
Dialogue of Civilisations: A Critical Security Studies Perspective

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Abstract

Civilisational dialogue initiatives are currently considered our best chance to prevent a potential clash between states belonging to different civilisations. Critical approaches to security are concerned with insecurities as experienced by multiple referents, including individuals, social groups, states and the global environment. This article argues that students of critical security studies and proponents of civilisational dialogue initiatives potentially have something to talk about. In presenting a two-step critique of civilisational dialogue initiatives, this article explores such potential, which could allow for further dialogue with a view to addressing insecurities of multiple security referents.

Key Words

Dialogue of civilisations, critical security studies, human rights, security.

Introduction

In the fall of 1998, United Nations (UN) member states agreed on declaring the year 2001 the “UN Year of Dialogue among Civilisations”.¹ One of the major players behind the proposal, then President of Iran Seyyed Mohammed Khātāmī, described the UN initiative as an attempt to counter the primacy of Huntingtonian axioms in world politics. The 9/11 attacks against the United States hampered the UN’s efforts while at the same time created a new impetus for dialogue. That said, while President Khātāmī’s initial proposal portrayed the Dialogue of Civilisations initiative as a way for managing “chaos and anarchy” and seeking “harmony” in world politics,² subsequent revivals of the project explicitly invoked the challenge posed “terrorism” for world security in justifying the need for dialogue.³ The point being is that civilisational dialogue initiatives have their origins in security concerns and have been offered by their proponents as responding to threats to world security.

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Over the years, civilisational dialogue initiatives have received support from the scholarly world as well. For Richard Falk, civilisational dialogue is not merely a “normative effort to appreciate the relevance of the civilisational interpretation of the historical situation, but at the same time seeking to avoid reproducing the Westphalian war system in the emergent inter-civilisational context”.⁴ Consider Fred Dallmayr, who views civilisational dialogue as contributing to efforts towards “strengthening... the prospect of a more peaceful world and more amicable relations between peoples”.⁵ More recently, Marc Lynch has explored whether civilisational dialogue constitutes an instance of an international public sphere in the making (in the Habermasian sense).⁶ Fabio Petito, in turn, has offered civilisational dialogue as an important alternative to those other discourses of world order that fail to consider the need for “reopening and rediscussion of the core of Western-centric and liberal assumptions upon which the normative structure of the contemporary international society is based”.⁷

Without wanting to underestimate the significance of such critical explorations for a peaceful world order amidst rampant fears of a “clash”, the article presents a critical security studies perspective on civilisational dialogue initiatives. Critical security studies are concerned

with insecurities as experienced by multiple referents, including individuals, social groups, states and the global environment. This article argues that students of critical security studies and proponents of civilisational dialogue initiatives potentially have something to talk to each other about. In presenting a two-step critique of civilisational dialogue initiatives, this article explores such potential, which could allow for further dialogue with a view to addressing insecurities of multiple security referents.

Civilisational dialogue initiatives are currently considered our best chance to prevent a potential clash between states belonging to different civilisations.

The growing literature on critical security studies has produced multiple ways to approach security critically.⁸ In what follows, I will be building upon the insights of Aberystwyth School of Critical Security Studies. From an Aberystwyth School perspective, thinking differently about security involves first challenging the ways in which security has traditionally been conceptualised by broadening and deepening the concept and by rejecting the primacy given to the sovereign state as the primary referent for, and agent of, security. Critical approaches also problematise the militarised and zero-sum practices

informed by prevailing discourses and call for a reconceptualising. Second, this perspective rejects the conception of theory as a neutral tool, which merely explains social phenomena, and emphasises the mutually constitutive relationship between theory and practice. What distinguishes the Aberystwyth School from other critical approaches to security is an explicit commitment to emancipatory practices in addressing insecurities as experienced by multiple referents, including individuals, social groups, states and the global environment.⁹

Through pursuing world security as peace between states belonging to different civilisations, “the problem of difference” would be “deferred”.

