western Civilization courses, in contrast, Professor David Wengrow of University College London reports, “Civilization is back.” Wengrow, a professor of comparative archeology, argues, “Civilization is a way of talking about human history on the largest scale…it binds human history together.” So, which is it? Is civilization back, or are we about to see the end of the humanities and by extension civilization studies?

Many people assume that reading a global landscape requires that we focus on those things that either bring humans together or motivate dissension and discord.
For example, Wengrow points out that 20th century French anthropologist Marcel Mauss’s claims that “civilization is what happens when discrete societies share morally and materially across boundaries, forming durable relationships that transcend differences.”

On the other hand, the Ayatullah Murtaza Mutaharri in *Man and Faith* appraises distinct conceptions of *The Book of Genesis* that, he argues, set the Christian and the Islamic worlds apart.

Though I concede the importance of considerations such as technical advancements, aesthetic awareness and cultural attainment, religious conflict, scarce resources, and misunderstanding in deciphering the ultimate context in which we live out our lives, I nevertheless maintain the need for an appreciation of specific notions that suggest any attempt to de-confuse our world will be inherently inconclusive.

Suppose, as is the case in much of the modern world, that social complexity, confusion, anxiety and dissonance are ruling states of mind. In a recent newspaper article, French physicist, philosopher, and astrophysicist Étienne Klein warns that although we may be part of the same society, we don’t all live in the same world. In the U.S., one need look no further than QAnon conspiracy theorists, election deniers, neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and radical right wing political pundits to support this thesis. Given it appears that many have lost their grip on reality, Klein offers suggestions for de-confusing and re-constructing our world.

Yet, psychologists Susan Blackmore’s survey *Consciousness: A Very Short Introduction* suggests that any attempts to de-confuse the world may be futile. She delves into the problem of experience itself. Blackmore asks whether divergent ways of seeing the world may be a product of an added extra that we humans possess, one that comes along with our evolved skills of perceiving, thinking, and feeling. She asks, how do subjective experiences arise? What is consciousness?

Consider, since February 24, 2022, when Russia attacked Ukraine, thousands have died, millions have been displaced, and swaths of Ukraine has been turned into rubble. It has followed that journalists, pundits, aid workers and civilians have offered thought-provoking interpretations of how we should think about Russia’s actions or read the current global landscape.

And *New York Times* editorial page editor Serge Schmemann writes “Things in Russia Aren’t as Bad as the Bad Old Soviet Days. They’re Worse.”

While Russia’s war against Ukraine has been called the most documented war in history, no single interpretation commands anything close to universal acceptance. What does all this unsureness demand? In addition to being a living, thinking, feeling creature, is our sense of self, our subjectivity, or consciousness something?

For example, in his recent book *Singular Pasts: The “I” in Histography*, French historian Enzo Traverso writes:

Recognition of the subjective dimension implicit in historical research, of the fact that historians inject a part of themselves into their works, has been far more frequent in the past twenty years. This admission that once seemed almost obscene, like the violation of a taboo or the confession of sin, has gradually been accepted as a form of intellectual honesty…the fact remains that history is an invention to which reality contributes its own materials. An invention, however, not arbitrary.

By making this comment, Traverso reminds us that historical facts are always the subject of differing interpretations. In fact, Blackmore and Traverso, by embracing subjectivity seem to confirm limits on our ability to interpret a global landscape.

In a recent *Washington Post* op-ed, Fareed Zakaria asks, “Why are so many democracies unwilling to condemn Russia?” Zakaria concedes that while many of the world’s democracies are supporting Ukraine, so too some of the world’s largest democracies such as India, Indonesia, and South Africa have reserved judgment concerning Russia. Even though many would simply remind us that the behavior of these democracies is a matter of “national interest trumping idealism,” Zakaria insists the problem is with the way the West has characterized the Ukrainian conflict. He says it has been mistakenly defined as a “grand ideological crusade against autocracies.”

In contrast he explains that “A much better way to frame the division of the world is between countries that believe in a rules-based international order and those that don’t.” “Russia,” he continues, “has revealed itself to be the world’s leading rogue state, intent on attacking the heart of this order: the norm that borders do not get changed by force.” Zakaria offers good reason to believe that this standard is one that many of the outliers (including countries like China) could rally around.

