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The Production of Souls in International Relations

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Global politics is exceedingly soulful, but the field of international relations (IR) astonishingly soulless. The world order is undergoing tectonic shifts: the “Western” unipolar moment is receding, China is rising, and geographies of “(Afro-)EurAsia” and the “Indo-Pacific” are emerging. To align with such shifts and remap the international geography, global actors are increasingly (re)producing narratives of civilizational “souls.” Putin views Ukraine as part of the “Russian world,” imbued with the “Russian soul.” Xi’s “Thought,” instilled in China’s schools and constitution, intends to “engineer” the country’s soul as a “civilizational state.” Von der Leyen advocates strengthening the European Union’s “soul.” Biden and Trump vied for “America’s soul.” But what is even a soul? I define a collective soul as a historical–spiritual space, constructed materially and ideationally, and construed as a vital force that permeates, orders, and embodies—or transubstantiates—a body politic, and engraves in it a mythical *Ursprung* (origin) and telos. Adopting a critical geography approach, I map out several soul-making narratives by unpacking how they “graph” their (internal, regional, or global) “geo” through “space-framing assumptions” and “space-producing practices.” They include (1) “civilizational states,” focused on China and geographies of “Sinosphere” and “Afro-EurAsia”; (2) “civilizational crossroads,” focused on the “Iranosphere”; (3) the US-led “rules-based order,” as the latest iteration of the “liberal civilization” regraphing its soul onto the “Indo-Pacific”; and (4) two European soul-producing narratives: the far-right’s “Judeo-Christianism” and the mainstream “European strategic autonomy.” Finally, I discuss the implications of soulcraft—as an indispensable yet unacknowledged component of statecraft—for IR theory.

L’âme de la politique mondiale est extrêmement présente, tandis que les relations internationales en sont tout à fait dépourvues. L’ordre mondial connaît actuellement des évolutions importantes : la période unipolaire « occidentale » est sur le déclin, la Chine en plein essor et les géographies de l’« (Afro-)Eurasie » et de l’« Indo-Pacifique » émergent. Afin de suivre ces évolutions et de produire une nouvelle carte de la géographie internationale, les acteurs mondiaux (re)produisent de plus en plus des récits concernant les « âmes » civilisationnelles. Vladimir Poutine estime que l’Ukraine appartient au « monde russe » et qu’elle est imprégnée de l’« âme russe ». La « Pensée » de Xi Jinping, inculquée à l’école chinoise et intégrée dans la constitution du pays, a pour but de « modeler » l’âme du pays pour en faire un « état civilisationnel ». Ursula von der Leyen désire renforcer l’« âme » de l’UE. Joe Biden et Donald Trump se sont disputé l’« âme des États-Unis ». Mais en fait, qu’est-ce qu’une âme ? Je définis l’âme collective comme un espace historico-spirituel, construit matériellement et conceptuellement, telle une force vitale qui imprègne, ordonne et incarne le corps politique, ou opère sa transsubstantiation, et y intègre une origine mythique et la cause finale. En me fondant sur une approche géographique critique, je catégorise plusieurs récits de construction de l’âme, en déconstruisant comment ils « représentent » leur « géographie » (interne, régionale ou mondiale) à l’aide de « suppositions de structuration de l’espace » et de « pratiques génératrices d’espace ». Parmi ces récits figurent : 1) les « États civilisationnels », centrés sur la Chine et les géographies de la « sinosphère » et de l’« Afro-Eurasie » ; 2) les « carrefours civilisationnels », centrés sur l’« iranosphère » ; 3) l’« ordre fondé sur des règles » dirigé par les États-Unis, comme dernière iteration de la « civilisation libérale » appliquée à l’« Indo-Pacifique » ; et 4) deux récits européens générateurs d’âme : le « judéo-christianisme » de l’extrême droite et le courant dominant de l’« autonomie stratégique de l’Europe ». Enfin, je m’intéresse aux implications de la définition d’une âme pour la théorie des relations internationales. Pourtant indispensable, cette composante de la politique n’est pas reconnue.

La política mundial tiene mucha alma, pero las RRII son sorprendentemente desalmadas. El orden mundial está sufriendo cambios tectónicos: El momento unipolar de «occidente» está retrocediendo, China está ascendiendo, y están empezando a emerger las geografías de «(Afro)Eurasia» y el «Indo-Pacífico». Para adaptarse a estos cambios y remodelar la geografía internacional, los actores globales están (re)produciendo cada vez más narrativas de «almas» civilizacionales. Putin considera a Ucrania como parte del «mundo ruso», imbuido del «alma rusa». El «Pensamiento» de Xi, inculcado en las escuelas y en la constitución de China, pretende «diseñar» el alma del país como un «Estado civilizacional». Von der Leyen aboga por reforzar el «alma» de la UE. Biden y Trump compitieron por el «alma de Estados Unidos». Pero ¿qué es el alma? Definimos el alma colectiva como un espacio histórico-espiritual, construido material e ideológicamente, e interpretado como una fuerza vital que impregna, ordena y encarna —o transubstancia— un cuerpo político, y plasma en él un *Ursprung* (origen) y un telos míticos. Adoptando un enfoque de geografía crítica, trazamos un mapa de varias narrativas de creación de almas y analizamos cómo estas «proyectan» su «geo» (a nivel interno, regional o global) a través de «supuestos de encuadre espacial» y «prácticas de producción de espacio», que incluyen: 1) los «estados civilizacionales», centrados en China y en las geografías de la «sinósfera» y la «afroeurasia»; 2) las «encrucijadas civilizacionales», centradas en la «iranósfera»; 3) el «orden basado en reglas» liderado por Estados Unidos, como la última iteración de la «civilización liberal» que vuelve a proyectar su alma en el «indo-pacífico»; y 4) dos narrativas europeas creadoras de alma: el «judeocristianismo» de la extrema derecha y la «autonomía estratégica europea» de la corriente dominante. Por último, analizamos las implicaciones del arte de creación del alma —como componente indispensable, aunque no reconocido, del arte de gobernar— para la teoría de las RRII.

