

Civilising the world – The nature of international organisations¹

Klaas Dykmann, Associate Professor for Global Studies, Roskilde University, Denmark

The emergence and massive increase of international organisations (IOs) since the mid-19th century, which has apparently led to a system of “global governance”, has inspired much research and provoked many explanations. In the on-going debate, a critical consideration has been dominant that deconstructs a highly normative picture, namely that IOs on the one hand helped mitigate the often violent conflicts of the “global condition” that arose in the middle of the 19th century, and that they, on the other hand, have attempted to make use of the potential of increasing worldwide interactions. Examples of the first cause range from the Hague Peace Conventions (1899 and 1907), and the Red Cross, to the International Court of Justice (1945), and the human rights treaties since the Universal Declaration (1948), to the International Criminal Court (2002). Examples of the second motivation include the standardisation of technology, the harmonisation of world trade regulations as well as global health politics, and the concern for “development cooperation”. This normative assumption has been challenged. From quite different angles it has been argued that IOs were, to begin with, powerful instruments, used to maintain the hegemonic position of the European powers and the US.² They institutionalised and thus perpetuated global imbalances, regardless of what course they took. To a large extent, the maintenance of western dominance through IOs was legitimised by the international and thus presumably rather neutral character of IOs that pretended to improve the world. This self-legitimation resulted in a civilising mission.³ We will have a brief look at different features of this mission and how it changed over time as IOs became more global and non-western actors eventually appropriated IOs and thus modified the civilising mission itself.

Jürgen Osterhammel stresses two main features of modern civilising missions. It needs a civiliser who is convinced of his superiority, or the general desirability of his plans, and expects that the recipients of these missions from the outside would basically welcome these endeavours.⁴ Similar views – and this is the first key to understanding IOs as institutionalised and “internationalised” forms of civilising missions – direct the policies of IOs. To give one example, the first IOs of the 19th century, the international public unions, initially dedicated to technical standardisation (thus a seemingly “neutral” and “un-political” field⁵) served as the conservation of the Western norm and

¹ This text is a very abridged version of an article that will be published soon in the journal *Comparativ*.

² See the forthcoming edition of *Comparativ*, edited by Katja Naumann and Klaas Dykmann, on the history of international organisations, their western bias and the impact of non-western actors and ideas.

³ Others have identified civilising missions at IOs, for example M. Mazower, *Governing the World. The History of an Idea*. The Penguin Press, New York 2012; A. Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law*. Cambridge et al. 2004 (paperback edition 2007), G. W. Gong, *The Standard of ‘Civilization’ in International Society*. Oxford 1984.

⁴ J. Osterhammel, ‘The Great Work of Uplifting Mankind’. *Zivilisierungsmission und Moderne*, in: B. Barth/ J. Osterhammel (eds.), *Zivilisierungsmissionen*, Konstanz 2005, p. 365.

⁵ Claude assumed that – in contrast to the maintenance of peace as major goal of the League of Nations and the UN – the first IOs could be characterised as “non-political”. I.L. Claude Jr., *Swords into Plowshares. The Problems and Progress of International Organization*. New York, 4th edition 1971 (1st edition 1956), p. 36. Reinalda, in contrast,

value system, that would thereafter determine international relations, mostly unchallenged. Later, such a role was played by specialised organisations such as the International Labour Organisation, the World Health Organisation or the international finance institutions. Their activities “...are much more similar in terms of their expected impacts than the often almost impossible to unravel multitude of organizations would suggest. They all share the expectation that developing states will develop once they share the same attitudes to technology as the specialized agencies themselves”.⁶ Osterhammel’s definition also corresponds to global inequality, which co-determined the creation and development of IOs.⁷

Wolfgang Schröder differentiates between three main typologies of civilising missions: 1) those within a state, 2) those which target societies in other states, and 3) civilising missions that address the international system as a whole.⁸ Also here, in the latter case, one finds IOs portrayed well.

Admittedly, there is a problem for analysing the politics and programs of IOs as civilising projects. There is neither a ‘reference civilisation’ serving as a standard nor a uniform recipient culture. It is hard to tell whether British, French, Spanish or US-American models of civilisation/culture were dominant when organised internationalism emerged. One can, however, assume that a “cosmopolitanised western civilisation” mixture emerged as a result of continuous negotiations – firstly dominated by British⁹ and French cultural ideas, and later expanded mainly by North American models. This negotiated concept of “civilisation” mirrored minimum standards, which served to identify which societies, peoples and states qualified as participants of the “civilised community of peoples”, be it members of an IO, those who would attain membership after a transition to “civilisation”, or those who were put on the waiting list and were expected to work hard before becoming part of the civilised club. Such a classification is particularly obvious in the preamble to the Covenant of the League of Nations that speaks of “organised peoples”, implying the existence of non-organised or less civilised peoples.¹⁰ Minimum standards included the general acceptance of western-designed international law and more specifically labour norms, health

appropriately attests that technical areas always have political implications, too. B. Reinalda, *Routledge History of International Organizations. From 1815 to the Present Day*. London/New York 2009, p. 335.

