
The Origin of a Triptych

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?
I hear my being dance from ear to ear.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?
God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,
And learn by going where I have to go.

Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?
The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Great Nature has another thing to do
To you and me; so take the lively air,
And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.
What falls away is always. And is near.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I learn by going where I have to go.

Theodore Roethke – “The Waking”
(Roethke 1966, p. 104)

1.1. The sun is shining in Berkeley

The sun is shining in Berkeley this September 2016. The presidents, vice presidents, and representatives of some of the world's top universities, however, are not taking advantage of California's fine weather. Gathered at the World Universities Summit, they are debating the challenges of higher education and high-level research in a pleasantly air-conditioned room with the curtains firmly drawn.

At around 5 p.m., a new round-table discussion ends in the tradition of all events organized by Times Higher Education. Argumentative, consensual and without great surprise. The chairman opens the question-and-answer session. They follow one another. Argumentative, consensual and without great surprise.

Until...

A finger rises in the audience. Its owner, an American professor, speaks. His address recalled that American universities had benefited greatly from public funding during the Cold War. Referring to a book published in 1997 (Chomsky *et al.* 1997), with chapters by nine academics, he pointed out that this funding, however, had a tendency to melt like snow in the sun, as East-West political relations had warmed up. As tensions between the United States and Russia or between the United States and China return – and are likely to continue in some form or another regardless of who becomes president¹ of the United States – will history repeat itself? Will America's public universities² (whose direct federal resources have been in steady decline for decades) experience a new golden age and their researchers be given new levels of funding? The answer was as expected: cautious, consensus-seeking, and expressing virtuous hope for a renewal of government funding for American universities, independent of any international tension.

It is natural, however, to extend this question and the idea behind it: more generally, do the international tensions in the world have, or will they have, a global impact on universities, especially those who are global leaders³, some of which were gathered at the Berkeley Congress? Is there a geopolitical reading of the various excellence initiatives that a number of countries have launched in recent years? Beyond the nations themselves, can we go so far as to shed light, in terms of civilizations, on the global

landscape of higher education and cutting-edge research? In other words, does the evolution of the ranking of the best universities say something about the vitality of the civilizations to which they belong? Are international rankings becoming a revealing thermometer of a geostrategy of knowledge?

These questions are, of course, so broad that it would be illusory to attempt to give a definitive answer, especially in this section, which is intended as an introductory overview.

1.2. Fukuyama versus Huntington: the revenge of civilizations in the 21st Century

Nevertheless, let us try to give an initial justification for their relevance. The question from the American professor at Berkeley first of all refers to a situation that emerged from the Cold War. This implicitly ended⁴ with the fall of the USSR in 1991, thus putting an end to the “short” 20th Century that began in 1914 with the First World War.

This end was seen as a deliverance that went far beyond what was perceived as the cessation of East-West tensions. For many observers, capitalist and liberal ideology had won, and communist ideology had lost. This victory of one ideology over the other was to mark, in their view, the end of the great conflicts and open an infinite period of near-planetary peace: “the end of history”, to quote Francis Fukuyama’s famous prophecy⁵ about the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

However, as early as the summer of 1993, Samuel Huntington published an article in the *Foreign Affairs* journal entitled “The Clash of Civilizations?” (Huntington 1993). In view of the controversy generated by this article on all continents⁶, the Harvard professor decided to develop his analysis of the world in a more substantial work. He would do so again three years later with his now famous 500-page book: *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (Huntington 1996). The reasonable doubt he had in 1993 is no longer relevant in 1996: the question mark at the top of his article disappeared from the title of his book.

