

# THE CLASSICAL MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE – SHOULD “CLASSICAL WISDOM” DETERMINE OUR IDENTITY AND FUTURE?

**LJUBEN TEVDovski**

Ljuben Tevdovski, Ph.D, Associate Professor  
Institute of History and Archaeology  
Goce Delcev University – Stip, Macedonia  
e-mail: ljuben.tevdovski@ugd.edu.mk  
e-mail: tevdovski@yahoo.com  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9486-4341>

Dr. Ljuben Tevdovski is international expert, lecturer, diplomat, classicist, archaeologist, and cultural manager with more than two decades of experience on leading positions in educational, scientific, and governmental institutions, and NGOs. His core fields of expertise incorporate international relations, history of religion, classical studies and theory and history of archaeology. His research and analyses also involve the scientific areas of cultural studies and cultural and public diplomacy. Tevdovski is Associate Professor of Classical Archaeology and Archaeological Theory at the Institute of History and Archaeology, Goce Delcev University. He also taught courses in the Faculty of Educational Sciences, Faculty of Law, and the Macedonian Diplomatic Academy, and gave lectures in numerous universities in different countries. Tevdovski has served as Deputy Director of Research of the Holocaust Fund of the Jews from Macedonia, Director of the Museum of the City of Skopje, Macedonian Ambassador to Canada, Public Diplomacy Advisor and Member of the Foreign Policy Council of the President of Macedonia. He has also served as founder, Editor-in-chief and member of the editorial boards of numerous prestigious Macedonian and Balkan academic journals. Tevdovski has written and edited academic and fictional books, articles, and analyses, and led important think-tank initiatives and research projects.

## ABSTRACT

“No one finds it easy to live uncomplainingly and fearlessly with the thesis that human reality is constantly being made and unmade, and that anything like a stable essence is constantly under threat.”

These were the words used by Edward Said in the late 1970's in the context of introduction of the new paradigms for the identity of the people, communities and societies in the East and the West, as well as the world as a whole. He was ahead of a wider decades-long process of re-evaluating and reimagining of our identities and values, leading to exposure of serious and numerous misconceptions and illusions in the perceptions and analyses of the self and the other.

The growing tendencies of scientific relativism and constant re-evaluation of the key paradigms, especially in social sciences and humanities, of the last decades, were further emphasized by the massive waves of globalisation, that have shaken societal traditions, norms, and principals all over the world. One of the key aspects of this transformative process in the West was the confrontation with the societal and scientific biases created by the Eurocentric views of the world and human history, connected to the dominant classicistic traditions in both society and academia.

This paper provides a novel multidisciplinary approach in thinking about our classical traditions and examines if the classical principals, ideals, and “wisdom” are still relevant in confronting contemporary challenges of the world and reimagining our own identity and our vision for the future.

**Keywords:** classical philosophy, globalization, classical tradition, Western civilization, identities

## INTRODUCTION

“What we may be witnessing is not just... the passing of a particular period..., but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”

Francis Fukuyama (1989)

At the end of the Cold War, and just before the end of a long millennium, when the great American political scientist and intellectual Francis Fukuyama optimistically and triumphantly declared the end of history, few believed that that “end” would look exactly like this.

During the 90’s of the last century many people around the world shared Fukuyama’s enthusiasm and embraced the notion that “the human won over history”, and thus over its ephemerality. This new *übermenschlich* (Nietzschean superhuman) momentum prompted important questions in both science and society. Could history, our old teacher, remain in its post? Is its “classical wisdom” outdated? And is the historical heritage and the constantly emerging ancient material, like Menander’s play “The Grouch” or the Dead Sea Scrolls, still relevant for our societies and relations?

Ancient authors were constantly cautioning us, like Menander with his playful ways, that “you don’t know what changes [time] will bring,” because “what he today gives, he’ll not give tomorrow” (Bolchazy 2006, 107). And yet, once again, we wanted to believe that the “universal messages” do not apply to us and our new “glorious” epoch.

Today, many intellectuals, political and economic leaders, and ordinary citizens of the Western world, as well as those around the world who have embraced and share their ideas and ideals, look back with nostalgia at Fukuyama’s vision. Just decades after its birth, the fast-paced historical transformations have turned it into a long-sunk modern Atlantis – utopia of a world that “all but” became that.

In a stark contrast to the vision’s expectations, today’s European elites, and many across the Atlantic, are astonished by the tendencies, profound changes and enormous challenges created or augmented by the growing extensity and intensity of the waves of economic and cultural globalization. This overwhelming process is threatening

not only our economic and political axioms, but also the moral imperatives of the civilization, as we understand it. Mass migration, demographic changes, weakening institutions and instability, as well as ideological transformations, often leaning towards radical ideas and movements, have shaken the basic structure of Western societies and they are increasingly reducing citizens' confidence in the sustainability and future of such a system.

It is in this predesigned scenography of uncertainty and fear that the pandemic of 2020 shocked the world, with its apocalyptic scenes of empty megacities and depersonalized mass burials. It "froze the blood" of many who fear the "punishment" for abandoning God's commandments and canons, the localisms and the traditions of our civilization, and even more of those who fear the "punishment" for abandoning its universal principles, humanistic values, scientific achievements and the idea of progress. Most of all, it represents a culmination of the wider accelerating alienation process, that stripped people of their shared values and beliefs, creating "more loneliness than any man could bear" (The Police, 1979). [1]

In an era of endemic distrust in traditional institutions, narratives and elites, numerous leaders from various political and ideological backgrounds have decided to react by "heroically" rescuing or bidding farewell to the Western civilization. The values and unique achievements of the Western civilization that just decades ago were professed to unite the world, are frequently mentioned today in the context of calls for their preservation or pathetic requiems dedicated to their departure. The growing radical voices frequently associate this "end of civilization" with the influx of "foreigners" or with the influx of a variety of ideological and religious systems. On the other hand, many would relate the overall deterioration of the contemporary Western civilization, and its values and traditions, with the decline of the ideals of democracy and the principles of individuality and human rights.

