

CRITICAL REVIEW

JOSEPHINE QUINN (2024). HOW THE WORLD MADE THE WEST: A 4,000-YEAR HISTORY. BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING. ISBN (HB): 978-1-5266-0518-4.

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In her book *How the World Made the West: A 4,000-Year History*, Josephine Quinn examines 4,000 years of the history of the Euro-Afro-Asiatic region, beginning in the Levant in the 20th century BC and ending with Christopher Columbus's arrival in the Americas in the 15th century AD. Professor of Ancient History at Oxford University, Quinn is a renowned historian who has written other award-winning works such as *In Search of the Phoenicians* (2017).

Quinn's analysis of 4000 years of history results in a book of more than 500 pages, divided into 30 chapters, and makes fascinating reading. Although it has an academic structure and includes bibliographic references, it will appeal to all types of reader on account of the accessible writing style and use of concrete examples.

Based on her analysis of this lengthy period, Quinn arrives at the conclusion that Euro-Afro-Asian history is essentially the sum of the contacts established by humans in this region. In the book, the author exhaustively details these interactions, between Phoenicians, Minoans, Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Carthaginians, Moors, Franks, and Visigoths, among others. These contacts were of various types, including trade, culture, diplomacy, and war, and it was through such interactions that societies were built and evolved. A particularly instructive example of these dynamics is the alphabet. As Quinn explains, the basis for today's alphabets was created in Egypt by Levantine workers in the 18th or 19th century BC. Because the Egyptian writing system — based on hieroglyphics — was quite complex, these workers invented a new, simpler system in which each letter corresponded to a sound. By doing so, they created the first alphabet in history. Contacts established by sea in the Mediterranean made it possible for this new system to be disseminated and then adapted by other peoples in the region. This gave



rise to the alphabets of Latin, Greek and other languages of antiquity and the present day. The same applies to the numerals we use. Although we now call these "Arabic," they are of Indian origin and were brought to Europe by people from North Africa in the 10th century AD. Several important mathematical inventions such as the number "0" are also of Indian origin. Quinn uses these examples to reveal that the idea of globalization (interaction between the local and the external) is a very ancient one. For the author, this constant dialogue between peoples is what shaped societies and facilitated progress.

Quinn's findings and conceptual conclusions have ramifications for Political Science and International Relations. They are substantiated by extensive research which examines a very wide range of primary and secondary sources. Her main argument is that, if history is based on interactions, this means that the idea it was built on civilizations is wrong. Civilization is generally assumed to refer to a broad group of people with common cultural traits and values, thus forming part of a coherent whole. These traits and values are group-specific and are used to distinguish the group from other groups with different characteristics. However, this specificity, authenticity, and differentiation between groups is something that the author does not encounter in her historical study of the 4000 years in question. The interaction between the various peoples throughout this period meant there was a tendency towards fluidity, co-creation and pollination. Thus, according to Quinn, calling the Phoenicians, Greeks or Persians "civilizations" is incorrect because one cannot identify characteristics in each which are essentially particular and distinctive. Quinn adds that, at the time, these peoples did not regard themselves in this way. They saw themselves as members of villages or cities rather than as part of a "civilization." In fact, the very concept of civilization only emerged in the 18th century.

If civilizations did not exist as such historically, why then do we speak, for example, of "Western civilization"? This is the core of the author's academic and political reading. The idea of the West as a distinct civilization is a construction that only prevailed for political reasons. According to the author, this construction emerged after the campaigns to expel Muslims and Jews from the European continent during the Middle Ages. It became ideology in the eighteenth century based on what she calls "civilizational thinking." According to Quinn, this developed in two phases: singular and plural. In the first phase, civilization is presented as an advanced stage of the development of societies. This concept was introduced in around 1750 by French and British philosophers and forms part of what we now call theories of social evolution. Viewed in this way, civilization is the end point of the linear evolution of societies from more precarious forms of socio-economic organization (nomadism and pastoralism) to more developed forms such as commerce and industry. Quinn confirms this view by quoting John Stuart Mill, a nineteenth-century British philosopher, who states that "In savage life there is no commerce, no manufactures, no agriculture, or next to none: a country rich in the fruits of agriculture, commerce, and manufactures, we call civilized" (page 3).

Civilization, in this singular sense, was theoretically a state to which any human society could aspire with sufficient effort and education, and all human societies could be ranked according to their success on this front. European authors, who were proponents of this vision, presented Europe as the civilizational model to which others could aspire. As a study of this era indicates, this abstract concept of civilization usefully supported Western European imperialism. Mill, who worked for the British East India Company for more than



thirty years, argued that civilized peoples had a duty to help others on their own journey down the same path (page 4). This ideology was captured by Rudyard Kipling in his poem "*The White Man's Burden*" (1899), in which he sought to convince the American president to colonize the Philippines in order to "civilize" it. Modern forms of this conceptualization of a linear evolution can be found in liberal economics and politics theories such as the "modernization theory" developed by Walt Whitman Rostow in his book *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (1991).