The very rich substance of Huntington’s work goes far beyond⁷ the scope of this chapter in describing the genesis of a thought. Let us content ourselves by summarizing the main message here: history is not finished with us; new conflicts of great magnitude will arise; these conflicts will no

longer be based on ideologies, but on differences of civilizations and therefore on differences of cultures. Huntington gives the following definition of civilization in the second chapter of Part I of his book:

A civilization is thus the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species. It is defined both by common objective elements, such as language, history, religion, customs, institutions, and by subjective self-identification of people. People have levels of identity: a resident of Rome may define himself with varying degrees of intensity as a Roman, an Italian, a Catholic, a Christian, a European, a Westerner. The civilization to which he belongs is the broadest level of identification with which he strongly identifies. Civilizations are the biggest “we” within which we feel culturally at home as distinguished from all the other “thems” out there. (Huntington 1996, p. 43)

In the third chapter of Part I (Huntington 1996, pp. 56–78), he develops his argument to contest the very existence of a “universal civilization”, and justifies the fact that the “bigger us” opposing all the other “them” are the civilizations he designates and defines, and that they are strict parts of all humanity. In other words, the whole of humanity certainly distinguishes man from other animal species, but does not constitute a civilization. It merely encompasses civilizations, which is already a broad agenda. Let us jump to Huntington’s conclusion of this chapter:

It would, as Braudel observes, almost “be childish” to think that modernization or “the triumph of civilization in the singular” would lead to the end of the plurality of historical cultures embodied for centuries in the world’s great civilizations. Modernization, instead, strengthens those cultures and reduces the relative power of the West. In fundamental ways, the world is becoming more modern and less Western. (Huntington 1996, p. 78)

Returning to 1989 and 1991, the successive falls of the Berlin Wall, and then of the Soviet empire, did not mean the end of the conflicts. For humanity, they mark the transition from a bipolar world to a multipolar, multi-civilizational and multicultural world. More specifically, the

cartography proposed by Huntington structures the world around the following civilizations and flagship countries:

- Western civilization, whose leading country is the United States;
- Chinese civilization, whose leading country is China;
- Hindu civilization, whose leading country is India;
- Japanese civilization, whose leading country is Japan;
- Orthodox civilization, whose leading country is Russia;
- Latin America, without a leading country;
- Muslim civilization, without a leading country;
- and (if possible) the African civilization, without a leading country (Huntington 1997, pp. 51–56, including “if possible”).

1.3. The role of universities in the race for global intellectual leadership

As a first approach, let us embrace Samuel Huntington’s reading of the world. However, before looking at the role that universities could play in this reading grid, let us also make the nuance that Régis Debray (Debray 2017, especially pp. 20–27) makes between civilization and culture, which are too often mistaken for one another⁸, our own. Let us give him the floor:

Just as a mother tongue radiates in regional dialects, a civilization de-compartmentalizes the culture from which it comes [...]. A culture builds places, a civilization builds roads. It assumes and requires a foreign policy. A civilization acts, it is offensive. A culture reacts, it is defensive. There is no civilization that does not take root in a culture, but a culture does not become a civilization without a fleet and an ambition, a great dream and a mobile force. [...] ‘Imperial civilizations’ is a redundancy. Just as an empire is multi-ethnic, a civilization, in the prime of life, needs all the talents available and must control several cultures as enclaves, outposts or relays [...]. (Debray 2017, pp. 23–24)

Let us spend a little more time on Debray’s analysis⁹, that “an economy alone has never made a civilization” (Op. cit., p. 26) and that “it is an

economist's myopia to measure the vitality of a civilization by the yardstick of its industry or its currency" (op. cit., p. 27). Relying on the redundancy of the expression "imperial civilizations", Debray ultimately asserts that:

In short, supremacy is established when *the imprint survives the grip, and the grip survives the empire*. [...] A civilization has won when the empire from which it proceeds no longer needs to be imperialist to make its mark. (Debray 2017, p. 27)

Debray's nuance between civilization and culture¹⁰, and the irreducibility of the latter to a (*myopic*) purely economic vision of the world, reinforce the relevance of the question that is at the origin of the present reflection. Universities play a pivotal role in the matters of civilization, given their importance in an analysis in terms of culture and the development of armament capacity. They are a place where the transmission of universal and cultural knowledge transpires; they can be used to defend a given culture, or to promote it; they can be the instruments of "power" that can certainly remain "soft", but can also become "hard" and contribute to a cultural hegemony that Gramsci would not have denied. According to Huntington:

The balance of power between civilizations is shifting: the West is declining in relative influence; Asian civilizations are expanding their economic, military, and political strength; Islam is exploding demographically with destabilizing consequences for Muslim countries and their neighbors; and non-Western civilizations generally are reaffirming the value of their own cultures. (Huntington 1996, p. 20)

Are some of the changes Huntington observes also measurable, at least in part, with respect to the world's top universities? Is the evolution of these university rankings an indicator of the intellectual vitality of these civilizations?

