



One Universal Civilization: Superiority and Eurocentric Conception of the Rest

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Abstract: The prevailing notion suggests a universal or human civilization, posing all as subsets of a shared human experience. This article critiques this perspective, arguing that the contemporary concept of human civilization is predominantly synonymous with Western civilization. This article will elucidate its argument by drawing upon the insights of Western scholars in the field of civilizational studies. Subsequently, it will undertake a critical assessment and examination of the Western discourse, evaluating its outcomes as evidenced in contemporary foreign policy shaped by the historical backdrop of colonialism. The article uses direct quotations and historical narratives to not only scrutinize the inclination to depict Western civilization as singular, extraordinary, and unparalleled but also to highlight the persistent tendency to undervalue the importance of other civilizations, often termed as 'the rest.' The notion of Western civilization is depicted as a constructed political construct utilized to perpetuate Western hegemony, engender othering, and perpetuate colonialist agendas. This dynamic persists in the post-Cold War era, and ongoing Western hegemony perpetuates dominance over non-Western powers. Instances reflecting this neo-colonialist paradigm include the US intervention in Iraq, the conflict in Afghanistan, and the ongoing Israeli military campaign in Gaza as of late 2023.

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Introduction

In contemporary times, thinking about civilization leads some to argue, deliberately and unwittingly, that we, as human beings, all live in one human or universal civilization. This comes from persistent post-enlightenment ideas of progress and the linear march of humanity towards modernity (Bell, 2002). So, there is no need to think of any role to be played by multiple civilizations, such as Christian, Chinese, or Muslim civilizations. In other words, through globalization, technology, and developments, humans are better able to connect and exchange their 'universal' ideas and values. This raises the question of whether the term civilization is a neutral and objective concept that all nations and groups of people would accept. This article demonstrates that the idea of civilization is used by a number of Western thinkers, philosophers, historians, and social scientists to rationalize colonialism and the superiority of the white race and for constructing a Eurocentric hegemonic discourse and conception of world politics, with the

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implicit expectation of its universal acceptance. The argument posits that there exists a singular universal civilization, which is often defined within the parameters of Western conceptualizations, thereby leading to its interchangeability with terms such as 'human civilization' or 'universal civilization'.

This article defines civilization as an organized society grounded on a constructed set of values, religion, culture, and rationale. This set is supposed to offer insights into individual and collective behavior and develop the mechanisms for a better and more just society wherein a society can thrive freely and peacefully. Civilization also indicates the perception of the self, the other, and the system of ethics and how things ought to be or should not be. Thus, civilization is a political concept that indicates an imagination of the self and its relations with others. By delineating specific attributes as markers of 'civilization,' it inadvertently perpetuates a binary framework wherein 'others' are portrayed in contrast as 'barbaric,' 'uncivilized,' or 'savage.'

It is argued here that this notion of a standard, universal human civilization is a fallacy and a delusion to justify and impose a particular exclusive Western discourse and domination over all civilizations. The objective here is to unpack some aspects of the Eurocentric discourse, its sense of superiority, and the claim of universality and neutrality regarding the concept of Western civilization. The article aims to demonstrate how the concept of civilization is often used as a weaponized concept, highlighting Western dominion and imperialism. The article will initially reference influential Western intellectuals to elucidate the inherent intellectual challenges in the Western perspective of 'others.' Subsequently, it will analyze the post-Cold War history of the Middle East as contemporary illustrations of the perilous implications of the Western-centric discourse on civilization. This examination will underscore how the 'civilizing mission' concept has been employed to rationalize colonization and acts of violence.

The article will use primary sources in its methodology, citing Western thinkers to illustrate their ideas on civilization and hegemony, as well as supplementing them with secondary sources to ground their thoughts in contemporary anti-colonial studies. The article will also refer to speeches and official statements of Western politicians that still reflect ideas from Western thought that seemed to have disappeared after the end of European colonialism. In essence, civilization has been reduced to a mere channel for the projection of an Imperial structure and not an impartial order of justice and equity. If anything, the West, led by the United States, continues the same approach towards other civilizations, more specifically the Muslim civilization. Manifested previously in the War on Terror and now in the Israeli war on Gaza, the approach of the West is still wired towards domination and imperialist authority in the name of civilization and progress. Despite the presence of many works on the idea of the clash of civilizations, the idea of a universal

civilization has not been extensively examined in scholarly discourse since Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" thesis (Huntington, 2011).