The Return of Historical Souls and Tanks

“Ursprung ist das Ziel” (“Origin is the goal.”)

—Karl Kraus, *Worte in Versen*, 1916

“The production of souls is more important than the production of tanks.”

—Joseph Stalin, speech at home of Maxim Gorky, 1932

“The first of the soul’s needs [...] is order; that is to say, a texture of social relationships.”

—Simone Weil, philosopher, member of French Resistance, London 1943

“Soul” is a musty concept and less shiny than tanks—or hypersonic missiles. Dedicated more to the latter, the field of international relations (IR) has astonishingly paid no attention to the production of souls in the exceedingly soulful world of international politics. In contrast, practitioners, historians, and pundits have been less soul-averse. Eisenhower argued that the struggle against communism “in the deepest sense, is waged neither for land nor for food nor for power – but for the soul of man himself” (Eisenhower 1953). Similarly, G.H.W. Bush called the Cold War the struggle “for the soul of mankind,” a phrase that became the title of Leffler’s (2007) Cold War history. Lambasting “collectivist society” and promoting her infamous neoliberal policies, Thatcher argued that “economics are the method; the object is to change the soul” (Thatcher 1981). With the Soviet Union’s collapse, the triumphalist “West” announced the end of humanity’s historical soul-searching; the liberal soul would become the “world soul,” Fukuyama (1989) and many others assumed. History and geography begged to differ. Back are history’s seemingly lost souls, reanimating ancient civilizational soils, recasting communities, undergirding tanks and nuclear submarines, haunting Westphalian borders, and (re)producing new geographies both politically and economically.

Geopolitically, we are at a historical juncture. The global epicenter is moving from “the West” to “Afro-EurAsia,” for some to the “Indo-Pacific.” In both landscapes, Asia is the key component. China’s rise is reconfiguring the global security geography, sometimes literally (e.g., through geo-engineering in the South China Sea). The Pentagon’s Pacific Command has become the “Indo-Pacific Command,” expressing itself through the QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, made up of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States) or AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States), to uphold the “rules-based order” (RBO), together with “like-minded” soulmates, in a US-led push for a “new Cold War” against China. The European Union (EU) is seeking geopolitical autonomy from both the United States and China. The (Russia-led) Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) are becoming increasingly prominent in EurAsian security affairs. West Asia and Africa are looking eastward, particularly to China. Although primarily geopolitically driven, these processes have unmistakable economic and cultural motives and implications.

Goeconomically and (geo)culturally, we are witnessing the growing salience of the “new Silk Roads” narratives in Afro-EurAsia. Large-scale infrastructural initiatives are “cementing” (Harvey 2010) such Afro-EurAsian soulscapes (landscapes of soul-making) and producing a sense of geoeconomic “sociality” (Forough 2022b). They include the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Russia-led “Eurasian Economic Union” (EAEU), and the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC, led by Iran, Russia, and India). Competing against these initiatives are the EU’s “Global Gateway” and the two US-led initiatives of “Blue Dot Network” (BDN) and “Partnership for Global Infrastructure Investment” (PGII). Africa has become a major arena in these competitive connectivity endeavors. Although primarily infrastructural, these initiatives have obvious geopolitical motives and implications. They are reconfiguring the global geography.

How can we make sense of these geographic shifts? Aimed at uncovering “the hidden hyphen in the word geography,” critical geography tells us that geographies are not only material but also ideational and that “the ‘geo’ of every geography is ‘graphed,’ which is to say, produced by multiple, often unnoticed, space-making processes and space-framing assumptions” (Sparke 2007, 338). The processes are material (policies) and the assumptions ideational (discourses). The two dialectically construct and constrain each other, without either having primacy over the other. One such unnoticed trend in contemporary global affairs is the reemergence of communal soul narratives, which are awash with themes of origin, (manifest) destiny, exceptionalism, ontological (in)security (Steele 2008), order, connectivity, hegemony, decoupling, and clash. These narratives increasingly both inform and are informed by the contemporary global reordering.

For instance, to promote his educational reform campaign, Xi (2018) builds on the Stalin quote above and calls teachers “engineers of the human soul.” Xi’s “Thought,” instilled in China’s constitution and educational system, is designed to reengineer and “rejuvenate” the country’s soul for a “new era” and a “new type of international relations” (Wang 2016). China increasingly views itself as a “civilizational state” (Zhang 2012). Iranian officials are re-narrating the “idea” (Gnoli 1989) which defines Iran’s soul as a “civilizational crossroads” (Forough 2021a) or “link,” mobilizing the discourse of the “greater cultural Iran”—or what I call the “Iranosphere” in this article. Similar “link” narratives exist in Turkish and, more recently, in Saudi and Emirati “developmental narratives” (Ennis 2018). Recently, Putin (2021) defined Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus as a “single people” or “single whole,” vitalized by the same civilizational soul (a “sense of unity at their core,” unity of “hearts and memories”). This “Russian soul” (*russkaya dusha*) transcends Westphalian boundaries and orders the “Russian world” (*Russkiy Mir*). Nowadays, Russian “soul tanks,” if you will, are ploughing through Ukrainian soil, wreaking havoc, leaving thousands of people dead, precisely because Ukrainians refuse to be ordered and transubstantiated by the Russian soul and subsumed under the Russian world.