⁶ Reinalda, *Routledge History of International Organizations*, p. 338.

⁷ S. Zimmermann, ‘International – transnational: Forschungsfelder und Forschungsperspektiven’, in: B. Unfried/J. Mittag/M. van der Linden (eds.), *Transnationale Netzwerke im 20. Jahrhundert*. Vienna 2008, p. 46.

⁸ W. M. Schröder, ‘Mission impossible? Begriff, Modelle und Begründungen der „civilizing mission“ aus philosophischer Sicht’, in: B. Barth/J. Osterhammel (eds.), *Zivilisierungsmissionen*. Konstanz 2005, p. 30.

⁹ A nice example for a civilising mission carried out by an NGO is the British Salvation Army whose activities outside of Europe are illustratively depicted by H. Fischer-Tiné, ‘Global Civil Society and the Forces of Empire’, in: S. Conrad/D. Sachsenmaier (eds.), *Competing Visions of World Order. Global Moments and Movements, 1880s-1930s*. New York/Houndsmills, pp. 29-67.

¹⁰ Reinalda, *Routledge History of International Organizations*, p. 290.

regulations, human rights and environmental standards or criteria for the granting of IWF loans. At least in the beginning, non-western societies did not participate actively in these negotiation processes; instead, they served as references for regions “to be civilised”. Consequently, the applied notion of modernity seemed to be genuinely European.¹¹

As unconscious and vague as the Europeans’ civilising mission may have been, they were operating along such lines. They were based on Western values, norms and patterns, and standardised rules mostly of European origin. Western European and then North-American/European or “Western” concepts shaped the goals, structures, the organisation, the power relations and concrete design of policies within and through IOs. Examples would be international norms of weights and measures, telegraphic regulations or labour rights elaborated by the International Labour Organisation, but also the notion that the League of Nations was a mainly US-inspired venture put into practise by Europeans and the United Nations a project largely designed by the United States, which simultaneously carried on the British empire to some extent.¹² The attribute “international” helped them to present their claim of authority in the light of “neutrality” and “universality” as it was considered less driven by particularistic national interests but more by the belief in a common good. In the following I will illustrate my argument by going through the history of IOs.

Power structures, contemporary problems, events and personal preferences and networks have shaped the origins and further development of IOs and their policies. Nonetheless, the civilising mission international organisation followed has been another powerful element in the making of IOs. Other authors have already identified civilising features of IOs. I would go further and consider it as an almost ingenuous and often unconscious driving force that has been elementary to the very establishment and further advancement of IOs. Accordingly, I deem it helpful to identify a civilising mission as a discourse of a perceived moral obligation and personal dedication to “do good” at the heart of IOs, since this discourse reflects the longing for progress and modernity, the belief in the natural superiority of mostly western, secular, technocratic and up-to-date techniques or solutions, but also mirrors the benevolence of the decisive actors, mostly deeply embedded in humanitarianism or, more generally, liberal internationalism. At the same time, cultural relativism

¹¹ This does not ignore the fact that other forms of modernity certainly influenced continuously the development of “western modernity” and had a more direct impact on IOs since decolonisation took off in the 1960s. S. Conrad/ A. Eckert, ‘Globalgeschichte, Globalisierung, multiple Modernen: Zur Geschichtsschreibung der modernen Welt’. In: S. Conrad/A. Eckert/U. Freitag (eds.), *Globalgeschichte. Theorien, Ansätze, Themen*. Frankfurt/New York 2007, pp. 18, 19; S. Eisenstadt, ‘Multiple Modernities’, *Daedalus*, vol. 129, no. 1 (2000), pp. 1-30.

¹² M. Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace. The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations*. Princeton University Press. 2009.

as a European invention went along with civilising missions that were initially aimed at western societies to improve social conditions and prevent wars. Nominally, these missions also included non-western societies, but with limitations that were not necessarily motivated purely by colonial interests, but also postulated in the belief that these societies were not yet ready for a) self-rule, b) independent economic government, c) social achievements such as human rights, labour rights, freedom of speech or gender equality, and d) in general, not fit for democracy (applicable even today).