The role of Western scholarships in justifying western superiority

Most Western scholars of civilizations acknowledge, directly or indirectly, the existence of other civilizations (Toynbee, 1987). Despite its acknowledgment, the concept remains overshadowed by a hierarchical comprehension that effectively monopolizes the attributes of civilization for the West. For instance, the German philosopher of history, Oswald Spengler (1880-1936), claims that Western civilization is an exception in the history of humankind, and states that world history is the Western world's picture and not that of all people. Spengler is not the only one; other Western scholars such as François Guizot (1787-1874) and Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897) make a distinction between Europe and 'the rest' or 'the Other' (Hall & Gieben, 1992). Moreover, some of them limit their definition of civilization to one nation, as in the case of Burckhardt, who sees the superiority of the Italian people over others (Burckhardt, 1999).

Historian Jacob Burckhardt attributes European civilization with superlative traits such as innovation and unrestrained self-expression. He depicts the European West as characterized by freedom in its institutions and individuals, driven by a desire to explore and advance knowledge across various domains. According to Burckhardt, this marks the West's superiority over all others who submitted themselves to absolute monarchies and theocracies, abandoning their free spirit and innovative strength. His analysis of civilization in Renaissance Italy (mainly between the twelfth and the sixteenth century) aims to illustrate different aspects of Italian civilization through Italian intellectual manuscripts, such as poems, biographies, and treaties. Through his arguments, he intends to show that the Italian personality has elements of greatness, making it the leading figure in Europe. Furthermore, he claims that the culture is incomplete outside of Italy, but inside Italy, the culture is harmonious. He states that:

"Thus, culture outside Italy is, on the whole, a disharmonious one, albeit one with great incomplete and latent forces. Italy, however, is the country of a common culture, which is at the same time one of inner harmony. The form of intercourse was a higher sociability independent of class differences, and its content was intellect." (Burckhardt, 1999, p. 97)

However, these scholars accentuate the concept of universality within Western civilization. Burckhardt's emphasis on Italy's elevated status within the West tends to marginalize other civilizations, portraying them as unworthy of being considered equals to the West. This minimization of the contributions of other civilizations serves to grant the West a monopoly over notions of civility and humane existence. The consequence is a form of universalism where not only are all individuals expected to emulate the West to be deemed civilized, but they may

also face repercussions for failing to do so. This phenomenon primarily manifests in the emphasis on adhering to Western values, with cultures and states facing branding as backward or uncivilized if they fail to comply. This approach underscores the belief that humanity is inevitably destined to follow the trajectory laid out by the West. For instance, François Guizot states, 'I am convinced that there is, in reality, a general destiny of humanity, a transmission of the aggregate of civilization; and, consequently, a universal history of civilization to be written' (Guizot, 2013, p. 13). It is worth noting that he believes '[...] France has been the center, the focus of European civilization' (Guizot, 2013, p. 11). Guizot is not the only Western scholar to see European civilization as unique, where France and the French people are at the center of that uniqueness. So even though there is a difference on which European country serves as the peak of civilization, the consensus is that the West has total monopoly on all aspects of human civilization.

Again, it can be argued that the notion of civilization reflects the social construction of the self (Mazlish, 2004, p. 100). So, claiming particular and unique characteristics allows branding different civilizations as 'barbaric,' 'uncivilized,' or 'savage.' This narrative has been repeated in many Western texts on civilization, the imagination of the self [western civilization], and how great their civilization is compared to the rest. This occurrence is unsurprising, considering that these works emerged during the onset and zenith of Western power, fostering a genuine conviction in the West's superiority over diverse civilizations, which aligned with its political and economic triumphs over others. Consequently, there arose a sense of entitlement to greatness and superiority, whereby other civilizations were deemed incapable of competing. Guizot's arguments serve to illustrate this perspective. He speaks:

“The civilization of our country has this peculiar character that it has never wanted intellectual greatness; it has always been rich in ideas; the power of the human mind has always been great in French society; greater, perhaps, than in any other. We must not lose this high privilege; we must not fall into the somewhat subordinate and material state that characterizes other societies.” (Guizot, 2013, p. 73)