Soul production is not limited to illiberal systems. The Biden/Trump election was called by both sides as a fight for “America’s soul” (Dias 2020), which has world soul implications. Obama wanted the United States, not China, to write “the rules of the road” (Obama 2016). Since taking office, Biden (2021) has promoted the “RBO” and framed the present historical moment in terms of an epic democracy-versus-authoritarianism battle to “win the twenty-first century.” While sympathizing and relatively aligning with the United States’ RBO narrative, European leaders such as Von der Leyen (2021) aim to strengthen the EU’s “soul.” This soul is, some EU policy elites argue, to be rooted in “European” civilization and history, not “Western” or universal “values” (Dams and Sie Dihan Ho 2021). The far-right in Europe and North America is redefining the “West” in terms of “Judeo-Christianism” against Islam. Similarly, The Economist (2019) describes Modi’s ethno-nationalism, which demonizes Muslims, as “a battle for India’s soul.”

Overall, three interlinked trends are apparent: first, soul-producing narratives are emerging in both geopolitical and geoeconomic processes in the world. Second, geographies are constructed (e.g., Afro-EurAsia, Indo-Pacific, or Russian World) to actualize those souls materially and ideationally. And, third, these soul narratives draw upon reductive *Ursprung* (“origin”) myths (such as those rooted in the ancient “Silk Roads,” “manifest destiny,” or “Historical Rus”)

and hegemonic conceptions of “order” (e.g., China’s “harmony,” the United States’ “rules,” EU’s “norms,” and Iran’s *nezam*—“order” or “system” in Farsi).

Two glaring gaps can be detected in the literature: IR scholarship has neither addressed soul as a component of IR practice and theory nor analyzed the interplay between these three trends. This article aims to fill these gaps by introducing soul (and relatedly “soulcraft,” “world soul,” “soulcape,” “soulmate,” and “souldiers”) as a distinct analytical concept to IR and political science by addressing the following questions: What is a collective soul? How is it constructed discursively and materially? And, what does investigating souls and soulscapes reveal about the contemporary global reordering?

The article proceeds as follows. In the next section, I demarcate the conceptual boundaries of souls, civilization, and historical *Ursprung*. I define collective “souls” as “historical-spiritual spaces” and civilizations as “the contexts of meaning” (Katzenstein 2010), in which soul production takes place. Then, I unpack four such soul-making enterprises: (1) China’s narrative of “civilizational states” and how it graphs the geo of “Sinosphere” regionally and Afro-EurAsia globally; (2) Iran’s narrative of “civilizational crossroads” and how it refashions that country’s soul in terms of the pre-Westphalian geo of “Iranosphere”; (3) the US-led narrative of the “RBO,” which is, I argue, the latest iteration of the “liberal civilization” presently geo-graphing its soul onto the Indo-Pacific; (4) finally, I examine two European narratives: (i) the far-right account of “Judeo-Christian” civilizational “values,” which aims to remap Europe and the “West,” and (ii) the mainstream narrative of “European strategic autonomy” (ESA) as an ongoing civilizational soul-searching project by the EU to demarcate an independent soul for itself in the contemporary world. In the concluding section, I summarize the findings and offer some thoughts on how to move toward an IR or political science of souls.

Souls, Civilizations, and the Historical *Ursprung*

“Call the world if you please ‘The Vale of Soul-Making’.”

—John Keats, 1819, letter to his brother

Communal souls have been constructed and mobilized for all manner of religious, political, revolutionary, nationalist, imperial, hegemonic, and genocidal enterprises. The fifteenth-century Spanish conquerors of the Americas tortuously mobilized Roman law and Aristotelian theories of natural slavery to debate if “Indians had souls or not, that is, whether they were a natural slave class” (Wiarda 2003, 35). In Du Bois’s book *The Souls of Black Folk* (Du Bois 2015 [1903]), the term was utilized for emancipatory purposes. With the rise of Japan as an Asian power, Lowell wrote *The Soul of the Far East*, wherein he tried “to see the soul of their civilization” by asking “why are these peoples so different from us?” (Lowell 1888, 205). He defined the region’s peoples in terms of “impersonality,” a racist stereotype still persisting today. The Nazi regime concocted the concept of “race soul” (*Rassenseele*) as the mythical soul permeating “the Aryan race” transcending individual souls. During the Cold War, both Russians and Westerners discussed the “Russian soul” (Williams 1970). Without clearly defining the term, the conservative columnist Will (1984) argued that, in the United States, “statecraft” should be about “soulcraft” and vice versa. But what even is a soul?

“Soul” is a slippery concept, resisting definition—but that is no bad thing. It pertains to a person’s (or thing’s) moral, psychological, or metaphysical aspects, responsible for their sensations and ideas. Etymologically, soul or spirit in many languages means “breath,”¹ what breathes life, order, and unity into the body—that is, its essence or vital principle. In most cultures, it is considered transcendental and incorporeal, yet is always somehow embodied, hence the well-known Wittgensteinian proposition that “the human body is the best picture of the human soul” (Wittgenstein 1958, 178). Soul should be understood as a “symbol,” “a deliberately ambiguous concept,” similar to all “ultimate symbols” (Hillman 1978, 46) of human thought such as matter, energy, God, life, and society.