The first section of the article argues that civilisational dialogue initiatives, in their current conception, overlook insecurities of referents other than those they are seeking to secure (i.e. states). The second section focuses on the notion of dialogue on which civilisational dialogue initiatives rest, and calls for approaching civilisational dialogue in a way that is dialogical not only in ethics but also epistemology as well.¹⁰ The third section highlights untapped potential in civilisational dialogue initiatives as

viewed from a critical security studies perspective.

Overlooking Insecurities of Non-state Referents

From a critical security studies perspective, civilisational dialogue initiatives, given their primary concern with preventing a potential clash between states, come across as prioritising state security to the neglect of other referents. The issue here is not only that they do not prioritise non-state referents’ security, but also that they are not concerned with the potential implications such a state-focused approach would likely have for the security of individuals and social groups. What follows briefly highlights three such instances of insecurity.

One instance is that through focusing on the ontology of civilisation and considering individuals and social groups insofar as they are members of this or that civilisation, civilisational dialogue initiatives risk marginalising other ways of engaging with people and social groups. This is because civilisational dialogue initiatives ultimately locate “the problem of difference” outside civilisations, with little consideration for differences inside. To paraphrase a point Naeem Inayatullah and David Blaney made in another context, projects of civilisational dialogue constitute “a deferral of a genuine recognition, exploration,

and engagement of difference” with difference being “marked and contained” as civilisational difference.¹¹ In other words, through pursuing world security as peace between states belonging to different civilisations, “the problem of difference” would be “deferred”. Such deferral, in turn, could potentially allow for insecurities inside civilisations, including marginalisation of insecurities of those with “interstitial identities”- to invoke Homi K. Bhabha.¹²

Highlighting insecurities as experienced by myriad referents should not be taken as underestimating potential contributions dialogue between civilisations could make.

Second, given prevailing conceptions of “civilisations” as having an unchanging “essence” (an assumption shared by Samuel Huntington and some of his dialogue-oriented critics) there will not be much room left for inquiring into power/knowledge dynamics in the (re)production of differences. Indeed, civilisational dialogue initiatives often fail to acknowledge that “identity is not a fact of society” but a “process of negotiation among people and interest groups”.¹³ More significantly, oftentimes such negotiations themselves are sources of in/security, while at the same time taking identities of people as “pre-given”. As Bill McSweeney has

argued when writing on insecurities in Northern Ireland, “the security problem is not there because people have separate identities; it may well be the case that they have separate identities because of the security problem”.¹⁴

Third, envisioning a world order structured around civilisational essences could potentially amplify the voices of those who dress their rhetoric in terms of cultural “essence”. One concrete instance of such insecurity was observed when Pope Benedict XVI embraced civilisational dialogue initiatives and sought to re-define “Western” civilisation along religious lines. This is not to reduce the former Pope’s interest in dialogue to his “in-house” concerns, but to highlight how engaging in civilisational dialogue allowed Pope Benedict XVI to form alliances with like-minded leaders from other civilisations and justify various policies that overlooked women’s insecurities (among others).¹⁵

Highlighting insecurities as experienced by myriad referents should not be taken as underestimating potential contributions dialogue between civilisations could make. Indeed, I join Fabio Petito in underscoring the need to

acknowledge something like a fundamental ethical-political crisis linked to the present liberal Western civilisation and its expansion, and recognize that dialogue of civilisations seems to enshrine the promise of an answer, or rather to start a path toward an answer.¹⁶

However, what civilisational dialogue initiatives currently offer in terms of contributing to security is a potential, a potential that needs exploring, but with a view to what Friedrich Kratochwil referred to as “interpretative struggles”¹⁷ that are going on within civilisations, and the insecurities of myriad referents that follow.