Emphasizing greatness is not only on the level of the political and cultural grounds. It goes beyond the biological superiority of the Western man over all others to show superiority as natural and just an accident of history. Thus, the West was destined for greatness by default, and the others were simply inferior all along. Other scholars, like the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), believed that the perfection of humanity incarnated in the race of the whites, and that is, of course, in Western civilization. He articulates, 'Humanity is at its greatest perfection in the race of the whites. The yellow Indians do have a meagre talent. The Negroes are far below them and at the lowest point are a part of the American peoples.' As explained above, the notion of civilization is to define and imagine the self and the rest. It is noted how Kant also underestimates the Indians, 'the

Negroes', and the Americans. For Kant, the justification for such perfection of white people is due to rationality as well as thanks to the 'capacity to be morally self-legislative [...] the development of our capacity to set and pursue ends through reason generally, and not just moral-practically' (McCarthy, 2009, p. 66). As explained before, the uniqueness of the West and the explanation of its dominance with the onset of modernity was seen as an inevitable natural force. Even if other civilizations were praised for some positive qualities, they remain dwarfed by the West and their own failures.

Different Western scholars elaborated on various reasons for the West's superiority over the rest. For instance, Kant justified it with rationality or for Burckhardt, with the Italian intellectual legacy. Guizot sums up the idea of the West's inevitable superiority and sees it as 'the intentions of God,' he plainly states that 'European civilization has entered, if we may so speak, into the eternal truth, into the plan of Providence; it progresses according to the intentions of God. This is the rational account of its superiority' (Guizot, 2013, p. 35). Guizot went further and argued that

“[...] France has seen herself thus outstripped in the career of civilization, she has called up fresh vigor, has sprung forward with a new impulse, and has soon found herself abreast with, or in advance of all the rest [...] There is scarcely any great idea, any great principle of civilization, which, prior to its diffusion, has not passed in this way through France” (Guizot, 2013, p. 11).

This bizarre claim by Guizot is no surprise considering the collective words of different Western scholars regarding Western superiority. It is self-explanatory as to why a constructed image of all the previous civilizations as non-existent or minimal has become the end result. The collective ideas generated in the West regarding other civilizations often attribute human achievements primarily to Europe and its derivatives. Other civilizations are consequently relegated to a peripheral role in the continuous march of Western progress, implying that they are obligated to emulate Western models to become truly civilized agents within human history.

However, not all have acquiesced to the universal claims of Western hegemony. Samuel Huntington aptly denies the existence of a universal Western civilization and asserts that such universality will not materialize in the future (Huntington, 1993, p. 49). However, he believes that the West is unique compared to all other civilizations;

“The West differs from other civilizations not in the way it has developed but in the distinctive character of its values and institutions. [...] Western civilization is valuable not because it is universal but because it is unique’ (Huntington, 2011, p. 311).

Despite the uniqueness found in the Western civilization, Huntington finds three inherent challenges in the belief of Western universalism, the belief that people everywhere should embrace Western values, practices, and institutions. The three challenges are: it is false because of its logic; it is immoral since the West has no more the economic and demographic dynamism to impose its value and will on the rest; it is dangerous because that could, 'lead to a major inter-civilizational war between core states and it could lead to defeat of the West' (Huntington, 2011, pp. 311-311).

However, Huntington reports different reasons for the uniqueness and superiority of the Western civilization, such as the 'superiority of its organization,' 'discipline,' 'superior weapons,' 'transport,' 'logistics,' 'medical services,' and more importantly 'the superiority in applying organized violence' (Huntington, 2011, p. 311). The idea of Western civilization as a constructed image of the self with particular superiority and characteristics has consequences. The notion of civilization is used in the Western context as an instrument and pretext for colonization as well as domination over other civilizations. Colonial expansion became a moral duty to raise different people from their lower state of existence into a world of progress. Huntington openly asserted these consequences when critiquing Western universalism and rightfully pointed towards its dangers. This colonial discourse occurred in an environment of what Bruce Mazlish calls the 'expansionism and exploratory zeal' of European civilization (Mazlish, 2004, p. 27).