Despite the deep ideological and political fractions in numerous societies and among their leaders, it seems that all these diffused contemporary visions share a common feature – the eschatological dimensions of their narratives. Seen as a whole and with a dose of cynicism, such a modern discourse seems appropriate for the time and role of Fukuyama's "last men" (Fukuyama 1992).

This global cacophony, even without the added effects of the pandemic, resembles a swan song of the "last people" in a futuristic movie. As if the leaders of humanity have recovered from their own apathy only for a moment, in order to send, with the last breath of

our societies, a “message in a bottle” from ours to some future civilization, or from our to another universe.

In this context, this paper answers to the recent “heightened calls for academics to engage” as well, with their voice and “using their classical knowledge” in the global and local debates concerning the growing challenges of the humanity (Naoise Mac Sweeney et al. 2019, 16). It takes the approach that academics should risk inevitably engaging in the global cacophony, unprecedented in human history, in order to recall the most valuable “messages in a bottle” that might be useful for the challenges of our civilization. And even if they are not useful enough, I propose that they would help writing a more valuable “message in a bottle” from our civilization to the next ones.

In his BBC article, from February 2019, “Are we on the road to civilisation collapse?”, the researcher Luke Kemp, of the Centre for the Study of Existential Risk at the University of Cambridge, concludes: “We will only march into collapse if we advance blindly. We are only doomed if we are unwilling to listen to the past” (Kemp 2019). This paper makes an important revision, or at least clarification, to Kemp’s bold statement, reminding our civilization that “we are doomed if we advance, blindly following our misunderstandings of the past”. It scrutinizes our “classical wisdom”, past and heritage, to the bone of its existence. Yet, it neither dismisses the importance of the “classical wisdom” in contemporary global challenges and debates, nor it aims primarily towards resolution of the decades long academic debates concerning the discipline of classics. In addition, instead of focusing on the most visible elements of the misuse of the classical narratives in the radicalized voices and rising cultural, racial, social, and interstate confrontations, the paper explores the wider impact of the “classical tradition” over modern intellectual history and epistemology. Creating a comparative and multidisciplinary context, by using the paradigms of the globalization and international relations theories, cultural studies and modern philosophy, it aims to create a novel, more value-neutral and integrative approach for understanding and utilizing the “classical wisdom” and narratives. Finally, this paper suggests that the profound exploration of the limitations and flaws of the classically programmed software of our academic and laymen minds represents an approach capable to unleash the wide spectrum of knowledge and wisdom accumulated through the great centuries that we traditionally cage in the term “classical antiquity”.

## WHAT IS THE CIVILIZATION WE ARE SAVING OR MOURNING?

“The survival of the West depends on [...] reaffirming their Western identity and Westerners accepting their civilization as unique (and) not universal [...].”

Samuel P. Huntington (1996, 21–22)

Just one year after Fukuyama’s epochal work, full of idealism, his former teacher and prominent American political scientist Samuel Huntington decided to “teach him a lesson” in theory of international relations. When Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” was published in the prestigious *Foreign Affairs*, many saw this reaction as a “relapse of the old”, another classical “Grouch” and a deeply conservative assessment of world’s affairs.

However, the wider perspective over the “old” provided some privileges for the experienced scholar and long-term political adviser as well. Unlike his student Fukuyama, Huntington has also lived through another historical period filled with enthusiasm in the pre-Cold War era. As a Yale student, he certainly followed with interest the early optimism and idealism of the era born of the victory over fascism. His warnings that “[e]xpectations should not always be taken as reality; because you never know when you will be disappointed” sounded cynical in the context of the idealistic 1990s. However, in the light of today’s “civilizational” challenges, many consider these, and his other thoughts, to be scientific empiricism, and some would even argue that they were prophetic.

In the years of the victory of the United States in the world’s biggest competition, the Cold War, Huntington’s visions of a multi-polar and multicultural world were not very appealing, even to representatives of the “non-Western” elites. In addition, his notion that there is a need to defend and focus on the “survival of the West” sounded completely outdated to many people. For a moment, or “in a historical momentum”, the impression was created that the idealists’ traditions in theories of international relations were much more appropriate for the “new world”, as well as more desirable in the context of the interests and visions of the Cold War victors, than those of the realists.

Today, in contrast, we have numerous easily measurable parameters to convince us that we are living in Huntington’s realistic “world of different civilizations”. Such divided global reality is

reflected through continuing misunderstandings of the leaders of the great powers, the regional instability and military conflicts, or the rise of ethnic and religious intolerance and fundamentalist ideas among people (Naoise Mac Sweeney et al. 2019). Most importantly, it seems as if the major institutions and advocates of universalism and idealism have also capitulated in front of the ideology of an eternally divided world.

Thus, for example, at the dawn of the new millennium the United Nations (UN) and UNESCO have intensified their commitments and efforts for dialogue between “different civilizations”. The proclamation of 2001, the first year of the new millennium, as the “Year of Dialogue among Civilizations” was a real milestone of this development. It was adopted with consensus of the United Nations’ member states and incited great enthusiasm and support from various international organizations and groups, as well as important inter-governmental institutions and bodies (UN-GA 1998). The enthusiastic initiatives of individuals that started in the 1970s, in the new millennium led towards serious global movements that are also reflected in the spirit of the UN Millennium Declaration, in the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations and the UNESCO Medium-term Strategy (2002–2007). This multilateral process instigated as well numerous regional and global initiatives, such as the “Dialogue on Coexistence of Cultures and Civilizations” from 2000, the “Dialogue among Civilizations” from 2002, the “United Nations Alliance of Civilizations” from 2005, or the International “Ancient Civilizations Forum” from 2017 (Naoise Mac Sweeney et al. 2019).

