

Across the world today, something remarkable is happening. Many societies are beginning to rethink the foundations of their own civilisations.

In the West, economists, policymakers, and social thinkers are increasingly questioning capitalism, the very system that has long stood at the centre of Western civilisation. Concepts such as "stakeholder capitalism", "inclusive growth", and frameworks like Doughnut Economics reflect a growing recognition that the existing model has produced extraordinary wealth but also deep inequality and environmental strain. In short, even the architects of the modern global order are now searching for ways to reimagine the system they built.

This moment of reflection invites a deeper question: What exactly do we mean when we speak of civilisation?

For centuries, the answer appeared straightforward. The societies that possessed the greatest military, economic, or technological power also claimed the authority to define civilisation itself. Their institutions, beliefs, and systems of governance became the standard by which others were judged.

But a simple comparison raises an uncomfortable paradox.

If a person sells goods through coercion, manipulation, or fraud, the law considers that transaction invalid. The reason is clear: genuine consent was absent. The buyer did not freely choose the agreement.

Yet when we examine the spread of many political, economic, and cultural systems across the world, a similar pattern often appears. Conquest, pressure, and unequal power relations frequently shaped the adoption of languages, institutions, and belief systems.

If coercion invalidates a commercial transaction between two individuals, we might ask: Can a process driven by coercion still be described as civilisation when applied to entire societies?

The question exposes an important distinction between power and civilisation.

Power or conduct: What really makes a civilisation?

A civilisation confident in its values does not need to impose them through force.



Gertrude Kamya Othieno

Civilisation



Power refers to the ability to control outcomes through force, wealth, or influence. Civilisation, however, ought to imply something deeper: the capacity to organise society in ways that respect human dignity, promote cooperation, and sustain communities across generations.

When the two are confused, the most powerful societies easily appear to be the most civilised. Yet history suggests that power alone is not a reliable measure of civilisation.

Across the world, societies developed diverse systems of governance, knowledge, and social organisation long before modern states emerged. African kingdoms maintained complex political structures and legal traditions. Asian civilisations produced sophisticated philosophical traditions. Indigenous communities across the Americas and Oceania cultivated deep ecological knowledge that sustained them for centuries.

In Africa, for example, societies such as the kingdoms of Buganda and the Ashanti, as well as Ethiopia's long-standing imperial tradition, developed systems of governance, di-

plomacy, and law that regulated power and social order long before colonial rule introduced European institutions. These systems were rooted in local history and cultural values, yet they performed many of the same functions that modern states claim as hallmarks of civilisation. These societies followed different paths, but differences do not necessarily imply inferiority.

Human progress has often been driven by exchange between cultures through trade, scholarship, migration, and curiosity. Ideas travelled across continents, enriching societies on all sides. When learning occurs through dialogue, civilisation expands.

The difficulty arises when dialogue is replaced by domination.

In such circumstances, institutions may be copied and systems adopted, but they may lack the deeper legitimacy that comes from organic development. What appears to be civilisation on the surface may, in fact, be imitation shaped by unequal power.

Perhaps the real test of civilisation lies not in monuments, wealth, or military strength but in how societies treat those who are different from them.

A civilisation confident in its values does not need to impose them through force. It can engage with others in a spirit of learning and mutual respect.

Perhaps the future of civilisation will depend not on who defines it but on whether humanity can learn to recognise civilisation in one another.

Gertrude Kamya Othieno,
Political Sociologist,
Alumna of London School of Economics,
gokbooks@gmail.com