

The British Academy and civilisation(s) – past, present, future

David Cannadine, President of the British Academy, unearths the deep roots of the Academy's new vision

In recent months, there has been considerable public discussion of civilisation – or, more accurately, of civilisations – much of it initiated by two of the British Academy's Fellows, Mary Beard and Simon Schama, whose eponymous television series has rightly attracted

a great deal of attention. What do we mean by civilisations? Is it good enough to say that we can recognise them when we see them? Are they the result of leaps of faith or efforts of will? And what exactly is the nature of their relationships with each other? These are serious and important questions, which the presenters of *Civilisations* certainly raised, but with which very few reviewers of the programmes made any serious effort to engage. A few weeks ago, I hosted a dinner at the Academy, at which Mary Beard eloquently lamented the lack of such a grown-up public discussion (her remarks are published elsewhere in this issue, page 9); and also present was Sir David Attenborough who, as Controller of BBC 2, had commissioned the original

Civilisation, presented by another of our Fellows, Kenneth Clark, which first aired in 1969.¹

Behind this latest engagement with the subject lies the work of the Harvard political scientist Samuel P. Huntington who, in his highly influential publication, *The Clash of Civilizations*,² claimed or warned or lamented or predicted that civilisations could be easily

and precisely defined, that they were largely homogeneous in their structures and characteristics, that their relations with each other were invariably antagonistic, perhaps latently, or perhaps actually, and that as a result they were always likely to go to war. Huntington's thesis, which was often invoked to justify intervention by the Americans and the British in Iraq in 2003, has been subject to many devastating critiques, some more explicit than others, and not least by Fellows of this Academy.

In his *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (2010),³ Neil MacGregor urged that for most of human history, civilisations had been characterised more by overlap, borrowing and conversation than by antagonism, confrontation and conflict. And in *Identity and Violence* (2006) and *The Argumentative Indian* (2005),⁴ Amartya Sen insisted that it was (for example) deeply mistaken to describe India, as Huntington did, as a 'Hindu civilization'. On the contrary, he contended it was a country that, ever since independence from the British in 1947, had been a secular state with a secular constitution, and where there are more Muslims to be found than in any other nation in the world, with the exceptions of Indonesia and Pakistan. And Sen further argued that, in any case, most people think of themselves in many different ways, and as belonging to many different groups, which makes it impossible to assign to them one over-riding, all-encompassing identity called civilisation.

Exactly one hundred years ago, in the spring and summer of 1918, as the First World War entered its final, climacteric phase, but when its outcome was still in doubt, the Fellows of the British Academy were themselves



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1. Kenneth Clark was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1949.

2. Samuel P. Huntington's article 'The Clash of Civilizations?', *Foreign Affairs* (1993), was further developed in his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996). The 'Clash of Civilizations' debate is discussed in David Cannadine, *The Undivided Past: History Beyond Our Differences* (2013), Chapter 6, 'Civilization', especially pp. 242–54.

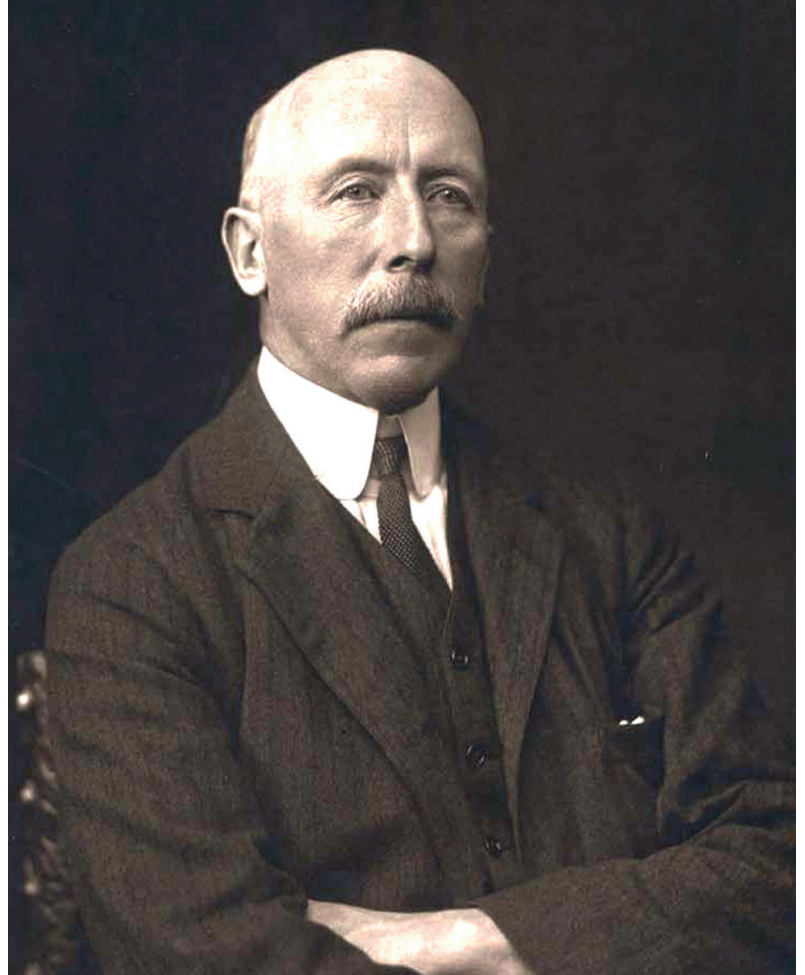
3. Neil MacGregor's *A History of the World in 100 Objects* was broadcast as a BBC Radio 4 series and published as a book, both in 2010. Neil MacGregor was elected an Honorary Fellow of the British Academy in 2000.

4. Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (2006). Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity* (2005). Amartya Sen was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1977.

much concerned with their own version of these issues concerning the nature and relationships of civilisations. As another article in this issue makes plain (page 49), one Fellow, the Revd Professor Canon William Sanday, thought the conflict had been ‘by universal consent, the worst war ever waged by powers calling themselves civilized’, but his plea that Fellows of the Academy should cultivate contacts with a select group of German scholars, who might be willing to work to bring ‘Germany back again into line with the moral conscience of the world’, was ill received. This was partly because there seemed little evidence that the German scholars he named were likely to embrace such friendly and well-disposed opinions, and partly because Sanday’s words could be misconstrued as indicating less than wholehearted support for the continuing British war effort.

One figure who soon distanced himself from Sanday’s remarks was Sir Frederic George Kenyon, the director of the British Museum, who had recently succeeded Viscount Bryce as President of the Academy. ‘It is right’, he urged, ‘to make it plain that British scholars are heart and soul in the war, that their determination is not slackened, because we feel that we, with our allies, are the trustees of civilisation.’ He made the same point even more emphatically in his first presidential address, delivered on 4 July 1918,⁵ when it was still unclear that the allied forces would successfully withstand the most recent German advance. ‘We are’, he concluded, ‘in a particular sense, trustees of a most important part of that civilization which we are fighting to defend ... In serving the Academy, we are serving no narrow cause. We are flying the banner of civilization which, side by side with our allies, we claim the right of serving and of preserving.’

Like all such comments by Presidents of the Academy, my own included, Kenyon’s observations were perforce time-specific and place-bound. The notion that Europe (or, more broadly, ‘the west’) represented the ultimate achievement of civilisation had not only been undermined by the horrors of the First World War, but would be further eroded when the bestialities of the holocaust became plain (thus regarded, German *kultur* was not at all civilised). In 1918, Oswald Spengler lamented and predicted *The Decline of the West*,⁶ soon after, Arnold Toynbee would begin his monumental *A Study of History*,⁷ where he would argue that European civilisation was but one among many, and even Kenneth Clark concluded his account of *Civilisation* by conceding that European culture had lost much of its confidence and



Sir Frederic Kenyon, President of the British Academy, 1917–21.

vitality as a result of the two world wars. Nowadays, and as *Civilisations* has made vividly and visibly plain, we rightly think about and define the subject in very different and much broader ways than Kenyon or Clark did (though in fact Clark was much more sympathetic towards and knowledgeable about civilisations beyond Europe than he was often given credit for).

Yet for all its temporal limitations, there is also much in Kenyon’s presidential address of 1918 that still resonates powerfully, exactly one hundred years on. The Academy, he believed, was and should be ‘the leader and official representative of the studies which come within its sphere’. It must, Kenyon continued, ‘on the one hand, earn the confidence and support of the great constituency which it claims to represent, and, on the other hand, make good its claim in the eyes of government and the country to be regarded as the representative of that constituency.’ He further noted that, with limited state support, ‘one cannot express too warmly the gratitude of the

5. F.G. Kenyon, ‘The Position of an Academy in a Civilized State: Presidential Address’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, [8] (1917–1918), 37–49.

6. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West: Outlines of a Morphology of world history*, 2 volumes (1918–22).

7. Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, 12 volumes (1934–61). Arnold Toynbee was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1937.

Academy to the generous benefactors who have chosen this way of demonstrating their sense of the value of intellectual culture, and who have selected the Academy as the medium of their gifts.' But he also urged that 'to advance learning by a wise use of funds committed to its charge, it is evident that [the Academy] requires endowments greatly in excess of those which it at present possesses.'

To be sure, government funding of the Academy has significantly increased since the paltry sums that were only intermittently made available in Kenyon's time, both in terms of our core grant from the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS), and of the many fellowship schemes and research projects that we oversee and administer on behalf of BEIS and other government departments. But we are already gearing up for the negotiations which will soon take place as the next Spending Review looms, having been brought forward by a year in the recent budget. We remain too dependent on government funding, and we possess an endowment that is still insufficient for our purposes, and which lags far behind those of our sister academies. We rightly prize and jealously safeguard our intellectual independence, but it would be greatly strengthened and enhanced if we could significantly diversify our income streams, and control and command more sustaining resources of our own, and we are devoting a considerable part of our fundraising efforts to achieving that vital goal and essential outcome.

To this end, we are also finalising the Academy's new strategic plan, building on the strategic framework about which my predecessor, Lord Stern, wrote in the summer 2016 issue of the *British Academy Review*.⁸ As the national academy for the humanities and social sciences, which recognises scholarly excellence and celebrates academic distinction across those disciplines, we intend to focus on five priorities: to speak up more effectively in public and to government on behalf of the subjects that we represent; to support and invest as much as we can in the very best researchers and research; to help provide answers to some of the greatest challenges of our time, which need the insights of the humanities and social sciences every bit as much as those of science and technology; to ensure and enhance our sustained international engagement and global collaborations; and to maximise the Academy's assets and resources so as to secure its future on Carlton House Terrace.

In terms of specific objectives, there is nothing in this strategic plan that is particularly novel or especially new: but the aim is to ensure that our efforts are both appropriately focused and well co-ordinated, and to that end we have recently made some changes to the internal staffing structure of the Academy to ensure it is more

closely aligned with our objectives. And there is clearly a great deal of work that needs doing. In the speech that the Prime Minister delivered at Jodrell Bank in May this year, she spoke about the importance of science and technology as the drivers of innovation and economic growth, very much as Harold Wilson did with his 'white heat of technology' speech to the Labour Party conference in 1963. But she did not mention the humanities or social sciences once, even though she herself has a degree in geography, and despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of her cabinet studied arts of humanities subjects, or the social sciences, at university. Nor did she recognise that many of the challenges we now face, from an ageing society to the future of work to the impact of artificial intelligence, require the insights of the humanities and social sciences every bit as much as the expertise of scientists and technologists.

These days, I spend much of my time as President making the case across Whitehall and Westminster for the importance of the humanities and social sciences: some senior civil servants are undoubtedly sympathetic as, in private, is the Prime Minister herself. And it is widely recognised that the Academy's Fellowship represents an extraordinary body of experience, expertise and wisdom across a vast range of human knowledge on which government ought to be more eager to draw, and from which it would greatly benefit. Might we hope that, before another 12 months have elapsed, Theresa May will deliver a complementary speech, from another

appropriately resonant location, extolling the vital importance of the humanities and social sciences for the well-being of our society and nation and, indeed, for the successful working of our economy and our democracy?

Let me end, as I began, with Mary Beard, Simon Schama and Sir Frederic Kenyon. As Beard and Schama both rightly lamented, *Civilisations* did indeed deserve more serious public discussion than it received: for in an age of xenophobic populism, ratcheting up the language of paranoia, hatred and fear, it is vital to be reminded that civilisations and cultures have indeed co-existed and intermingled – and greatly to their benefit. But who, among the commentariat, took any notice? And so, finally, to Sir Frederic Kenyon. During his presidential address of 1918, he urged that the British Academy, along with the Royal Society, should be 'the official representative of learning in the state'. Amen to that. And he went on to proclaim his 'utmost confidence in [the Academy's] future, and in the share which it should take in the intellectual development of the country'. I, too, am very hopeful for the Academy's future, but there is much to do to make that future as confident and certain and commanding as it ought to be. ■

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8. Nicholas Stern, 'President's Notes', *British Academy Review*, 28 (Summer 2016), 3–4.