A society having a common soul or spirit is an idea that has existed since time immemorial. Celebrating Prussian local cultures’ uniqueness, the German eighteenth-century philosopher Herder posited the unpolitical concepts of *Volkgeist* and *Volkseele* (folk/national/ethnic “spirit” and “soul”), by which he meant a particular lifestyle, a common character or soul born out of that community’s unique historical traditions. A “collectivity’s soul,” Weil argues, is rooted in “the spiritual treasures accumulated by the dead” (Weil 2003 [1943], 7)—and, I would add, repurposed by the living.

We still need a clear definition of soul in IR to make it analytically distinct from related concepts such as “civilization,” “(collective) identity,” and “culture.” To start, I define a collective soul as a historical-spiritual space, constructed both materially and ideationally and construed as the vital force which permeates, orders, and embodies—or transubstantiates (into)—a body politic, and engraves in it a mythologized *Ursprung* and telos. In what follows, I will unpack this definition.

The “space” at stake could be that of a family, tribe, city (state), nation state, group of nation states (EU or the QUAD), continent (Europe), civilization, or the whole world of living things. *Anima mundi* or “world soul,” a Platonic and Manichean concept, was thought to be the force animating and ordering the universe. This is what Rumi poetically calls “the Soul of souls” (*Jaane-e Jaanaan*) or Ralph Waldo Emerson refers to as the “Oversoul.”

Soul-making occurs at multiple levels. At the civilizational one (Katzenstein 2010), it is mainly (but not exclusively) elite-driven. Sometimes, elites conceptualize old concerns via new terms (“strategic autonomy”) or combine existing notions to create new ones (e.g., narratives of pre-Westphalian “civilization” and Westphalian “statehood” becoming “civilizational state” in China or Russia). Alternatively, they may take an academic idea (“greater cultural Iran” rooted in Classical Studies) and geoeconomize it as the “Iranosphere.” In all cases, they draw upon cultural, historical, and geographic reference points (“the spiritual treasures of the dead”). Elite concepts sometimes become contagious; for instance, China’s civilizational state discourse has influenced Russian elite views on the Russian world.

Some processes of soul-making emanate relatively organically from within the community, such as the many ordinary Iranians or Indians, still today, partly situating their ancient origins in the “Aryan race”—despite it being a myth invented by nineteenth-century European elites. Sometimes it is ascribed externally, as when Kennan paints the Russian soul. Almost always, these dynamics intersect in soul-production dynamics. It is never a unidirectional or

¹ *Ruh* in Persian and Arabic, *ruach* in Hebrew, or *spiritus* in Latin, all mean both “breath” and “soul”/“spirit.”

monocausal process. Flows of capital, state's historical actions and relations, arts, literature, music, everyday life, cultural processes, material conditions, and many more factors go into soulcraft. The analytical scope here is limited to elite-driven dynamics of soul production.

A soul embodies—or transubstantiates (into)—a body politic, across a relatively demarcated space (e.g., of a tribe, nation, continent, civilization). To paraphrase Wittgenstein, we can argue that the (Chinese, European, or Iranian) “body politic” is the best picture of its “soul.” Souls also contain hegemonic ordering or governing logics. Order, Weil argues, is the first of the soul's needs, providing “a texture of social relationships” (Weil 2003 [1943], 9). Such notions of order in this article include harmony for China, *nezam* for Iran, rules for the United States, and norms for the EU. Used in the basic etymological sense of the word *gubernare* (“to be at the helm of” or “to steer”), governing means to steer the ship of the nation toward a specific telos.

The soul subject is inscribed and interpellated by such an ordering trope and its imagined history and spirituality. Souls therefore produce logics of identity, membership, participation, and citizenship. The soul subject becomes a “natural” part of that soulscape. Through this ordering, souls (and like-minded soulmates as well as “others”) are naturalized. Such is soulcraft that can be defined as the art (both discursive and practical) of summoning forth and producing a collective soul.

That leaves us with another elusive term “spirit,” which has always accompanied soul—from Plato to Herder, Weil to Putin, Judaism to Islam, and Rumi to Keats.² Here, the term “spiritual” has three interlinked functions: it discursively renders the specific “historical space” at stake mythological, ahistorical, and quasi-transcendental. The mythological (or primordial) aspect speaks to the *Ursprung*-telos dichotomy; *Ursprung* is a mythologized prelapsarian moment of pureness or glory, which all collective (and individual) souls somehow assume. Its flipside is the soul's telos or manifest destiny. Soul discourses are also ahistorical in that they aim to reductively produce a straightforward historical narrative, by whitewashing contradictions, tensions, and suppressing polyvalent histories. It thus enables the production of myth. When the majority of civilizational elites endorse a given myth, it has arguably become hegemonic. By invoking ahistorical myths, soul-makers render the soul quasi-transcendental—that is, beyond the realm of everyday socioeconomic and legal-political procedures and questioning.

For instance, if you subscribe to the Russian soul or the liberal soul's RBO narrative, first you endorse the origin myth that it has always been purely “Russian” or “rules-based”; second, that its history (of “Russianness” or “rules-basedness”) is a straightforward clean one (i.e., it has never been un-Russian or unruly/disorderly); and, third, that the imagined “pureness” or “righteousness” is unassailable, meaning beyond legal-political debate. For instance, this quasi-transcendentalism allowed American policy elites to ratify The Hague Invasion Act, authorizing the US military to potentially invade the Netherlands to save American “souldiers,” if you will, from the International Criminal Court (ICC) should the latter dare to question the US military's spiritual-global mission and accuse its service members of war crimes.