Civilizing mission and colonization

The civilizing mission is an effort done by the West as a 'moral duty' or 'the burden of the white man' to deliver, teach, and instruct the Eastern societies [the rest] on Western models of institutions and values to pave the way for them to progress and integrate into Western civilization. To some Westerners, the main reason for this Western responsibility is 'the burden of the white man' and the incapability of the rest to lead. It is worth noting that Western scholars show not only what they consider as the superiority of their moral system, practice, and institutions, but also assign themselves the responsibility to lead the rest. For many of them, the rest always need the West to accomplish their objectives. This position is expressed openly by the likes of Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965), who wrote exclusively on the foundational ethical aspect of all civilizations. He principally justifies the primacy of the colonizer for their "higher civilization." He claims that colonial powers are responsible for raising the level of what he calls 'non-civilized nations.' Even more, Schweitzer believes that no progress of civilization comes from any African counterpart, but from "enlightened" Western civilizations (Schweitzer, 1987).

Likewise, Samuel Huntington claims, 'Societies from other civilizations usually need Western help to achieve their goals and protect their interest' (Huntington, 2011, p. 81). Clearly, such kinds of statements pave the way for colonization and

invasion. This is due to the fact that civilization is a hardly neutral term when used in most contexts. It is important to note that civilization as a term goes hand-in-hand with the concept of modernity. The former being the objective, and the latter being the means to it (Mazlish, 2004, p. 103). It seems that, in the end, the way to be considered civilized is to be incorporated in the European-western definition due to its universal claims.

Civilizing mission indicates the superiority of Western rationalism, practice, manners, and (political and economic) institutions. I.e., the civilizing mission is bringing these unique Western qualities and values to the others. The 'other' indicates the rest and all the non-Western as inferior to the West as a result of conquests and subjection (Sayyid, 2022). The concepts of superior and inferior are used in this context to reflect the preeminence of superior as well as weak inferior, who cannot advance and develop without Western rationality, practice, and institutions. Since Western civilization is the superior one, it has given itself the right and legitimacy to interfere, and always to make the rest in its image and evaluate them based on the Western standard. This has opened the road for the superior race to justify and conquer the inferior race. These are the reasons why the West is imagined as the 'standard of civilization', still observed in the form of hierarchical judgment by states that adhere to international norms more than other states. States that adhere to the norms and values of the modern international community are tacitly recognized as civilized than those that are not (Mozaffari, 2002, p. 93).

The Construction of Binaries, The Muslim World as an Example

It is worth saying that 'civilization versus barbarism' indicates the contrasting relationship between the West and the rest. Nonetheless, more comparable sub-concepts are used to manipulate the discourse of Western hegemony, such as 'superior versus inferior,' 'core versus periphery,' 'rational versus irrational,' and 'modern versus tradition.' Such concepts are constructed to serve the political agenda of the West to subjugate the rest, followed by holding the rest – all civilizations accountable, according to Western standards. The West's universal claims regarding civilized life lead to a firm belief in a paternalistic position that the West is entitled to in relation to the other.

In other words, whoever does not follow the Western standards, or the model of Western civilization, will not become or be considered civilized, modern, rational, and developed. In his excellent work *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation*, John Hobson elaborates accurately on the imagined 'Self' and 'Others.' He asserts that;

“[...] the West was imagined as being inherently blessed with unique virtues: it was rational, hard-working, productive, sacrificial and parsimonious, liberal-democratic, honest, paternal and mature, advanced, ingenious, proactive,

independent, progressive, and dynamic. The East was then cast as the West's opposite Other: as irrational and arbitrary, lazy, unproductive, indulgent, exotic as well as alluring and promiscuous, despotic, corrupt, childlike, and immature, backward, derivative, passive, dependent, stagnant and unchanging" (Hobson, 2004, p. 7).

Not only that, but the triumph of progress means that the inferior beliefs will disappear as the West continues its victorious march. Until the late 20th century, it was believed that Islam would fade away as secularization and progress continued to spread (Sayyid, 2022, p. 11). The Muslim world is still seen, until now by the believers in Western superiority, as an inferior civilization waiting for the grace of enlightenment.