It is important to note that since benevolent civilising missions often ignored cultural peculiarities: the “otherness” of non-western societies was often only considered collectively in comparison with the western ideal (the “west and the rest”), not between the “others”. In colonial times it came along with the belief of racial inferiority; afterwards, cultural “backwardness” replaced the former, including the articulated need to advance to western standards. With good reason it has been argued that since the emergence of IOs, these incorporated a problematic paternalism. This has proven to be long-lasting. The current discourse and practice of global governance has been elevated to an impersonal and secular catechism of enlightened multilateralism: peace, human rights, democracy, the preference of diplomacy over violence, and the belief in international solutions have become corner stones of international politics, at least at the rhetoric level.

In comparison to the war-torn first half of the 20th century, when the League of Nations – founded in the spirit of preventing a second (European) world war – proved to be impressively ill-equipped and lacking substantial support to maintain the fragile European peace, there has certainly been an improvement, despite the problems for IOs in view of the East-West conflict. However, the non-western countries seemed to do both, adapting unconditionally to the pre-existing concepts and procedures of IOs, while at times fiercely contesting these, with success in some policy areas. Non-western actors, however, appeared hardly able to challenge the very concept of IOs and of the civilising mission, also as a result of an often brittle unity. One may certainly argue that since the 1970s, and even more so since the beginning of the new millennium, rising non-western powers have challenged the western imprint in IOs.

However, IOs have also sought to civilise colonialism and later civilisers. Furthermore, non-western ideas were also introduced and contributed to modifying the nature of the civilising mission carried out by IOs. Nevertheless, the debate on a truly global health policy or global human rights (in contrast to neo-colonial medicine in world health or western individualised rights) often moved within the previously established frameworks and in the end succeeded in broadening the dimension

of “global health” and human rights. However, when it comes to funding or policy priorities, we can still see a rather western imprint (human rights, health programmes, development projects, global governance) and desire to civilise the world. It seems, however, that non-western actors and ideas also supported the idea of making the world a better, and more civilised place. In the case of Primary Health Care (PHC), we can detect both a combination of western medical practices and non-western “health realities” with existing “traditional” practices, as well as a challenge to the previously by-and-large uncontested pre-eminence of western medicine as the superior standard. The prevalence of western concepts in general, and in world health politics in particular, seems to hint at a perpetuated western civilising mission, conducted by health organisations since the early 20th century. Nevertheless, the strong influence of the Chinese concept that combined Traditional Chinese Medicine with western medicine, adapted to the challenge of remote rural populations, can be seen as a sort of non-western element of civilising efforts. With Primary Health Care the WHO has challenged predominantly western defined methods of what is necessary, but at the same time has created a less (if at all) western-dominated civilising mission to bring “health for all” to the world’s peoples. Interestingly, the advocates of PHC as a sort of hybrid non-western version of the civilising mission were also uneasy about other world regions – here in Europe, in particular – that showed more scepticism regarding the applicability of this concept to their region.

Contemporary IOs are also shaped by a civilising mission that contains western patterns of making the world a better place by making the world more “European”, “western” or simply “modern”. These “best intentions” have also led to laudable successes, like the improvement of labour conditions, women’s rights, democratic standards or better health conditions. Large problems remain, which often display a pitiable lack of holistic approaches or inappropriate measures applied to culturally different regions. Today, it seems difficult to be “uncivilised”: “While the word ‘civilization’ has become almost taboo, the underlying doctrines are flourishing more than ever. The key words now are development, modernization, and human rights.”¹³ Consequently, nowadays belonging to the “international community” requires the acceptance of international law, rules and

¹³ Jörg Fisch, ‘Internationalizing Civilization by Dissolving International Society. The Status of Non-European Territories in Nineteenth-Century International Law’. In: Martin H. Geyer and Johannes Paulmann (eds.), *The Mechanics of Internationalism. Culture, Society, and Politics from the 1840s to the First World War*. Oxford 2001, p. 257

norms – and a hierarchy is also still shining through when politicians and academics speak of rational and “rogue” states or news magazines write about “serious states”.¹⁴

My argument that a global civilising discourse has been one of the essential driving forces for IOs shall contribute to a more accurate study of IOs as an alternative to a questionable postcolonial and overall condemnation of these institutions, as well as too normative and applauding assessments of IOs as the only universally-legitimate global “governors”. It will be of particular research interest in the future to look closer at non-western internationalisms and civilising features of IOs.

¹⁴<http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21567939-even-miserable-standards-peace-process-israels-proposed-new-settlements-are>, Accessed on 8 January 2013.