While shedding light on the global landscape of higher education and research in terms of civilizations may, at least in part, be justified by the above arguments, we choose to confine this light to the leading universities, in other words, to those that contribute to a significant production¹¹ of knowledge *in addition* to the transmission of that knowledge. We are, of

course, fully aware that the reality of the global higher education landscape is much more complex. Indeed, other institutions, by far the most numerous – more than 90% – transmit knowledge without producing it.

However, the latter are intent on responding to a challenge whose great complexity is already increasing day by day: mass education.

The number of students on earth is projected to double by 2025, compared to 2012 (see (Bjarnason *et al.* 2009) and (Goddard 2012); see (Maslen 2012) for a summary of the latter), to reach 262 million. Almost all of this growth will be outside Western civilization, with more than half coming from China and India (Altbach 2009).

In addition, there are calls¹² within countries or groups of countries to achieve high minimum quotas (generally above 40%) within an age group, with a higher education degree or with an equivalent level of education.

Lastly, if the countries where this growth is taking place fail to provide adequate university infrastructure at the necessary pace, it is estimated that by 2025, about 8 million students (three times as many as in 2012, and twice as many as in 2017) will go abroad¹³ for their education (see (Bhandari 2009) cited in (Goddard 2012)).

These figures speak for themselves: demographic pressure¹⁴ makes these institutions crucial and indispensable in this generation of educated and self-reliant citizens, and therefore¹⁵, in the development of a stable and productive middle class, at least that is their purpose. The main challenge for higher education institutions is, of course, the quality of education, pedagogical innovations in this field, and their capacity to change the lives of learners¹⁶.

This task is extremely difficult and also largely ignored by current ranking systems¹⁷. It is therefore with a touch of bad conscience¹⁸, and at the cost of numerous cross-references to the (numbered) notes grouped together in the *Notes, Insertions and Tangents* section of this study (a description of the content of each of the sections of this study is given below), that we have left more than 90% of universities out of this reflection, in order to concentrate on the small portion of those with significant research activity, and among them, the even smaller portion of universities in the international rankings. For convenience, we refer to the latter indiscriminately as “leading edge” or “elite” universities. Let there be no mistake: the author thinks, says

and constantly repeats that the strategy of universities should not be based on international rankings. He is not a blissful admirer of the results of these rankings. However, it is clear that these international rankings have largely penetrated the landscape of higher education and research since 2003, and the first so-called Shanghai ranking, followed by about thirty others, including those of QS-THE (before these two organizations split and gave birth to two separate rankings) and more recently, the Leiden ranking¹⁹. We therefore try to take advantage of the phenomena that these rankings may reflect, regardless of how the experts feel about them²⁰.

With the three limits set – acceptance of Samuel Huntington’s vision of the world in terms of civilizations and leading countries, Régis Debray’s refinements and nuances on the fact that a civilization is more than a culture and cannot simply be reduced to an economy, and a focus on the best universities in the world as rendered by international rankings – our approach is articulated in the form of a triptych, each part of which deals, in essence, with a question in a nutshell.

1.4. Why? Where? How?

The first part of the triptych is, of course, about identification, but above all, about the role of leading universities. The first aspect of identification is “easy”: international rankings have become a major tool for the graduation of leading universities. These international rankings form the thermometer that we consult. The main question of this first part of the triptych is, however, different. Indeed, the role of leading universities is not often addressed. While the answers may vary considerably from one place to another or from one period to another²¹, some common features can nevertheless be identified. What are these motivations? What are these common features and their weight in academic initiatives to create world champions from leading countries? Finally, what are the missions of these leading universities? These questions will be addressed in the “why?” section. The last of these questions are considered again, but under a different aspect in the concluding chapter of the book.