The second phase, which Quinn refers to as plural, appeared in the nineteenth century under the influence of the French historian and politician François Guizot. According to him, civilization not only referred to a stage of social evolution, but also to a specific human group from a specific location, with its own particular history and attributes, within which development was an endogenous process. In the light of this definition, there was not only "civilization," but "civilizations," that is, Indian, Greek, Roman, among many others. According to Guizot, these groups could be defined as civilizations because they had particular and essential attributes that distinguished them from one another. Thus, the academic's mission was to identify these attributes, which could imply studying the origin of civilizations, their ancestral roots. Quinn considers that the idea of "Western civilization" was constructed on this basis, and was particularly dear to English philosophers of the Victorian period. They claimed that Western civilization had its roots in Ancient Greece and Rome, namely in attributes such as: the rule of law, democracy, the appeal of science and art. These attributes were disregarded in the Middle Ages and then recuperated, first, during the Renaissance and, second, by the Enlightenment, and then formed the basis of the political and cultural system of the nineteenth-century British Empire. Quinn argues that this conception of "civilization" also made it possible to create hierarchies between civilizations whereby some are viewed as being more apt for development than others, and "Westerners" are presented as superior. Thus, European technological advances of the nineteenth century were retroactively explained in civilizational terms, that is, Europe led because it had endogenous attributes originating in Ancient Greece and Rome that favoured this development. For example, in 1896, Arthur Evans, head of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, who oversaw the archaeological excavations of "Minoan" ruins, extolled Crete, calling it "the champion of the European spirit against the yoke of Asia" (page 27).

This view of humanity divided into perfectly demarcated civilizations was recently revived by Samuel Huntington in his book *The Clash of Civilizations* (1999). In this, Huntington argues that, in the post-Cold War period, the wars of the future will not occur between states but between monolithic and homogeneous "civilizations," such as the "Western," the "Islamic," the "African" or the "Sinic" (Chinese).

According to Quinn, any of these conceptions of civilization are incorrect because they are not supported by historical facts. She develops her argument by analysing the case of the West. First, the author argues that there are no "civilizations." The idea that humans organize themselves into broad clusters with specific characteristics that consolidate over time is not a viable one. Nothing occurs spontaneously nor exclusively endogenously. Everything arises as a result of interactions and influences. This means that creating distinctions and specificities is useless. Secondly, and following on from the previous point, the author argues that what might be considered Western in the case of



Greece and Rome was already being practised in other places, or else became established there as a result of influences from elsewhere. Hence the title of the book; the West was not created by Greece or Rome, but by the world. Quinn presents numerous examples of this dynamic. The alphabet and numerals, already mentioned above, are two instances. But there are many more. Legal codes came from Babylon, irrigation from Assyria, the art of navigation from the Phoenicians, and the wheel came from the Central Asian steppes. Religion, in the Greek case, is of Eastern origin. Even in the case of democracy, the author shows how this form of governance first appeared in Assyria around the 11th century BC. There, holders of public office were selected by a public lottery that included all citizens, any of whom could be given this responsibility. This form also eventually became established in Athens.

For all these reasons, an analysis of history based on the idea of civilization is reductive according to Quinn, because it tends to obscure contacts between peoples over the centuries, through which that history was made and evolved. The “West” and other social spaces are places of aggregation and hybridity, with an extensive range of objects and artefacts that negate the notion of an organic, pure or essential culture.

Despite the important contribution made by the book there are some limitations. The lack of a conclusion means that there is no development of the theoretical ideas in the introduction in the light of the empirical data explored in the chapters. The analysis is short, which makes it more difficult to apply to the present day situation and other moments in history. Some questions that remain unanswered are: has the emergence of the modern state and capitalism reduced the space for heterogeneity? Can this interaction-based approach be applied to other groups that we have also called “civilizations,” such as the Chinese, Aztec or Mayan? If so, how? What motivates interactions? Human nature, circumstances, other reasons?

In addition, the conclusions reached by the author are not actually new. Many scholars of post-colonial thought have challenged civilizational thinking. One of the most emblematic examples being Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (2021), in which the American-Palestinian philosopher deconstructs West-East binarism. Other authors pursuing this line of thought have demonstrated how the “non-Western world” has historically been a space of technological, social and political innovation. Examples include *The Silk Roads* (2018) by Peter Frankopan and *The Once and Future World Order* (in press) by Amitav Acharya.

Nevertheless, what makes the author's contribution significant is the scope of her historical survey, which is mostly based on primary sources. This book will make it even more difficult to argue the existence of a pure, distinct Western civilization with direct roots in Ancient Greece and Rome. Quinn's book is also particularly relevant in view of the political moment in which we live. At a time when nativisms and chauvinisms propagated by the far right are gaining momentum all over the world, Quinn's book shows that it is in diversity and the interaction between peoples from different backgrounds that the world advances and that history is made. The people of antiquity understood this and it is up to us to honour that memory.



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