All these initiatives are based upon the ideas of tolerance, understanding of diversity and culture of peace as solutions to the many global, regional, and local challenges instigated or emphasized by the rapid pace at which today’s intensely globalizing world lives and transforms.

However, this deep global commitment to “dialogue among different civilizations” (Salter 2002, 128–155), despite its firm determination to oppose Huntington’s famous and, for many, controversial concept of “clash of civilizations” (Huntington 1996), basically strengthens, reaffirms, and promotes its basic principles. We can find a curious illustration for the promotion of the ideology of a divided world in the Convention on the Rights of the Child of the United Nations. The UN, through this convention, obliges all education systems in the world to encourage each child to have “respect for his or her identity [...] and for civilizations other than his or her own” (UN-GA 1989).

This and other documents and policies create an impression that today the UN and the most important international organizations and intergovernmental initiatives, do not dispute Huntington's views that, for example, "Arabs, Chinese and Westerners, however, are not part of any broader cultural entity", but instead they agree that "they constitute (substantially different) civilizations" (Huntington 1993, 22–49).

Viewed through the prism of Huntington's ideas and arguments, many of the global initiatives for "dialogue among different civilizations" that marked the first decades of the new millennium represent an essential scientific, cultural, and social capitulation of the concept of a single "human civilization" in the face of insurmountable, profound, and historically argued and perceived differences of the many cultural groups and subgroups in the world.

Finally, we may ask ourselves, what is the global dialogue among civilizations, if not an application of Huntington's theory that "the world will be shaped in large measure by the interactions among seven or eight major civilizations" (Huntington 1993, 22–49).

## CIVILIZATION OR CIVILIZATIONS

"Western belief in the universality of Western culture suffers three problems: it is false; it is immoral; and it is dangerous."

Samuel P. Huntington (1996, 310)

Decades after their promotion, Fukuyama and Huntington's visions and ideas remain in the centre of major scientific, ideological, and political polarizations in the Western world and beyond. Yet, as part of the idealist and realist traditions in International Relations' theories, they represent only significant manifestations of the century-old debate between the two polarized tendencies, with substantial impact on the world's developments. Furthermore, despite their numerous and irreconcilable differences both visions are deeply and firmly embedded in the ideas, theories, and symbols of the identity of Western man, as part of the world-dominant "Western civilization". The only way to understand this subtle unity of the two opposed visions is to understand the origin and significance of the main conceptual basis from which they both derive – "the idea of the existence and the nature of Western civilization".

Western civilization, and the civilization in general, are so ubiquitous in political, social, and even scientific discourse that we



often accept them as timeless axioms of history and the world. In this context, Huntington would emphasize: “The broader reaches of human history have been the history of civilizations” (Huntington, 22–49).

Yet, despite the conscious or subconscious tendency to transcend civilizations across different epochs and contexts, we cannot trace them, or at least the history of the consciousness of their existence as such, before the nineteenth century.

On the contrary, when the neologism “civilization” was created in the world of the Bourbon kings of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it existed only as a singular noun. As integral and useful element of the ideology of the Bourbon royal court, the “civilization” represented an expression of the level of total cultural, social, political, economic, and technological development of the world (Díaz-Andreu 2007, 67; Reeves 2004, 15–16). It was perceived as an important omnipresent parameter of human history, that was constantly evolving under the leadership of the Egyptians, Assyrians, Persians, Macedonians, Romans and, of course, “triumphed” in the era of the French Bourbons’ global rule (Mulryne, 165; Rubin 1992, 28–32; Ng 2006, 297–298). [2]

This early definition for civilization is in direct collision with the parameters upon which it was defined by Huntington in the dawns of the new “multicivilizational millennium”. Huntington’s civilization, or rather civilizations, was not defined as a level of overall societal or human growth or development, but through its/their cultural characteristics. Thus, the new definition for civilization became rooted, and, accordingly, closely connected in contemporary usage and diverse contexts with another term – culture.

However, these terms and conceptions were not always compatible, and their different histories of development and transformations, especially in the last two centuries, are of a paramount importance for comprehending their contemporary nature, as well as their ideological impacts in wider analyses. Thus, the contemporary concept and dominant understanding of culture, and especially its implications on broader collective and global identities, represent products of the German intellectual traditions developed in the wider scope of nineteenth-century Europe, known as the “Spring of Nations”. The German theoretical novelty, *Kultur*, initiated as an ideological counterweight to the French universalistic imperialism of Napoleon’s era, have transformed into an entirely new and alternative understanding of the history of the world and the mankind (Reeves 2004, 16–25; Tevdovski, Ilievski 2015).

This new global ideology aspired to replace, once and for all, the centuries-long dominant position of France, as “the centre of

civilization”, and consequently the political centre of Europe and the world (Diaz-Andreu 2007; Dietler 1994). The new, “German” idea of the world, has freed the “different cultures” from the obligation to civilize themselves and to engage in the global competition for absorption and further development of the heritage of the universal human civilization (Trigger 2006, 61).