The second part asks “where?”. In other words, where are the best universities in the world? We propose a civilizational reading of the development of leading universities and their positioning in the context of a geostrategy of higher education and research. Our approach is different from

and complementary to the book (Hazelkorn 2015) and the collective work (Hazelkorn 2017) led by Hazelkorn, where there is a notable emphasis on case studies. We propose a unified vision in light of the world rankings of universities. We address the question of “where?” in a context that may be broader than that of a single country or, when dealing with a single country, taking it as the spearhead of a broader civilization. Our focus, at this stage, is on civilizations and their flagship countries and seeks to draw global trends. This question of “where?” is based on a careful examination of the results of international rankings for both the flagship countries of civilizations and the civilizations themselves. This section therefore focuses on a review of the methodology used by the THE, QS, Leiden and Shanghai rankings, and the results of the Top 20, Top 200 and Top 1000 of these rankings, both for flagship countries and for civilizations, over a period of about 10–15 years, depending on the rankings.

Ideally, this work should be complemented by a targeted study of universities in each of the “seven or eight major civilizations of the world” and, within them, their flagship countries, if there are any²².

The third part, completing the triptych, should ask the question “how?”, within a conceptual framework of civilization and leading countries. This is a complex task and we are only initiating it in this part of our study.

Let us describe the complexity. In contrast to the three blocs that organized the world during the Cold War (*free* world, communist bloc, and non-aligned states), seven or eight civilizations constitute Huntington’s contemporary groupings of States (Huntington 1997, chapters 1 and 2). The organization of this geography has not remained without opposition. Among the protests expressed, not against this view of the world as civilizations, but against what civilizations digest and the boundaries to which they claim to adhere to according to Huntington (the first paragraph in the Appendix gives this assignment to the corresponding civilizations of the countries included in the various rankings), the strongest have come from Europe. Since Europe is also the historical cradle of universities, it is only fair to summarize the criticisms that have been expressed from the old continent.

Western civilization has two components. One is Anglo-Saxon (mainly USA, UK, Canada, New Zealand and Australia) and has English as its linguistic unit. The other component, European²³, is more linguistically

fragmented²⁴. For example, for Jean-Pierre Chevènement, Huntington's proposal of a dilution of European nations into a Western bloc is questionable: "Huntington's scheme has a heuristic value: it allows us to orient ourselves, but loosely" (Chevènement 2016, p. 136). It might therefore be necessary to distinguish between Anglo-Saxon civilization and European civilization, considering the memory²⁵ that some nations retain, and to see France, for example, as the flagship of European civilization. However, this does not always seem to be the case. Europe increasingly seems to revolve²⁶ around Berlin rather than Paris.

So, is Europe a civilization apart, fundamentally different from the North American Anglo-Saxon civilization? Or has it been taken into the United States' orbit as a "junior partner", in other words, as a minor and residual component of Western civilization? Like Jean-Pierre Chevènement, Régis Debray is also critical of the reading proposed by Samuel Huntington. However, he leaves little doubt about the direction of his aforementioned work. The legendary mediologist states:

In 1919, there was a European civilization with American culture as a variant. There is, in 2017, an American civilization, whose European cultures seem, with all their diversity, at best, adjustment variables, at worst, indigenous reserves.

On a chessboard, this is called castling. On a battlefield, a defeat. (Debray 2017, p. 48)

Taking note of this castling and defeat, the United States of America, is indeed the leading country of Western civilization, including Europe. This is the view taken in this book²⁷ although, we allow ourselves a brief review of continental academic Europe in the concluding chapter of this book, as well as in a substantial footnote. In order of priority, it would be advisable to begin by studying the "how?" across Western civilization and the USA²⁸.

It is probably through Chinese civilization, and its flagship country, China, that the landscape of higher education and research should continue to be studied as a counterpoint to what is happening within Western civilization. Anticipating our conclusions, let us say that the academic center of gravity is rapidly shifting towards China and the civilization it nurtures²⁹. It would then be a matter of further study into the Indian civilization and its

flagship country, India. The case of Japanese civilization is simpler, in that it coincides with Japan and does not go beyond it³⁰. It would then be time to deal with the case of the Muslim civilization, Latin American civilization, the possible African civilization (remember that the term “possibly” belongs to Huntington), three (or two) civilizations without a clearly identified flagship country. Lastly, this overview would be incomplete if we omitted the Orthodox civilization and its flagship country, Russia.