Again, for some Western scholars, there are unique characters in Western civilization that do not exist in other civilizations. For instance, the uniqueness of the language, outstanding mind, exceptional manners, and ideas. For example, in the French context, Guizot articulates that '[...] perspicuity, sociability, sympathy, are the peculiar characteristics of France, of her civilization, and it is these qualities which rendered her eminently fit to march at the very head of European civilization' (Guizot, 2013, pp. 11-12). Separating the West from the rest constituted a belief in the inherent superiority of the self over the other, where the West, with its unique institutions and culture, stands on the top as the 'first world', while the rest are exiled to some category of barbarity. In addition, the West sees itself as the only pioneer of rationality, allowing it to lead the world economy, politics, and culture.

The West's belief in its own unparalleled uniqueness and superiority has led to a strong normative basis for imperialist wars of conquest, which have taken two forms: direct and indirect. Those who advocate for direct imperialism-like the example of European colonialism-argue that non-Western peoples are incapable of progressing economically and politically due to their irrational cultures and institutions. They believe that the only way for these societies to escape their self-imposed backwardness is through the West's paternalistic civilizing mission, which brings about rational institutions and culture. The second form of imperialism is indirect control, characterized by utilizing universalism as a way to push countries "peacefully" into imitating the West in order to become properly civilized (Layug & Hobson, 2022, pp. 55-56). However, this happens with ethical justification. Strictly speaking, the West is unique, and the rest must learn to be like them and follow their exceptional model. This has led the West to conduct what is known as a civilizing mission, which is an undercover for Western domination, colonization, and hegemony. In short, the Western discourse on civilization versus barbarity persists under American hegemony, albeit reconstituted to confront anti-democratic forces and their perceived inherent backwardness (Said, 1993).

This phenomenon is evident in the Eurocentric perception of the Muslim world. Since late Ottoman times, Turks have been branded as backward people who are deprived of progress and enlightenment. The Ottoman Empire was branded as a target of colonial control due to its barbarity, despotism, and its backwards religion (Hobson, 2012, pp. 38-42). This view extends to all the societies in the regions from Afghanistan to Türkiye. This still lives on to this day in some form. In the case of Türkiye, the European Parliament's criticism and the indefinite postponement of Turkey's accession to the European Union reflect the challenges and uncertainties surrounding Turkey's path to EU membership (Uras, 2023). Even now, after the Ottoman Empire's demise, the perception of some powerful figures of Türkiye still perceives it as backwards in some form. As seen in the French attitude towards Türkiye's accession into the European Union, Former French president Valery Giscard d'Estaing expressed the sheer difference between Türkiye and Europe. Giscard d'Estaing reflects the attitude towards Türkiye as too poor and Muslim to enter the EU (Richburg, 2002).

Meanwhile, Afghanistan faces criticism for its closure of schools for girls, while simultaneously being called upon to uphold and respect women's rights (Hakimi, 2022). Yet no critique on the same volume was ever made against America's entry into Afghanistan and its destructive war in the country. Not only that, but interviews with a Taliban spokesman reflect great arrogance, such as the case when Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban government spokesman, was questioned whether the Taliban is sorry for killing Canadian soldiers during the war (CTV News, 2022). If anything, this reflects the ridiculous paternalism with which the West still interacts with the rest of the world. The civilizing mission remains prevalent, influencing the West's approach to the world long after the dissolution of colonial empires. Analysis of examples such as Turkey's European Union accession and the situation in Afghanistan reveals that behind the ostensibly well-intended criticisms lies an implicit question: "Why are you not like us?" or, more pointedly, "How dare you attempt to act differently?"

At the height of the colonial era's civilizing mission, all means were justified, including the idea that weaker races must be subjugated to the superior races to survive; otherwise, extermination must be conducted against the weak races. That justifies the imposition of ideas and values, the employment of exploitation, colonialism, and the elimination of the inferior races. It is worth quoting at length, John A. Hobson (1858-1940), who states that 'It is desirable that the earth should be peopled, governed, and developed, as far as possible, by the races which can do this work best, i.e. by the races of highest "social efficiency"; these races must assert their right by conquering, ousting, subjugating, or extinguishing races of lower social efficiency. The good of the world, the true cause of humanity, demands that this struggle, physical, industrial, and political, continue until an ideal settlement is reached, whereby the most socially efficient nations rule the earth in accordance

with their several kinds and degrees of social efficiency' (Hobson, 1902/2005, pp. 154-155).