That said, it is important to note that the proponents of civilisational dialogue do not prioritise non-state referents’ insecurities for a reason. Their thinking is that given the urgency of preventing a potential clash between states belonging to different civilisations, the current insecurities of non-state referents could be postponed till later.¹⁸ Without wanting to underestimate the potential planetary consequences of such a clash, what is also important to remember is, first, that such “short-termism” may not allow for the addressing of medium- to long-term consequences.¹⁹ The steps we take here and now allow some future steps to be taken while disallowing some others. Second, focusing on the short-term as such betrays a non-reflexive approach to security. Non-reflexive approaches to security do not reflect upon insecurities generated as we put various security policies into effect.²⁰ The point is that civilisational dialogue initiatives do not reflect on potential insecurities that may follow the adoption of state-focused security policies as such. Cold War policy-making is a scary but

useful reminder of potential implications (for individuals, social groups and the environment) of adopting such short-termist, state-focused and non-reflexive notions of security.²¹

Dialogical in Ethics but not Epistemology

Civilisational dialogue initiatives, in their current conception, embrace dialogue as ethics but not as epistemology, which, in turn, limits their horizons. In making this point, I build upon Xavier Guillaume’s explication of Bakhtinian notion of dialogue. Critiquing those approaches that adopt a narrow notion of dialogue, Guillaume writes:

This discovery of the “other” within the “self” is a peculiar and narrow approach to dialogism since it only considers dialogue as a “possibility of conversation” between civilisational actors, and not as a general process underlying continuous active and passive interactions.²²

Whereas Bakhtinian dialogism, argues Guillaume, underscores the need for adopting dialogue as ethics and epistemology:²³

Ethically, the completion and perfection of a self is determined by the reflexive and dialogical integration of otherness. This, in turn, is opposed to an unethical approach, which would understand otherness through monological lenses, and thus as an object. Epistemologically, dialogism enables us to tackle the identity-alterity nexus through the existence of a hermeneutical locus-a

concept that draws on the three main characteristics of an utterance (expression, context, and relation) and which I will develop further in the next section-by using its definition as an interweaving of mutually-responsive utterances. A dialogical approach, then, illuminates both the formation and performance of an identity.²⁴

What is at stake is recognising multiple civilisations' contributions to what are popularly portrayed as "Western" ideas and institutions.

An example of monological approach to dialogue was exhibited by Pope Benedict XVI, notes Mustapha Kamal Pasha:

Pope Benedict's recent remarks on the inextricable association between violence and faith as a durable feature of Islam offers a striking example of essentialism's immunization against modernity or globalizing currents, economic integration, cultural flows, or scientific exchange. The other's past, present and future are simply identical.²⁵

In contrast, seeking sociological insights into civilisations would "afford sensitivity to differentiations and distinctions of locale, class, gender or ethnicity" among Muslims.²⁶ Avoiding essentialism, then, needs to go hand in hand with efforts at avoiding monological epistemology. Adopting a dialogical epistemology to look at historical dialogue of civilisations amounts to- in philosopher Susan Buck-Morss's words- "[rejecting] essentialist

ontology and [returning] to critical epistemology".²⁷

While major proponents of dialogue recognise some give-and-take between civilisations, they consider such exchanges to have taken place at the margins, thereby leaving civilisations largely untouched.²⁸ As such, civilisational dialogue initiatives overlook historical dialogue between civilisations. What I mean by historical dialogue is the give-and-take between civilisations that has, throughout the ages, gone beyond surface interaction, as explored by John Hobson in his writings.

What Hobson means by "dialogue" is different from the conception of dialogue that civilisational dialogue initiatives rest upon. For Hobson, dialogue is

a fundamental concept that underpins the non-Eurocentric global-dialogical approach, referring to the ways in which civilisations mutually shape each other as new ideas, technologies and institutions invented in one civilisation diffusion to another.²⁹

As such, Hobson adopts a dialogical epistemology toward imagining "the identity of the West along polycivilisational lines".³⁰

That such give-and-take had taken place centuries ago does not render it a historical curiosity that is inconsequential for present day world politics. What is at stake is recognising multiple civilisations' contributions to what are popularly portrayed as "Western" ideas and

institutions. Such acknowledgement, in turn, would potentially have significant consequences for averting a potential clash and allowing further dialogue.