It should be noted that the soul subject does not necessarily rationalize these dynamics. A soul's spirituality is

most often experienced affectively due to its masked hegemony. This brings us a bit close to Nietzsche's psychological definition of the individual soul as a “sociopolitical structure of drives and affects” (Nietzsche 2000, 579).³ Similarly, Dostoyevsky describes a communal (Russian) “soul” as “unexpressed, unconscious ideas which are merely strongly felt [. . .] fused with the soul of man” (Dostoyevsky 1979, 14). Souls therefore produce affects in a collectivity or civilization.

“Civilization” is another murky concept. It was a “neologism” of the Enlightenment era (Mazlish 2001), with a dark history (like “race” or “geopolitik”) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Civilization has generally been approached in three broad ways: (1) Huntington's (1993) essentialist approach views civilizations as clearly demarcated, relatively coherent, and almost static cultural entities. In IR, “civilization” is stuck in “the polemical jaws of Samuel Huntington.”⁴ (2) The emancipatory essentialist approach (e.g., of Mahatma Gandhi) views civilizations as plural and rejects superiority discourses, but still posits that they have essentialized values. (3) The critical approach views civilizations as evolving “contexts of meaning” (Katzenstein 2010), which are both plural (there are many of them) and pluralist (from within).

Following Katzenstein's approach, this article views civilization as “weakly institutionalized” and “loosely coupled, internally differentiated, elite-centered social systems that are integrated into a global context” (Katzenstein 2010, 5). Conceptually, the phenomenon is readily distinguishable from a collective soul—a historical-spiritual space portrayed as a vital force. In other words, soul production occurs in “contexts of meaning” or “social systems,” which we call “civilizations.” Soul-making can occur in one (imagined) civilization (Russian world) or can bring a number of civilizational actors together under one world soul (India, Japan, and the United States subsumed under the liberal civilizational soul of the RBO or QUAD). Souls thus purport to be the vital force or essence of civilizations.

Civilization is also a “traveling concept” (Mazlish 2001). In Afro-EurAsia, two distinct narratives have manifested in recent years: “civilizational states” and “civilizational crossroads.” Unlike the former, the latter has not been discussed at length (except about Turkey) in the literature to date. When civilizational state does appear therein, it is either endorsed as fact (Zhang 2012) or simply rejected as “myth” (Acharya 2020).

I contend that it is necessary but not sufficient to view these narratives as myths. They are indeed myths—as are other concepts such as “nation state,” “sovereignty,” and “the West,” whose use has very real consequences. Countless millions have been killed in history for such spatiopolitical myths; thousands of Ukrainians are being slaughtered and millions made homeless these days because of such a Russian myth. We should move beyond calling them “myths.” We need to lay bare the dynamics driving the production of such myths, the collective historical *Ursprung* they (mis)represent, the (national, regional, or global) order they (aim to) create, geographies they frame and produce, (geo)economic policies they entail, and war machines they deploy.

Contemporary soul narratives are rooted in mythologized *Ursprung* histories. The dying man in Kraus's poem engages the dichotomies of life and death, origin and telos, damnation and redemption. Pizer, in his analysis of the latter's

²The philosophical and theological distinctions between “soul” and “spirit” are beyond the scope of this discussion.

³“Gesellschaftsbau der Triebe und Affekte.”

⁴See Michael Barnett's (2010) review of Katzenstein (2010).

poetry, contends that *Ursprung* conveys “a dynamic polyvalent and disseminated character” and “cannot be reduced to a single locus” (Pizer 1994, 1). According to Steiner in his introduction to Benjamin’s *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* [*Origin of the German Tragic Drama*], “*Ursprung*” is a “resonant” concept in German-speaking intellectual traditions (Benjamin 1988). At the conceptual core of *Ursprung* is the question of a “primal ‘leap’ (*Sprung*)” into history. Seeing the possibility for a redemptive moment, for the fusion of the past and present, Benjamin argues that the site of history

is not homogeneous and empty time, but one filled by now-time [*Jetztzeit*]. For Robespierre, the Rome of antiquity was thus charged with now-time and blasted from the continuum of history. The French Revolution regarded itself as Rome reincarnate. It quoted ancient Rome as fashion quotes a past attire. [...] It is the tiger’s leap [*Tigersprung*] into the past. (Benjamin 2003, 395)

My overall argument proceeds as follows: adopting a critical geography perspective, I will unpack the space-framing assumptions and space-producing processes permeating the contemporary soulscapes (Afro-EurAsia, Indo-Pacific, Europe, Iranosphere, and Sinosphere). In terms of assumptions, I examine how global actors frame their souls by taking “primal leaps” into their (pre-Westphalian) histories and reduce their polyvalent *Ursprung* to a single spiritual prelapsarian locus, thereby crafting a hegemonic soul that then embodies—or transubstantiates (into)—a body politic. This body is ordered or governed both ideationally through the hegemonic soul’s spirituality and materially through (geo)political and (geo)economic processes.