Thus, Ferguson’s eighteenth-century definition of civilization as antipode of primitivism (Ferguson 1966, 1) was in direct collision with the “culture”, defined by German Romantic thinkers as a celebration of the natural and the primitive. [3] The new “German culture”, followed by other European and non-European “cultures”, defined themselves as being different, authentic and, most importantly, “pure”. In this context, the civilizational waves that were coming to Europe from the Middle East, through the Mediterranean, for millennia, eagerly grasped by earlier European elites, and mastered by the Bourbons, were suddenly transformed by the new “pure” Germans into corrupting and un-European oriental or barbarian influences (Reeves 2004, 21–22; Guthenke 2008).

According to the new theories of the scientists and intellectuals of the German romanticism, the “cultures” represented broad “natural” entities of people, substantially different from each other that existed for a long period, or eternally through history. They were defined as communities that share authentic traditions, language, symbols and philosophical beliefs through centuries and millennia. The theory permits that such entities have interacted with others in their development and transformation, yet, insists that they always keep certain characteristics that make them unique (Zammito 2002).

These conserved capsules that travel through time, unique, instead of universal, newly conceived in the nineteenth century, represent the real prototypes of Huntington’s civilizations. Yet, in the ideological and scientific milieu of nineteenth-century Germany and beyond, they were not called civilizations, but only cultures. During the nineteenth century, when the “Concert of Europe” convincingly defeated the French imperialistic ideal in Europe and in the world, cultures, as conceived in Germany, became the key component of an increasingly accepted and universalized view of the history of mankind. It initiated a global transformation with large scientific and societal impacts, in which the different episodes and aspects of the development of the human civilization, had to be transformed and reorganized into separated groups of events, people and ideas owned by the different “invented” eternal entities and communities, called cultures, ethnicities, nations, or races.

Finally, the transformation of human civilization into its new plural identity, and the usage of the plural form of the term – “civilizations”, still dominant in world relations today, is a product of the global socio-political transformations of the first half of the twentieth century.

In 1905, the first generation of the family of the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama settled in the United States. They left Japan during the military conflict with Russia and headed East in order to get to know the West. In the very same year, Japan won the war with the great Russian Empire, and Europe and the West were obliged to reinvent their understandings and get to know the East in the entirely new light (Reeves 2004, 27–29).

In the new global context, the European colonial powers and “civilizers” of the world had to reluctantly give way in international relations to non-European actors, which, until then, they had described as “less civilized” or simply “savage”. The American intellectual and religious leader Gerrit Gong, whose ancestors, like those of Fukuyama, met the West going East, illustrates this process with the following words: the new “practice of bothering at all to create international legal agreements with ‘uncivilized’ countries was justified as necessary to maintain law and order in the ‘civilized’ international society” (Gong 1984, 58).

It was this necessity and “diplomatic outwitting” regarding the admission of non-European countries, especially those from East Asia and South America, to the “Club of the civilized”, that strengthened the new understanding of the world as a conglomeration of civilizations.

Thus, in the new European version of civilization, full of the cultural features of the romantic nineteenth century, but also of the imperial traditions and racial stereotypes, created in recent centuries as well, there was no place for the former “savages” and “barbarians” (Marchand 2009a). Therefore, if relations with them were to be regulated within the frames of what was civilized, then the only solution was to recognize them as being another, alluding to a less valuable, civilization.

## THE CLASSICAL CIVILIZATION

“It is necessary, then, to accept as a principle and point of departure the fact that there is a hierarchy of races and civilizations, and that we belong to the superior race and civilization, still recognizing that, while superiority confers rights, it imposes strict obligations in return. The basic legitimation of conquest over native peoples is the conviction of our superiority, not merely our mechanical, economic, and military superiority, but our moral superiority. Our dignity rests on that quality, and it underlies our right to direct the rest of humanity.”

François Jules Harmand (Said 1994, 17)  
Early twentieth century European intellectual,  
scientist and colonial administrator in Asia

The idea of dividing the world into different civilizations, where the members of the “West”, and especially the “Concert of Europe”, were to maintain their dominant role in world relations, created the need for the existence of the concept of “classical civilization”. It aimed to define and preserve the ideals and principles “by which non-European societies might be judged (by the self-appointed European arbiters) sufficiently “civilized” to be accepted as members of the European-dominated international system” (Huntington 1996, 41–42).

Such a new, separate, “European civilization”, following the example of the German *Kultur* concept, was to have its own ideas, values, symbols, and achievements throughout history, which are timeless, and, as such, to maintain the piety of a dominant civilization, which “rules and ennobles” the rest for millennia. This view, predominant in the intellectual circles of the West during the twentieth century, is illustrated by the British theorist of international relations Gilbert Murray in his honest and deeply personal words. He says: “To the men of my youth Western [...] civilization was simply the right road of human progress: other civilizations, if one could call them civilizations at all, were just false roads or mistakes” (Reeves 2004, 31).

In this sense, Fukuyama’s idea of the end of history, in which the brilliance of the “classical” West is universalized as a value and it unites the world, is far from being new. On the contrary, it is a logical consequence and an expected result of the ideas upon which the world order at the beginning of the twentieth century was founded (Gong 1984).

Even more, Fukuyama's and numerous other contemporary visions for the global affairs, while striving to answer the contemporary challenges of the world, are still deeply entrenched in the paradigms of the European intellectual and scientific thought of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Their universalistic ideals are systematically undermined by the subtle intellectual influence of the asymmetric vision of global history, developed by the European elites in the nineteenth century, for the needs of their self-identification and validation of their global aspirations. For the needs of their time and their endeavours, and through their understanding of the self and other, the romantic Western thinkers of the previous centuries created a vision of the whole human history, seen through the eyes of their invented "classical" progenitors.