The previous paragraph describes the complexity of dealing with the question “how?”, for all civilizations and their flagship countries. Rather than doing nothing, given the magnitude of the task, we have chosen to do what we can. We are starting this vast program today with Russia³¹, the flagship country of Orthodox civilization.

Two reasons guide our choice of analysis of the “how?” for the Russian version: the calendar³², temporal by definition, and the immersion, spatial³³ in this case.

Firstly, Russia launched the ambitious 5-100 project in 2012, aimed at propelling five Russian universities into the top 100 in the world by 2020. By the time we write the final lines of this book, this will be on the horizon.

Secondly, our analysis is based on an *in vivo* experience of almost nine months during the year 2016, in one of the first universities selected by the 5-100/2020 project, and on the expertise and consulting activities that several of these Russian universities have requested since then.

In the fourth chapter of the present work, we satisfy the diktat of the Russian emergency, by dealing with the third part of the triptych – the “how?” – in the context of the flagship country of Orthodox civilization, Russia. We analyze the chances of success and the obstacles encountered by Russian institutions in their conquest of international academic summits. Lastly, we propose options for strategic choices to be made at the governmental level.

Let us now continue the description of the contents of the other parts of this book.

Practically every page of this study is filled with numbered notes. They are grouped together in the “Notes, Insertions and Tangents” section of this book. The title reflects the fact that these notes often contain much more than details. Some give a historical or literary perspective (or both); several initiate possible avenues of development (some of which are mentioned in the foreword); and others address subjects that may seem more distant from the heart of the book’s subject but which, in our minds, are nevertheless linked to it in one form or another. A mathematician would say that they are related to, and positively correlated with, our concerns at the moment.

The “Appendices” section contains a certain amount of information, tables and graphs on which the different chapters are based. A “Reference” brings together the main sources used in this book.

We try to bring together the main points of emphasis of the previous chapters in Chapter 5, under the heading “Conclusion: Analysis and Perspectives”. Here, we identify the main trends of our study regarding the winners of the race for global intellectual leadership, as measured by the rankings. We even risk drawing trajectories that seem probable to us. Since the universities were born in Europe, we take advantage of this section to outline the situation of continental European universities within Western civilization. They confirm – without necessarily comforting – a prophecy by Paul Valéry from a hundred years ago, recalled in this same chapter. Beyond divisions and competitions, elite universities have important responsibilities, especially in tackling difficult problems. If the question of “why?” initiates the triptych, we mutate it in this chapter into “for what?”. We are indeed questioning the very mission of universities, wherever and whoever they are, and the responsibility of elite universities in particular, in the unprecedented context of population explosion, advances in robotic automation, and migrations of both technology and people.

This work does not have all the answers. It gives an angle, and identifies the dynamics of positions among the world’s elite in higher education and research. We believe in the sustainability of these dynamics. We hope that this book will provide some hindsight when it comes to influencing public policy and university reforms. This hindsight is necessary so that the short time for action does not obstruct the long time for strategic thinking in this competitive sector that is crucial to the sovereignty of nations, at a time when important forces are at work and when civilizational balances that were thought to be stable are faltering.

Throughout this book, we aim to contribute to the task that Albert Camus spoke of in his speech at the reception of the Nobel Prize in 1957:

Every generation, no doubt, believes it is destined to remake the world. Mine, however, knows it will not. Its task may be greater. It is to keep the world from falling apart. (Camus 1957, pp. 18–19)

At least, we try to do so by naming things as we see them, with all the lucidity and intellectual honesty we are capable of.

This study does not solely rely on lectures, graphs and scholarly analysis. It also draws³⁴ on stories, novels, plays, films, songs and pictorial works. It was not conceived in a theoretical, abstract and dry manner in the reassuring environment of an immovable office. Nomadism, quarrelling³⁵ and leaving the sphere of comfort are the main determining factors.

Let us begin this journey.