In terms of these processes, I look into how the above assumptions are underpinned by geopolitical arrangements (such as the QUAD or SCO) as well as geoeconomic (mainly infrastructural) initiatives (such as the BRI or PGII). Once constructed, these soul narratives help these global actors change their foreign policy and revise the regional or global order. They thus reassert themselves in the contemporary world dynamics, a world they view as in transition—that is, as history in the making—by reinventing their past in the form of their dreamed future. Origin becomes telos in a reactionary discursive operation devoid of the redemptive thrust of Kraus’s or Benjamin’s *Ursprung* concept.

China as a “Civilizational State”: The Production of a “Harmonious” Soul

“[T]he only continuous civilization to continue onwards is China. [...] We people are the original people, black hair, yellow skin, inherited onwards. [...] We call ourselves the descendants of the dragon.”

—Xi Jinping in conversation with Donald Trump, 2017

“The rise of the civilizational state” has become a hot topic in academic and political circles (Coker 2019). Pye first argued that “China is a civilization pretending to be a state” (Pye 1990, 58). Jacques (2009) popularized this concept. Zhang is an outspoken advocate of viewing China as a civilizational state (Zhang 2012). This notion has also been applied to Russia, India, Turkey (Acharya 2020), and the EU (Glencross 2021). Imperial histories are thus (re)constructed and “remembered” nostalgically (Fisher Onar 2021).

Putin dismisses the “national question” (Putin 2021) and views the Russian world as having one “single people.” This soul-framing assumption (re)graphs the geo of Russia and haunts its surrounding countries (e.g., Ukraine and Belarus) and regions (e.g., Central Asia). He practically demands a sphere of privileged civilizational interests (Coker 2019). His geoeconomic initiatives such as the EAEU are premised upon such assumptions. The CSTO is the geopolitical policy complementing the EAEU. Similar *Ursprung* myths have also emerged in China. The Chinese civilizational soul discourse is expressed at various geographic levels, three of which will be briefly discussed here: domestic, Asian, and Afro-EurAsian.

China’s civilizational history—like any other—is polyvalent. It has given much to the world and received much (including Communism and Socialism) from it. Mao tried to modernize China by repressing traditions such as Confucianism. In the post-Mao era, China’s rise has been accompanied by “Sinicization” processes (Katzenstein 2013), a turn that embraces traditions such as Confucianism. If there is one concept that captures the post-Mao production of a Chinese civilizational soul, it is “harmony” (*he*)—which has been called the “most cherished ideal in Chinese culture” (Li 2006), predating Confucianism. Conceptually, it comprises both “diversity” and “unity.” The concept has become indispensable in contemporary official Chinese discourse, resulting in the policy of “harmonious society” domestically and “harmonious world” internationally, offering humanity a “common destiny.”

While the theoretical ideals of harmony hinge upon unity in difference (not homogeneity) and “responding” to one another (Li 2006) as in a symphony, the contemporary Communist Party of China’s policy of producing a “harmonious” soul has resulted in hegemonic sameness and top-down ordering of the body politic. Through the concept of harmony, China’s elites have taken a primal leap into a hybrid historical tapestry, aiming to reduce it to an essentialized “spiritual and historical space”—thereby conflating harmony with uniformity. The institutionalization of Xi’s “Thought” in China is part of the production of soul with Chinese characteristics.

Many Chinese political elites increasingly see their country as a civilizational state (Zhang 2012). In other words, China is adapting its soul to the Westphalian system and conversely through concepts such as civilizational state and harmony adapting the Westphalian system to China, too. It is through such discursive gymnastics that the “one country, two systems” becomes conceivable. The disputed historical-spiritual spaces of Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang are framed and produced under this civilizational geo and treated officially as domestic (sovereign) issues, a framing underpinned by, inter alia, spatial, military, sociopolitical, industrial, and (geo)economic policies. For instance, this framing partly determines China’s military modernization strategy (e.g., development of hypersonic missiles and “carrier-killer” missiles), preparing the country for a potential military confrontation with the United States (possibly over Taiwan).

This domestic civilizational soul percolates into Asia. Chinese political-civilizational elites take similar reductive leaps into the regional hybrid history, charging it with now-time, “recycling ancient ideas to describe world order in the 21st century” (Callahan 2004, 569). They perceive the present moment as a new historical era, entailing “a new type of international relations” (Wang 2016)—hence Xi’s call for China’s rejuvenation. This discourse makes reductive assumptions about Asia and China’s

historical–civilizational role in it, especially in East and Southeast Asia.

For instance, the controversial historical assumptions behind the “nine-dash line” have led to aggressive space-producing practices of building and militarizing artificial islands in the South China Sea. These assumptions and practices graph a geo in Asia, which can be called the Sinosphere, best described as a privileged civilizational zone of interests and respect (Coker 2019) rooted in the pre-Westphalian tributary system—one in which China imagines itself as the Middle Kingdom. This system is relevant to the contemporary civilizational politics of China (Kang 2010, 99). It refers to the immediate regions and peoples surrounding China that were historically Sinicized.

The concept of *tianxia* (“all-under-heaven” or “world”) has been mobilized to explain the logic of this geographic construct. It constructs an *Ursprung* for China as a benevolent empire, which, the official narrative holds, drew others to itself only through its civilizational attractiveness, not by force. It rhetorically denounces coercive imperialism. However, in its Sino-centric assumptions, it expects a privileged sphere of influence. In this *Ursprung* myth, China misrepresents its historical influence on the region as one-sided. However, the tributary system was historically highly contested and the influence cut both ways, from China to the region and vice versa (Hau 2010). *Tianxia* is therefore used to counter US global hegemony, but it frames and produces its own hegemonic order (Callahan 2008) as the Sinosphere.