In this context, the two critical points through which the globalizing ancient civilization of the Middle East, through the Mediterranean, approached the "unique" European soil, were transformed by European researchers and enthusiasts of the previous centuries into fetishized symbols of the ancient "authentic" traditions of the West (Díaz-Andreu 2007, 12).

They were declared as the starting points and defining elements of the European civilization, built upon the particularistic principles of the German *Kultur* concept. Like the nineteenth-century Germans, they did not have to prove their technological achievements and traditions in comparison to other "ancient civilizations". Instead, they were declared "morally superior" to others, and, thus, predisposed to world domination (Dietler 1998, 296–98; Traina 2005; Guttenke 2008; Hall 2011).

The main fabric of the historical narrative that built and legitimized the new modern ideology of the "authentic European culture in antiquity", were the writings of the late-republican Roman authors. These local elite of one city in antiquity, much like certain western elites of today, was fearlessly defending itself from the overwhelming waves of diverse influences of the ancient globalization. The particularistic values and principles, through which they were trying to justify the survival of their local system of social relations and privileges, was no match for the global models that inevitably overwhelmed them. More importantly, the localist and anti-globalist tendencies remained peripheral even in their heyday and died out, even in Rome, in the next centuries. The models of rule and understanding of global relations developed in the Middle East many millennia ago, and spread across the Mediterranean to Europe, overtaking Rome, and dominating globally up to modernity (Grafton et al. 2010;

Pieterse 2001; Whitmarsh 2010; Stockhammer 2013; Pitts and Versluys 2015; Tevdovski 2020).

However, the screams or the dying republican system in the city of Rome, though peripheral in the course of development of the global and even European history, became the key milestone of the new-emerging identity and view on history of modern Europeans. Combined with its ideal, the “Athenian democracy” of the Periclean Golden Age, and further reinforced by elements of the narratives of late-medieval propaganda of the Roman Popes, who tried to emancipate themselves from the influence of Constantinople, it transformed into the historical foundation of the newly “imagined” entity. It became the crucial historical prove for the unique identity of the newly imagined eternal entity – the “Western civilization”.

The anti-royal and anti-oriental tones, of these patched up voices from different historical periods, represented the bone of the new narrative about Europe and the West. It suited, perfectly, the sentiment of the new European elites emerging from the antiroyalist movement widely popular after the French Revolution and the racist and anti-oriental ideas of European imperialists and German romantic thinkers of the nineteenth century. (Diaz-Andreu 2007; Marchand 2009a; McGrath 2013) Thus, the globally dominant modern Europeans, although already significantly divided into “different” nations and cultures, were to gain through the “classical civilization” their shared and, in Huntington’s words, “widest identification” (Huntington 1996, 41–44, 57–58), which explained their naturally dominant place in world’s affairs.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Periclean Athens, and late-republican Rome, two local realities whose ideas and social relations represented an almost negligible irregularity in the principles and directions of the millennial social and cultural development of Europe from antiquity to modernity, were transformed by European elites in timeless capsules and ultimate symbols of the “Western identity”. As such, from peripheral stops of the millennial development of the human civilization in the “Old World”, they were transformed in the imagination of the European intelligentsia into historical and geographical centres of the newly “imagined” morally and effectively dominant Western civilization and culture (McGrath 2013, 190; Diaz-Andreu 2007, 100–102, Roessel 2002).

This civilization, although younger than the civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and parts of East Asia, represented, in the European imagination and self-representation through the past, a higher degree, another quality of man and interhuman relations. The word classical was also used in that very context. It naturally stemmed

from the Latin adjective *classicus*, which was used in republican Rome in reference to “high (social) class” and later for “high” literature, or literature of a higher quality than the rest. The other “civilizations” in antiquity with its millennial traditions and numerous achievements, were reduced to the terminology “early civilizations”, as if they came early by mistake and just waited for the glorious “European” Classical epoch to happen (Martindale, 2007; Tevdovski 2019; 2020). [4]

The “classical civilization” has become an alter-ego of the modern Western world through the educational process, public commemorations and architecture, museums, scientific institutions, and popular culture (Hight 1985; Dyson 2006; Martindale 2007; Marchand 2009a). According to Huntington, the classical tradition is a core value of the Western civilization, and through its re-invigoration and the further promotion of its political and philosophical concepts, the West will recognize its uniqueness, distinguish itself from other civilizations and, thus, survive (Huntington 1996, 21–22). For Fukuyama, on the other hand, these “classical” messages of democracy, freedom, individualism, and entrepreneurship, which are the ideological foundation and historical verification of the success of Western liberal democracy, are so morally superior, in other words “classical”, that it is normal to universalize them, and that they would govern and recreate the modern world.

## THE CLASSIC MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE

“You who have had to endure a rather heavy burden,  
a god will grant an end to this, too.  
Perhaps one day it will be pleasant  
to recall even this hardship.”

Vergil, “Aeneid”, Book 1 (Bolchazy 2006, 91)

As opposed to the dominance of the classical civilization in the Western narrative, French universalistic traditions, the restored and reimagined Orientalism, and the post-colonial tendencies of the second half of the twentieth century, have disputed its significance and emphasized the burden of the “classical traditions” for decades (Wood 2012, 163–173; Tevdovski, Masalkovski 2021).