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1 Along the same lines Philosopher of Science Bruno Latour, in *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* questions the classic division between reality and imagination. Latour argues that even scientific facts are not just out there waiting to be discovered. While the “view from nowhere,” or seeing things objectively or from the outside, is a common sense understanding of knowledge, Latour contends, we cannot leave out the subjective.
Of course, the problem is not just a matter of overcoming divergent interpretations of the global landscape or framing acceptable responses when conflict arises. There is also the fact that humans are easily misled. Zakaria complains that the actions of the United States in the Iraq War appeared to be on a par with Russia’s actions in Ukraine. During the war in Iraq, thousands died, millions were displaced, and swathes of that country were turned into rubble. And much if not all of this death and destruction was based on the lie that Saddam Hussain was developing nuclear weapons. In addition, he urges, there was a failure of global politics.

Through various means, nation-states were strong-armed into supporting the actions of the United States in Iraq. Hence, Zakaria warns we cannot simply preach the importance of adherence to a rules-based international system.

In her book *Red Famine: Stalin’s War On Ukraine* journalist Anne Applebaum writes that, not unlike Stalin,

> The current Russian government also believes that a sovereign, democratic, stable Ukraine, tied to the rest of Europe by links of culture and trade, is a threat to the interests of Russia’s leaders. After all, if Ukraine becomes too European — if it achieves anything resembling successful integration into the West — then Russians might ask, why not us?

Hence, the words of others as well as our beliefs can predispose us to misinterpret reality when, ideally, reality is supposed to serve as evidence upon which to base our beliefs.²

Moreover, Professors of Sociology Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann caution us against accepting the products of human activity as “facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will.” They call this the reification of social reality. Reification, they insist, “implies that man is capable of forgetting his own authorship of the human world.”

Take for example, an April 22, 2022, article by Dr. Jeffrey Mankoff, who is a Senior Associate with the Center for Strategic & International Studies. In his article, “Russia’s War in Ukraine: Identity, History, and Conflict,” he insists that Putin’s policies toward Ukraine and Belarus assume their national identities are artificial. Conversely, what is a fact of nature or a manifestation of divine will is the organic unity of the Russian Empire and its people. Historian Timothy Snyder calls this the “politics of eternity, the belief in an unchanging historical essence.”

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² Indeed, individuals are misled by others and by their own beliefs. For instance, in *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment is Killing America’s Heartland* Professor of Sociology and Psychiatry, Jonathan M. Metzl demonstrates how conservative dogma has mislead poor and working-class whites into supporting policies that are not in their self-interest.
The 52nd ISCSC conference flyer asked attendees to “reaffirm our vision that civilizations matter; to encourage new research; to elicit new thoughts and approaches; to renew discussion of what makes a ‘civilization,’ and why some are resilient but some not; and to reach a wide range of disciplines.” In contrast, throughout these remarks, I’ve emphasized the importance of delving into factors that limit our ability to undertake or to resolve these concerns.

Susan Blackmore claims “it is no good learning about perception, memory, intelligence, or problem solving as purely physical processes and then claiming to have explained consciousness. If you are really talking about consciousness, then you must deal with subjectivity.”

My concern then, is with what this level of complexity demands of us. Ultimately, one could see these remarks as encouraging a critical grasp of civilizations, or what I might call a “minimally dogmatic” understanding. Conflicting perceptions, feelings, interpretations of facts, and beliefs that guide our living challenge attempts to make out the ultimate context in which our lives are set. They make it difficult to give meaning to social milieu, institutional changes, and struggles that influence us.

And finally, all this brings me to humorist Mark Twain’s famous admonition: “It ain’t what you don’t know that gets you into trouble. It’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so.”

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3 Such a grasp would be inherently inconclusive, indeterminate, and undefined. And yet, this is not to support relativity. Philosopher Daniel Dennett argues “the model of constructive and competitive interaction is the key to knowledge . . . the most reliable path to truth is through communication of like-minded and disparate thinkers who devote serious time to trying to get the truth – and there’s no algorithm for that.”
Works Cited and Consulted