In the meta-geography of Afro-EurAsia, the Chinese civilizational approach promotes exchange, not clash, between civilizations. This view finds its most cogent expression through the concept of “connectivity,” epitomized in the BRI, loosely called the “Chinese New Silk Road.” The BRI’s infrastructure discourse is globally overlaid with civilizational and spiritual rhetoric. “Silk Roads” has become a master narrative, a world soul as it were, which serves its participants—especially China—in reviving the imagined economic–cultural geography of ancient Afro-EurAsia and their own spiritual prelapsarian *Ursprung* in it.

That world had, broadly speaking, two dimensions to it: first, it consisted of a shifting network of roads that facilitated the exchange of ideas, commodities, knowledges, philosophies, religions, cuisines, and such (Christian 2000). Second, the same network of connectivity aided the spread of diseases, conquests, religious conflicts, imperial wars, pillaging, and depredation. The Chinese Silk Road discourse (for instance, in the 2019 Belt and Road Forum⁵) completely ignores the latter and gives China a central role in the former dimension. Whereas Huntington only emphasized clash, Chinese elites highlight connectivity alone. In the Conference of Asian Civilizations, Xi called the clash-of-civilizations thesis “a stupid idea” (Zhen and Ng 2019). However, his imagined Silk Roads connectivity also offers a reductively “nostalgic” Silk Roads (Thorston 2005) in the Afro-EurAsian soulcape. It turns what is a complex, rich, multifaceted, and turbulent historical phenomenon into a reductive spiritual realm.

Equally romanticized iterations of Silk Roads appear elsewhere in West Asia and Africa, which reinforce the Chinese discourse. The transnational relations behind these assumptions are cemented through infrastructure initiatives. The BRI has been the most momentous force behind the “re-configuration” of the globe and the resurgence of an “Afro-EurAsian” geography (Forough 2019). The histories of Africa, Asia, and Europe (and by extension, Latin America)

are increasingly interconnected through these practices and assumptions, such as the Health Silk Road, Digital Silk Road, Air Silk Road, Green Silk Road, and so forth. China has been by far the largest investor in Africa and has put that continent on the global radars again; Africa disappeared from Western geopolitical thinking after the Soviet collapse. The United States, EU, and India have come up with initiatives (such as the EU’s Global Gateway) to compete with China, particularly in Africa.

China’s official discourse has constructed a Chinese civilizational soul both domestically and internationally. It is rooted in reductive myths of *Ursprung* and in ordering tropes such as harmony. It overflows Westphalian boundaries. With this soul and its glorified *Ursprung*, Chinese civilizational elites aim to “harmonize” (i.e., hegemonize) the nation, region, and the world. Through such primal leaps, they “remember the future” (Callahan 2004). The imagined origin is repackaged as the goal. They thus adapt to and affect the contemporary global reordering and produce geographies of Sinosphere regionally and Afro-EurAsia globally. These geographies give a home, literally and metaphorically, to their (re)visions of the global order. “New Silk Roads” becomes a new world soul.

Iran Refashioning Its Soul as a Civilizational Crossroads

“Iran does not need an empire. Iran is an empire, in terms of its civilization [...] Iran has served as the link between East and West and will continue to do so.”

—Hasan Rouhani, Iranian president (2013–2021),
2018 UN speech

West Asia is experiencing its own reordering. Its geopolitical value has sharply declined in recent years due to, inter alia, the world moving toward renewables, overall energy prices going down, the discovery of gas and oil elsewhere, and the US pivot to the Indo-Pacific. Traditional security partnerships are dissipating and new ones (e.g., the Abraham Accords or the Sino-Iranian “twenty-five-year pact”) are emerging. China has become the region’s indispensable geoeconomic partner. Intense regional soul-searching has ensued.

New tropes, such as “civilizational crossroads,” have emerged to make sense of such shifts. Turkey (Vali 2019) and Iran in recent decades (and Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates [UAE] in recent years) have reconceptualized themselves as such. A civilizational crossroads is defined by its position at the intersection of other major civilizations. The larger geography, for all these actors, is Afro-EurAsia. Nationally, most of these actors are non-liberal, with primordialist myths of origin (e.g., Turkishness, Persianness, and Arabness). However, when it comes to geoeconomic foreign policy, they celebrate civilizational hybridity, albeit ahistorically and still as a project for power, relevance, and regional reordering. Turkey is a prime example of a country defining itself as a cusp or bridge, historically straddling African, Asian, and European geographies, civilizations, and religions.

Iran has been defining itself along similar lines since at least the 1990s. Iran’s soul has been invariably contested in the last three millennia. The historical Iran was conquered and ruled by various empires and ethnic groups such as Persians, Greeks, Arabs, Turks, Afghans, Uzbeks, and Mongols. It conquered and ruled over many regions—what is today Iran, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, parts of India, Armenia, Turkey, Iraq, Egypt, and Syria; it has given birth to or (violently) received various religious or spiritual

⁵ The author was a participant observer in this event.

traditions such as Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Sufism. Contemporary Iran is undergoing serious soul-searching to align itself with the global reordering. In what follows, this soul-searching will be discussed at three levels: domestic, West Asian (geopolitics), and Afro-EurAsian (geo-economics).