However, if we think that the contemporary scientific development and the social and cultural transformations and challenges of recent decades, incited by the strong globalization waves, have pushed classical traditions and narratives from the centre of the

contemporary political and social discourse, we will probably only deceive ourselves once again. It is enough to think for just a moment of the numerous European politicians in Brussels and across the continent who defend democracy as a unique tradition of Europe and the West, thereby necessarily referring to Roman republicanism and Athenian democracy (Naoíse Mac Sweeney et al. 2019). Or should we look at the growing popularity of the radical right? Shouting slogans about the “Oriental invasion” and the protection of our “traditional values” in the squares and on social media, these radicals often unknowingly paraphrase the propagandist slogans of late-republican and Augustan Rome. After all, it is not difficult for many connoisseurs of the classical era to recognize elements of startling plagiarism of the works of Cicero or Tacitus, in the expressive disgust of many American intellectuals, and some of today’s most brilliant minds, from the policies and style of President Trump (Naoíse Mac Sweeney et al. 2019).

This cacophony of classical allusions and illusions in contemporary discourse is far from naive. It makes one think of the teachings of the prominent classical philosopher Parmenides of Elea, who supposedly argued that even if we have convinced ourselves of something unreal, that lie had already created a new reality. In this regard, the words of Huntington and Fukuyama, who agree that the Western civilization is founded upon the Classical traditions and Christianity, need not be analysed as a historical truth (Fukuyama 1992, 55–57; Huntington 1996, 69– 71). It is not even important that they represent a direct transfer from the concepts of the German nineteenth century, when the early classicist and royal tutor Ernst Curtius urged for Germans to make the reconciliation of Christianity and *Hellenentum* their mission, in order to create or strengthen the Western world (Marchand 2009b, 37).

What is most important to remember, instead, and deal with, is that this imaginary duality represents a persistent dominant perception that creates a reality of a particular geography or even globally in the present. That is why we are obliged, again and again, to seek parallels to the contemporary global challenges and their solutions in the “mythologized” classical epoch, or at least to look for the “messages in a bottle” left for us by “ancient people” living in common circumstances.

Did these “idealized” ancestors of ours really face problems similar to those we face today? Or, it is just our centuries-old commitment to imitate their ideas and solutions that has connected us to them in both benefits and challenges. Such questions, I am sure, will remain in the centre of the academic debate for the decades to



come. Yet, a brief experiment of examining prominent messages from classical antiquity, developed in historical circumstances and episodes that resemble our contemporary challenges and dilemmas might be useful for our wider understanding of both the past and the future. After all, this “classical wisdom” represents, according to Huntington and many other Western thinkers, the original philosophical foundation of the Western civilization. As such, its considerations, even if critical or contrary to our contemporary understandings, might be more acceptable for us, just because they are “truly ours” – Western.

In this context, one of the most recognizable figures which provides a linkage between the Classical philosophy and Christianity, the two elements considered by Huntington and Fukuyama as the main markers of our Western Civilization, is Augustine of Hippo. Like so many other important ancient symbols of the West, he is not originating from Europe. Yet, writing in Latin in Rome at the very end of the Classical Era, and linking classical philosophy with Christian theology, transforms Augustine into a symbol of the unique “Western identity”, built in the classical world through which we have reimagined ourselves again and again for centuries.

After all, some of Augustine’s numerous works represent a true classical “message in a bottle” for future civilizations that he prophetically foretells. A telling example is one of his famous works “The City of God”. Written in the decades following the “fall of the city of Rome”, it is a true manifesto of the future. The fall of the “eternal Rome” in 410 under the attacks of the “barbarians”, according to many Western historians marked the end of the “classical world”, and the fall of this city also had a symbolic significance in antiquity. Rome, in Augustine times, was a city that was slowly, but surely, turning from a centre into a periphery of the empire for more than a century. Yet, the symbolic of its name continued to live with the empire for another millennium, as a theoretical concept of ruling the world until the fall of Constantinople, and beyond.

Augustine’s “message”, written in ancient Rome, is very different from the expected pathos of the elites of the old and once dominant capital, who being robbed, assaulted, and disenfranchised looked with horror at the time to come. Thus, Augustine comforts his fellow citizens with deep moral lessons, but he is also stern in his assessment that if the “city of people”, Rome, and the civilization they knew, was to fall, they should not grieve but rejoice at the “city of God”, as a world and a government in which people are not connected through traditional affiliation to a political or cultural entity, but through universal values and truths and shared goodwill.

Reviewing this “message in a bottle”, dating in one of the monumental “ends” and “falls” of the Western civilization, we definitely, as Huntington’s says, “reaffirm and preserve” the uniqueness of our civilization (Huntington 1996, 21–22). However, the classical doctrine of Augustine of Hippo does not, it seems, direct us to protect “our civilization” from various other civilizations, but to make it resistant to challenges by discovering the most universal and shared values which it carries within itself. Such values and approach, Augustine suggests, have the capacity to outlive and renew the traditional institutions, and even the morals of a society faced with any challenge. It seems that the Christian aspect of Huntington’s “authentic Western traditions”, in Augustine’s messages before the “end of the civilization” is transformed into a typical idealism. It does not mourn the old, but instead finds optimism, energy, and shared values in the present and the past with which to step into the new and the unknown.

Moreover, the Christian element is not the only one in Augustine teaching that calls for universal and shared values. The deep knowledge of classical philosophy of this philosopher, who in his maturity accepted faith, led him to a profound analysis and evaluation of the “fundamental philosophical values” that constitute the “classical”, and, thus, the Western world. However, Augustine does not refer us to the Athenian Golden Age, the glorified nucleus of the classical civilization, with its sophists, and their “rationalism”, evoked by Huntington, and the Periclean “democracy,” that evolved into the most suitable western value for Fukuyama’s universalization (Huntington 1996, 69–70; Fukuyama 1992, 112–113). Instead, Augustine, as many others, points towards the most obvious tradition, that many contemporary researchers, especially in the West, are not able to recognize as dominant, because of their “culture-boundness” (Fukuyama 1992, 69). He reconnects to one of the ideological developments of the classical antiquity, with a continuous, documented, and undisputable ideological impact in the East and the West through millennia, the moral traditions of the philosophy of Socrates and Plato.