Stated in less abstract terms, recognising civilisations as dynamic, pluralistic and co-constituted entities allows recognising multiple agency in the emergence of ideas and institutions such as human rights, rationalism and democracy, which are presently viewed by Huntington, as well as some of his critics, as exclusively “Western” inventions.³¹ Indeed, the historical give-and-take between civilisations, Hobson reminds us,

was vital in enabling not just the early phase of the rise of the West but in positively shaping Europe’s cultural identity (especially through the Renaissance)... the Muslims acted as “switchmen” in that they served to retrace the path that European development underwent, helping to put it on an eventual collision course with capitalist modernity. But while the Muslims were vitally important in making and remaking of the West between about 650 and 1500, the progressive baton of global power and influence was then passed on to the Chinese who ran with it right down to the early nineteenth century.³²

Even more relevant for the purposes of this paper is Hobson’s point that, “the very term European ‘Renaissance’ is problematic, since it exaggerates its Ancient Greek foundations and denies its substantial Eastern heritage”.³³ Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen concurs:

There is a chain of intellectual relations that link Western mathematics and science to a collection of distinctly non-Western practitioners. For example, the decimal system, which evolved in India in the early centuries of the first millennium, went to Europe at the end of that millennium via the Arabs. A large group of contributors from different non-Western societies- Chinese, Arab, Iranian, Indian, and others- influenced the science, mathematics, and philosophy that played a major part in the European renaissance and, later, the Enlightenment.³⁴

Hobson makes a similar point about the Reformation and highlights how the idea of “man [as] a free and rational agent” was integral to the works of Islamic scholars and that “these ideas were also strikingly similar to those that inspired Martin Luther and reformation”.³⁵

The point being, writing values and institutions such as human rights and democracy out of the history of civilisations other than “the West” do not only render invisible others’ contributions to the making of (what is popularly referred to as) the “civilised way of life” but also ends up substantiating extremists’ theses. For, it is based on the presumed absence of such values and institutions outside the “West” that Huntingtonians have called for strengthening their own vis-à-vis the rest; likewise Muslim extremists have warned against “Western” plots to export “alien” values (such as democracy or women’s rights as human rights) to the land of Islam and have called for *jihad*.³⁶

In contrast a dialogical approach to civilisational give-and-take would uncover multiple beginnings to human rights norms. Among others, Zehra Kabasakal-Arat has warned against reading the history of human rights norms through the categories of current debates:

Although the current vocabulary of human rights has more easily detectable references in Western philosophical writings, this does not mean that the notion of human rights was alien to other cultures or that the Western cultures and societies have been pro-human rights.³⁷

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Siba N. Grovogui has challenged assumptions regarding the “Western” origins of human rights, and pointed to other imaginaries that could allow expanded domains of human rights.³⁸ Comparing French, American and Haitian revolutions’ different formulations of human rights, Grovogui has maintained that

human rights have multiple genealogies, and it is possible, as often happens in the Global South, to imagine protected human rights as existing outside of Western norms, without negating

the possibility of universalism or universality, which is the appeal of the concept of human rights.³⁹

Meghana Nayak and Eric Selbin’s *De-centering International Relations*, in turn, has highlighted multiple authorship of the human rights convention.⁴⁰ Kabasakal-Arat has provided further evidence:

The Universal Declaration was formulated through debates that involved participants from different cultures. Although representation in the UN Human Rights Commission, which drafted the Universal Declaration, was not global, it was not limited to the Western states either. Two of three main intellectual forces in the drafting subcommittee, Charles Malik from Lebanon, and Peng-chun (P.C.) Chang from China, had their roots in the Middle Eastern and Asian cultures.⁴¹

Finally, Gurminder Bhambra and Robbie Shilliam have pointed to the agency of social movements in different parts of the world who framed their struggles in human rights terms.⁴² Taken together, these writings point to multiple beginnings of what is popularly portrayed as the “Western” origins of human rights, and highlight potential for further and worldwide dialogue on human rights.

This is not to lose sight of the fact that the world has changed since 1948 when the human rights convention was written. Arab representatives to the United Nations at the time (Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and Saudi Arabia) are

currently under different leadership. There are other state and non-state actors in the Arab world and beyond that vie for shaping Muslim minds. Aziz Al-Azmeh reminds us that whereas late 19th and early 20th century was characterised by Muslim thinkers inquiring into “Reformist Islam”, recent decades have witnessed marginalisation of such efforts.⁴³ As such, highlighting multiple beginnings of human rights norms is not meant to imply their universal acceptance in present-day politics. Rather, the point here is that what renders human rights a contentious issue is not a question of “origins” of ideas about human rights (for we know that there are multiple beginnings),⁴⁴ but present-day contentions of world politics. A dialogical approach to history of civilisations would help uncover historical dialogue of civilisations and allow further dialogue toward addressing insecurities experienced by multiple referents.

