Bruce Bowden, *The Empire of Civilization: The Evolution of an Imperial Idea.*

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This is a book strong on definitions and bolstered by extensive citation from literature in the field. Professor Bowden is from Australia, where he teaches at the University of New South Wales, and his perspectives are not clouded by bias towards or against the United States, the West – meaning Europe – or some of the ideological clutter that filters analysis through political correctness.

The introduction to the book, which is also the first chapter, establishes the central question that remains in focus throughout the 231 page text, which is heavily footnoted by an additional 35 pages. There is also a bibliography and index, both of which are extremely useful for finding some of the myriad citations. Bowden repeats the issue raised by the 18th century French philosopher-historian, François Guizot, as to whether or not there is a universal civilization. Bowden shows that virtually every answer to that question about universal civilization is biased in favor of the European Enlightenment, American political hegemony, or both.

He poses Samuel Huntington, author of *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, on one side with a rival Francis Fukuyama of fame for *The End of History and the Last Man* on the other. While the former is shown in the book to argue that civilizations are at war until one is left standing, the latter argues that conflict has already been settled in favor of progress. But both authors interpret the West as the definitive example of civilization.

This early serving-up of the central idea and its conclusions does not detract from the exhaustive analysis in historical perspective of how the term and the idea behind civilization have been used over more than two centuries.

In this second chapter, the French notion of *civilisation* is discussed with exhaustive detail about its origins in the Enlightenment and the various uses and misuses of the term to exalt the European experience. He compares the French approach to *civilisation* with the German method of *Begriffsgeschichte* because both more or less rely on a history of ideas that become the intellectual structure for justifying themselves.

Citing Norbert Elias, Bowden notes that this self-justifying terminology allows civilization to become empire, since bringing civilization to barbarians and savages entails making them submissive to imposed political and social norms. The English, on the other hand, tend to follow what Bowden calls “the Cambridge School” that places emphasis on stages and historical evolution in civilizational advancements.
The German use of *Kultur* has been intended, says Bowden, as a response to the French use of *civilisation*, which is characterized as effete and elitist in meaning, whereas the German thinkers tend to view the vitality of *Kultur* as rooted in the experiences of the *Volks*. This anti-elitist sense of historical change can be found notably in Nietzsche. Yet, even this rebel views such contestation of imposed social values as driving history towards greater freedom, more or less what the Cambridge School and the French also bestow upon “civilization.”

The third chapter focuses upon what the discovery of America meant to the theories of civilization. Bowden shows special skill in linking together the thought of Locke, Hobbes, the later Scottish philosophers such as Adam Smith, and the anthropologist Louis Henry Morgan on the legal and commercial implications of encountering non-European civilization. The author deftly swings to the Spanish experience with the Native America and back to the Europeans, Voltaire, Turgot and Condorcet.

He shows how these writers laid the foundations for Herder, Kant and eventually for Hegel, each of whom argued for the necessity of the state as the prerequisite for civilization. Societies that had no state, it was said, suffered a moral necessity for a state to be imposed. Hence, each of these various sources, civilization justified empire.

Chapter Four examines the economic premises for civilization that accompany or even strengthen the case for empire. Weaving his way through Marx and Ricardo in early economic thought, considering Kant’s ethics and its relationship to modern thinkers like John Rawls, Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama, Bowden makes his case that despite differences, these thinkers discount a non-Western alternative to civilization. Even when striving to avoid cultural imperialism, says Bowden, the language of democracy, free trade, open elections, etc. all imply submission to European experience.

It is somewhat unfortunate that this book was published before the recent contribution by Ian Morris, *Why the West Rules – for Now*, because he might have considered the argument that Western hegemony is based on the elusive foundation of technology – an advantage already being rapidly eroded on the world scene.

Chapter Five focuses on the violence invoked by the imposition of civilization and the racist consequences. The analysis begins with the logic of Pope Innocent IV regarding pagans, and Bowden shows how this concept of superiority carries over into the logic of Vitoria, the legal authority for the Spanish colonization of the Americas. The argument here was that these societies were governed by tradition as known to them by their religions. As such, they did not follow reasonable laws, i.e. a written code that could be accepted as binding by literate peoples.
Until said peoples could adopt a legal code, it was incumbent upon the Christians among them to provide education. Although softened by Bartolomé de las Casas, a champion of native rights as self-governing peoples, the practice of Iberian colonization was based on a presumed Western superiority.

Chapter Six continues the analysis of the Spanish American colonization, including the debate between Sepulveda and las Casas, although this is one of the few areas in the book where more might have been said. Nonetheless, there is a valuable focus upon the monetary and commercial needs for bringing civilization that is employed as justification for Spanish dominion.

Relying on the work of Muldoon on medieval law as it was applied by Spanish jurists to the American situation, Bowden links these notions with the emphasis upon land use advocated by John Locke to show that both European traditions relied on economics as much as on legal principles.

Bowden shows that the economic principles in the English Utilitarians repeated the racist notions implicit in the earlier writers. These concepts were also invoked in Europe with the Berlin Conference of 1884-85 that divided up Africa for colonization. The same justifications were then invoked by the United States of America as it built up its empire, particularly under the urging of the chief imperialist, Theodore Roosevelt, and the racist advocacy of William Howard Taft. Bowden shows how these same imperialist and racist impulses were continued in United States’ policies leading up to George W. Bush who used the phrase “axis of evil” and the backdrop of a struggle for Western civilization to justify invasion and brutal wars.

Chapter Seven examines the application in the current realm of politics to justifications for civilizing mission, such as the restoration of states on the verge of collapse and “nation-building.” Bowden is not afraid to trespass into matters like the Clinton and European interventions in Kosovo. He notes how many have not noticed the emphasis on free trade in the justifications offered by George W. Bush for invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

For Bowden, these speeches and actions are evidence that Europe has “passed the baton” of empire to America (pg. 203). Charles Krauthammer is singled out as an advocate for American exceptionalism.

The columnist has written on repeated occasions that America should not shirk the word “empire” when explaining why it imposes its will on other nations by war and invasion. Citing Marx about the repetition of history, the first time as tragedy and the second as farce, Bowden takes the Bush regime to task.
The last chapter emphasizes the close identification of Western civilization with capitalism. Even the counter effort by Marxists, says Bowden, holds up the West as the paragon for development. Bowden supplies in refutation a long list of the accomplishments of Islam in the area of civilization (pp. 221ff.) to show how much of the West’s claims to superiority are really from borrowed or stolen inventions.

Bowden suggests that superiority in civilizational matters is not a contest for who invented what first (p. 224) but how such technology is used. He exposes the weakness in the “end of history” claims of Fukuyama, (which claims by the way have been altered in Fukuyama’s most recent work). With the same deftness, he detonates the racist arrogance of Huntington, founded as it is on muddled stereotypes and self-serving arrogance.

He ends his book citing the late Edward Said: “Rather than the manufactured class of civilizations, we need to concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together in far more interesting ways than any abridged or inauthentic mode of understanding can allow.”

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