This classical philosophical tradition that he leans upon, is another conveniently illustrative classic “message in a bottle”. The birth of these proud intellectual traditions is directly connected to another dramatic “end of the civilization”. At the end of the fifth and the beginning of the fourth century BC Athens was finally defeated by Persia, through its allies in the Aegean, and its “small Aegean world” disintegrated economically, socially, and politically. It was a dramatic time of decadence of the society, the epidemic of the

“Plague of Athens”, the growing power of the external factors and the attempts and internal support to abolish “democracy”. The words of the famous classical historian Thucydides illustrate vividly this scenery of the “classical apocalypse”:

Never had so many cities been taken and laid desolate, here by the barbarians, here by the parties contending (the old inhabitants being sometimes removed to make room for others); never was there so much banishing and blood-shedding, now on the field of battle, now in the strife of faction. Old stories of occurrences handed down by tradition, but scantily confirmed by experience, suddenly ceased to be incredible; there were earthquakes of unparalleled extent and violence; ... there were great droughts in sundry places and consequent famines, and that most calamitous and awfully fatal visitation, the plague. (Thucydides 2004, 10–11; Clark 2013, 16–17)

For those of us who would dare to avoid parallels with the “ancient end of civilization,” on the pretext of “contemporary end” being of different nature, related to morals, standards, institutions and law in our Western democratic societies, the famous historian has a secondary element in the lecture. Being there, “among them”, not as a historian, but almost like a contemporary fieldwork anthropologist, Thucydides, who survived the plague, discusses as well the institutional, ideological, and moral rapid deterioration of the cultural micro-system that we call today “classical Athens”. He argues:

Men who had hitherto concealed what they took pleasure in, now grew bolder. For, seeing the sudden change – how the rich died in a moment, and those who had nothing immediately inherited their property – they reflected that life and riches were alike transitory, and they resolved to enjoy themselves while they could, and to think only of pleasure. Who would be willing to sacrifice himself to the law of honour when he knew not whether he would ever live to be held in honour? The pleasure of the moment and any sort of thing which conduced to it took the place both of honour and of expediency. No fear of Gods or law of man deterred a criminal.” (Thucydides 2.53: 2004, 90–91; Clark 2013, 91–92)

All these factors brought the end of the few “glorious” decades of the history of the classical poleis, and the end of a tiny world, that would be gloriously reimagined in distant future, and transformed into a pattern of developing of the globally dominant western society

in the last centuries. Nevertheless, the philosophical revolution that this crisis brought, has created the united world of antiquity, which we still admire and call “classical”.

Thus, while the “classical” city of men, Rome, was falling dramatically, Augustine saw that the universal “purpose and plan of God [...] is shown to fulfill itself within a Platonic universe...”, born from the ashes of another falling “classical” city of men, Athens (Burleigh 1944, 188).

## INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

“... symbols intervene between our experience and ourselves.”

William H. “Poteat” (1993)

Decades before Fukuyama and Huntington, and their prominent debate, in the South of the United States, the doctor, novelist and philosopher, Walker Percy, tried to provide answers for the important problems and confronting tendencies of contemporary humanity. His approach was much more personal and philosophical. Yet, it also confronted the duality of the “western tradition”, and the identity of the modern Westerner torn between the irrational aspects of spirituality, values, and traditions, on one hand, and the rationality and pragmatism of modernity on the other.

In his collection of essays “Message in a Bottle”, Percy attempts to solve the philosophical problem through a metaphor of sending messages in bottles to a shipwreck survivor with amnesia that recedes on an island. One of the important elements of his analysis is that a human being, with no clear knowledge of her or his past, needs to understand three important aspects of the “messages in the bottles” in order to be able to use them in creating a new life for himself. Two of them are important elements, traditionally well-known and applied by researchers of the past: the trustworthiness of the source and the rationality of the information in the message. Yet, the third aspect that Percy emphasizes is, in my understanding, equally important for our research of the past: the importance and applicability of the message for our present dilemmas and challenges.

Bearing this methodology in mind, we are enabled to approach the “classical wisdom” with fresh perspective. In addition, most of us today are convinced that the “classical culture” as well as the “cultures”, and the identities, symbols and narratives related to them, of the antique, medieval or modern societies in the East, West, North

or South are not static, but “[...] emergent, always alive and in process [...]” (Bruner 1994, 407).

Therefore, it is up to us, and our challenges and ideas for their solution, to hand pick the elements of “classical” or other wisdom. This time consciously. Should we get inspired by the unique “western” tradition of classical Athens and its sophists, who saw their role as “sellers of the skills of dialogue” among people, in order for them to impose their truth and their values above those of others? Or do we prefer the ideas of Socrates and Plato, who broke away from these “unique” traditions? In contrast to the sophists, in the same classical city, Socrates’ moral revolution elevated the new “sophists” above the positions of local artisans. Instead, he turned them into ideologues of the society in search of the general truth and common good, or as we know them today – the philosophers.

Ancient Athenians in the face of decline and inevitable fall of their small Aegean world, decided to trial and kill Socrates for corrupting the minds of their youth with ideas that were undermining both their values and their institutions. The ideas he was promoting extraintstitutionally were clearly undermining the core values and institutions of the Athenian “classical civilization”, the democratic government and institutions (the assembly) and the xenophobic isolation of the polis’/poleis’ citizens from the barbarians (Brown 2000, 74-80).