A Critical Security Studies Perspective on Civilisational Dialogue?

Students of critical security studies and proponents of civilisational dialogue initiatives potentially have something to

talk to each other about. Critical security studies approaches (broadly conceived) are concerned with insecurities as experienced by multiple referents—individuals, social groups, states and the environment. Those critical approaches that originate from the Aberystwyth School tradition rest on a notion of security as emancipation, understood as the “political-ethical direction” of security scholarship.⁴⁵

Emancipatory approaches are almost always criticised for their reliance on “Western” traditions of thought. Over

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the years, critics have pointed to the ideational origins of critical approaches to security and have argued that they are bound to be of limited use in analysing insecurities

in “non-Western” contexts.⁴⁶ What the critics sometimes overlook is that the notion of emancipation adopted by students of critical security studies pushes the term beyond its Western European origins and conceptualises it as— in Hayward Alker’s turn of phrase—“political convergences on needs, not agreement on foundations”.⁴⁷ Indeed, reflecting on the Enlightenment roots of emancipation, Booth has maintained that “what matters is not where ideas come from but how well they travel.”⁴⁸ Susan Buck-Morss’s remark, made with

reference to the possibility of alliances between critical actors in the aftermath of 9/11, is highly relevant to the discussion here:

...the rejection of Western-centrism does not place a taboo on using the tools of Western thought. On the contrary, it frees the critical tools of the Enlightenment (as well as those of Islam) for original and creative application.⁴⁹

Indeed, a dialogue of civilisations could potentially help us find multiple beginnings of our key notions in different civilisations.

Recently, Jürgen Habermas has identified dialogue between civilisations as a remedy to “Western” roots of our key concepts including emancipation.⁵⁰ Indeed, a dialogue of civilisations could potentially help us find multiple beginnings of our key notions in different civilisations. However, to achieve such an end, civilisational dialogue initiatives would need to embrace dialogue not only as ethics but also epistemology as well. From a Critical Theory perspective, the goal, in Buck-Morss’s words,

is not to “understand” some “other” discourse, emanating from a “civilisation” that is intrinsically different from “our own”. Nor is it merely organizational, to form pragmatic, interest-driven alliances among pre-defined and self-contained

groups. Much less is it to accuse a part of the polity being backward in its political beliefs, or worse, the very key embodiment of evil. Rather, what is needed is to rethink the entire project of politics within the changed condition of a global public sphere- and to do this democratically, as people who speak different political languages, but whose goals are nonetheless the same: global peace, economic justice, legal equality, democratic participation, individual freedom, mutual respect.⁵¹

Students of critical security studies, in turn, could adopt a twofold strategy. On the one hand, they could focus on highlighting how emancipation, to quote Booth,

As an ideal and a rallying cry, in practice, was prominent in many nineteenth-century struggles for independence or for freedom from legal restrictions; notable examples included Jews in Europe, slaves in the United States, blacks in the West Indies, the Irish in the British state, and serfs in Russia.⁵²

This would also allow moving civilisational dialogue initiatives from their current focus on state security. On the other hand, students of critical security studies could inquire into multiple beginnings of their core ideas (as with human rights, see above).⁵² Towards this end, approaching civilisational dialogue as ethics *and* epistemology carries significant potential.

Conclusion

Civilisational dialogue initiatives are currently viewed as our best chance to

prevent a potential clash between states belonging to different civilisations. Critical security studies are concerned with insecurities as experienced by individuals, social groups, states and the global environment. In this article I have argued that students of critical security

studies and proponents of civilisational dialogue initiatives potentially have something to talk about toward rendering possible further dialogue with a view to addressing insecurities of multiple security referents (including states).

Endnotes

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