The civilizing mission is built upon a fundamental contradiction: while its aim is to civilize others by imparting Western values, practices, and institutions, it paradoxically employs various means, including violence and brutality, to fulfill this purported moral obligation. The consequences of the Western civilizing mission are known to everyone. John Hobson gives an example of the British civilizing mission; he states '[civilizing mission] is meant for imposing cultural conversion, which sought to 'raise the Eastern peoples up' to the level of true civilization. This required that Eastern institutional practices could be transformed along the British lines. On the other hand, cultural conversion went hand in hand with the strategy of containment, which sought to keep the Eastern peoples and economies down' (Hobson, 2004, p. 241).

In the contemporary era, the civilizing mission endures in an indirect guise within a post-colonial framework, relying on the preservation of the global order established in the wake of Western hegemony's zenith. The establishment of the United Nations, the codification of global laws and regulations, and the propagation of the vision of a peaceful world where progress benefits all have obscured the memory of the suffering inflicted by hegemonic powers. However, the old order of Western hegemony persists, demanding adherence to Western principles and values as the sole path to recognition on the world stage. Expansion and maintaining influence are based on violence and neutralizing threats, and nowhere is this truer than in Israel. Jeremy Boreing, the CEO and co-founder of the Daily Wire, explicitly mentions the importance of eradicating Palestinian resistance against Israel. Boreing articulates what he perceived as the exigencies of war, highlighting the devastation inflicted by the Allies on Germany to vanquish the Nazis.

Meanwhile, Yoav Gallant, the Israeli defense minister, openly marks how radical the Zionist war effort could be, by stating "We are fighting human animals" ("MEE staff," 2023). Likewise, Israel's prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, adds to this radical rhetoric by saying, "We are sons of light, they are sons of darkness" (Euronews, 2023). Israel's actions and rhetoric are an indication that the old Western spirit of expansion and domination is alive and prevalent. The existing international institutions are either helpless or simply part of the Western-made global order that is working for its well-being. Nowhere is this more obvious than the open and unquestionable support that President Biden has shown for Israel, emphasizing its right to self-defense against Hamas (Telhami, 2023). According to that rhetoric, President Biden defends the West's stance on Israel as a battle for a better world, essentially a world that caters to Western hegemonic powers. The current Gaza war reflects what happened at the height of colonialism, with its demeaning rhetoric of the "other," unrestricted use of violence, and believing that

the West is the sole owner of civilization and humanity. The colonial civilizational discourse did change over the years, but its bloody and dehumanizing roots remain visible to the observers.

Conclusion

This article has engaged with the presence of strong enlightenment ontology and epistemic coloniality of Western thought regarding the definition of civilization and civility. The main issue to be found in Western thought is the standardization of a Western conception of civilization and the subsequent universalization of the mentioned conception. This process entails simultaneously constructing a sense of self and otherness, ultimately depicting the other as barbaric and uncivilized compared to the civilized Western bastion of enlightenment. Ultimately, non-Western civilizations are often categorized as inferior in various aspects—cultural, religious, and even biological—resulting in a dynamic where they are expected to conform to Western standards. Anything diverging from Western values and institutions is often labeled as barbaric or, in contemporary terms, authoritarian, illiberal, or undemocratic. This critique highlights certain Western thinkers' dangerous and narrow perspective regarding the concept of civilization, as evidenced by numerous examples from nineteenth and twentieth-century Western writings, which prominently reflect a Eurocentric worldview that historically justified colonial domination under the guise of civilizing missions.

From the zenith of European colonial conquest to the aftermath of World War II, decolonization, the post-Cold War era, and the recent Israeli aggression against Gaza, the discourse on civilization persists, particularly when Western powers engage in conflict. Despite the world's transition to a multipolar order beyond Western hegemony, the same discourse resurfaces, often framed as defending democracy against illiberal forces akin to combating "barbarity." Examples include the US invasion of Iraq, Western propaganda during the conflict with Russia in Ukraine, and Israel's rhetoric in its actions against Gaza. Western civilization, conceived by colonial and imperial powers for dominance, is emblematic of a political construct; however, contemporary discourse treats it as an unquestionable truth, echoing debates on modernity and its Western-centric perception. John Hobson's assertion, "without the Rest there might be no West," underscores the interconnectedness of civilizations' (Hobson, 2012, p. 10).

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