One might question if our contemporary daily intellectual crucifixions of those intellectuals that question the values of the liberal democracy and the treatment of the foreigners and non-citizens in western societies are elements of the proud classical tradition or the endemic signs of societal crisis. Yet, more important than the reaction, it seems, is the “message in the bottle” sent by the wise classical men. Thus, Socrates’ ideas for openness towards foreigners, as well as their “wisdom”, values, and societies, might be a sign of the weakness of the small world of the classical Hellenes, and it might have really undermined their traditions and institutions (Brown 2000, 74–80). However, this openness to the globalization waves provided new avenues for the survival and transformation of the traditions and ideas born or at least partly developed in the classical Greek poleis. While, less than a century after Socrates death, the whole military, social and political system of the Greek poleis was dismantled and they were integrated in the global empires of the Macedonians, many of their cultural traditions survived. The ideas, materials, forms, and people of the small Greek world due to the new traditions of openness initiated by Socrates, were much more prepared for the global competition and amalgamation with the great cultural contri-

butions of the developed societies of Africa and Asia. It was this presence in the hubs of the ancient globalization, like Alexandria, Seleucia, or Antioch, that help them survive and made them eternal.

Plutarch, who lived in the Roman Empire at the turn of the second century, illustrated the ideals of this new classical, and at the same time truly global, world through the ideas of a philosopher, who represents an ideological continuum with the early ideas of Socrates. Zeno, an Asian and non-citizen, as founder of the most dominant philosophical school in Athens and the antiquity, the Stoics, only a century after the departure of Socrates was among the most influential philosophers and people in Athens. His relations with the royal court of Pela, as well as those of other philosophers of his era, might have further undermined the traditions of democracy and independence of the classical Greece, but certainly promoted and developed further the image of Athens and Greece as important hubs of the philosophical and intellectual thought. According to Plutarch, this intellectual leader of Athens, professed an ideology that resonates closely, and certainly inspired, the later messages of Augustine of Hippo and many religious leaders as well. In Zeno's vision:

[...] our arrangement for habitations should not be based on cities or peoples, each one distinguished by its own special system of justice, but we should regard all men as citizens and members of the (one) populace, and there should be one way of life and order, like that of the herd grazing together and nurtured by a common law/pasturing. (Lavan et al. 2016, 144)

His messages, associated with the era of the much-emphasized "European domination of the world in antiquity", are not words of particularism, and even less of "Western domination". They seem to represent a vision of a truly globalized world, prepared to face the dilemmas and problems it shares. These and similar messages were the dominant voice of the globalizing "classical world", and, as such, they are interesting lessons, or at least pointers, for the challenges of the contemporary globalizing realities as well.

Yet, even with the presented clear continuum of these important messages from the classical antiquity and their ideas, this paper is neither suggesting a conclusive interpretation of the "classical wisdom", nor providing recipe for its implementation in contemporary circumstances. Instead, its multi-layered intersection of elements of the past, and the contemporary approaches and methodologies of their reinterpretation and reimagination through the binoculars of different research focuses and disciplines are aiming towards multiplication

of the levels of understanding and possibilities of utilisation of this valuable material.

Finally, all those convinced that the extensively presented elements of the intellectual tradition labelled as classical in this paper might be conclusive and provide clear directions, must be warned that this is one of the most common mistakes of the analyses of the classical traditions. We should always bear in mind the great complexity of ideas, traditions and experiences enclosed in this theoretical construct, additionally blurred by its connections to our identities and intellectual traditions and misconceptions.

Thus, although many of these ancient messages illuminate the less known united world of ancient globalization, there are also many other that emphasise the differences. One of them is certainly the critical note of the “western” Diodorus Siculus, which might also underline the historical foundations of the capitalist ideas as important instigator of global processes even from antiquity. He analyses that “the barbarians, by sticking to the same things always, keep a firm hold on every detail, while the Greeks, on the other hand, aiming at the profit to be made out of the business, keep founding new schools and, wrangling with each other over the most important matters of speculation, bring it about that their pupils hold conflicting views, and that their minds, vacillating throughout their lives and unable to believe at all with firm conviction, simply wander in confusion” (Clark 2013, viii).

The “classical period” has left us with numerous and quite diverse “messages,” as well as “bottles” in different sizes and shapes. Therefore, the decision whether we will choose the most universal or the most profitable ones, and which of them we will declare as the most reasonable, remains with us.

## NOTES

- [1] The song “Message in a Bottle” from the music group “The Police” was released as the lead single from their second studio album, “Reggatta de Blanc” (1979):

“Just a castaway, an island lost at sea, oh  
Another lonely day, with no one here but me, oh  
More loneliness than any man could bear  
Rescue me before I fall into despair, oh  
I’ll send an S.O.S to the world  
I’ll send an S.O.S to the world  
I hope that someone gets my

I hope that someone gets my  
I hope that someone gets my  
Message in a bottle..."

- [2] On the concept of the four/five global empires, its birth and transmission and transformations from antiquity, see: (Sharon 2020; Strootman 2014; Mendels 1981; Swain 1940; Rowley 1935).
- [3] In the 1767 "Essay on the History of Civil Society", Ferguson emphasized the important conceptual unity between the development of the personal and the collective, arguing that "[n]ot only the individual advances from infancy to manhood, but the species itself from rudeness to civilization".
- [4] For wider analyses on the alleged "European" identity of the Classical World, see: Tevdovski "The Beauty of the Oikumene Has Two Edges: Nurturing Roman Imperialism in the 'Glocalizing' Traditions of the East", and Tevdovski "On the Identities of Hellenistic Globalization – The Unified World of Diversity".

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