Domestically, Iranian civilizational history—like any other—is hybrid. The previous political system, the Pahlavi absolute monarchy (1925–1979), a Western ally, reductively embraced Iranian pre-Islamic imperial-military conquests, conveniently brushed aside the innumerable moments when Iran was downtrodden, and ignored the long Islamic trajectory of the country. It called itself the region’s “sheriff,” responsible for its order. Since the 1979 Revolution, the current political elites have taken a similar primal leap into that same hybrid history and come up with the idea of the “Islamic Republic of Iran,” giving overwhelming weight to the Islamic component of this history. A specific sect Shi’ism (with a belief system centered on the Fourteen Infallibles—the Prophet Mohammad, his daughter, and twelve Imams), functions as the theocratic anchor for this new Iranian soul. It crafts a primordial myth of prelapsarian infallibility.

Producing this soul requires an organizing trope. Here, there is elective affinity with China and the concept of harmony. Contemporary Iranian leaders use concepts such as *nezam*, meaning, as noted earlier, “order” in Farsi. Like harmony, it functions as a discursive vehicle with which to mask the Iranian civilizational polyvalence, render it linear and homogeneous, and order the body politic. The word has become so normalized that political elites and their opponents alike use expressions such as “this *nezam*” when they mean “this (political) system.” The order becomes the system, the *Ursprung* the telos.

In West Asia, Iran’s presence is mainly geopolitical. The current political elites came to power in 1979 with anti-imperialist slogans; however ironically, in their regional diplomacy, they regularly invoke the three-millennia imperial history of Iran to remind rivals that it cannot be sidelined. They promote the Iranian self-perception as a “natural” regional hegemon. In other words, they geo-graph what I call the “Iranosphere”—or what Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran’s supreme leader, calls the “greater cultural Iran” (Forough 2021a). It is in essence similar to the Sinosphere, historical Rus, or what some US politicians call “America’s backyard” (Latin America).

Iranian leaders believe that the United States has been denying them this natural position in the region by forming anti-Iran alliances. The solution for them has been to (re-)graph the regional geo based on geopolitical and religious narratives. They have crafted the political-ideological geography of “the axis of resistance” rooted in the strategic narrative of Iran as a “victorious underdog” against the United States (Forough 2021c). This narrative is informed by both Shia history and very pragmatic considerations. Officially, the “axis” represents the states (Iraq and Syria) and non-state actors (Hezbollah, Houthis, Hamas, Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq) resisting American hegemony in the region. Such space-framing assumptions are then cemented through military, financial, energy, media, and economic support for these actors. In short, Iran has been constructing a geopolitical Iranosphere to actualize what it imagines to be its natural (pre-Westphalian) power position in Asia.

In the Afro-EurAsian geography, Iran’s discourse is mainly geo-economic and framed in terms of civilizational hybridity and connectivity. Despite the “neither West, nor East”

slogan of the 1970s/1980s, Iranian leaders have portrayed their country as a civilizational “link,” “bridge,” or crossroads between the East and West since at least the 1990s (e.g., Broujerdi 1996). They have celebrated the rise of “Eastern” powers—especially China, Russia, and India—and their geo-economic initiatives. The country’s leadership has been actively trying to make Iran central to the BRI, INSTC, and the Ashgabat Agreement between Iran and the landlocked Central Asian countries aiming to access inter-national waters via Iran. Iran has also signed a preferential trade agreement with the EAEU. It is modernizing its railway network and ports to be able to better accommodate all these connectivity initiatives. These are some instances of Iranian space-making processes to reinvent its soul as a “civilizational crossroads.”

The two main space-framing assumptions underpinning these processes are Silk Roads and the Iranosphere, respectively. The two are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Iran has been, since the 1990s, one of the pioneers of the idea of reviving the “Silk Road” (Cordier 1996), in which it (with the benefit of now-time) imagines itself as a crossroads. Iran’s Silk Roads imaginary is heavily romanticized, like China’s. Out of this glorified rendition manifests the Iranosphere, as the country’s contemporary soulscape—invoking a pre-Westphalian imperial history and geography. That is why Rouhani feels comfortable in international arenas such as the United Nations to call Iran a “civilizational empire.” Under Raisi, the new president, Iran is “pivoting” to Afro-EurAsia both geopolitically and geo-economically (Forough 2021b).

The contemporary leadership has reproduced the Iranian soul at three geographic levels: national, West Asian, and Afro-EurAsian. The three seep into one another. This soul narrative selectively deploys particular components of a polyvalent history and geography, aiming to devise a monolithic spiritual space. The spirituality is rooted in primordial myths of origin, infallibility, and “natural” power. The power is partly rooted in religious quasi-transcendentalism—God bestowing power upon this theocratic *nezam*—and partly in Iran’s romanticized imperial history. This soul is mobilized to embody and order the Iranian body politic and the region. The geography it creates is best described as the Iranosphere, which can be defined as Iran’s (imagined) privileged sphere of civilizational influence, affinities, and interests. This new soul is then promoted as hybrid in global geo-economics. The country’s elites conjure up the civilizational crossroads narrative to adapt to regional and global shifts, and as a means to gain geopolitical power and geo-economic connectivity. To mix Kraus and Rouhani’s quotes, the imagined *Ursprung* becomes the “civilizational-imperial” goal.

Rules-Based Order: The “Liberal Civilization” Re-Graphing Its “Soul”

“I don’t want my grandchildren to live in a world dominated by the Chinese.”

—Hillary Clinton (quoted in Goldberg 2016)

Souls are not confined to non-liberal systems. “North America and Europe,” which Fukuyama, in his ill-fated argument, called the “most advanced outposts [. . .] at the vanguard of civilization” (Fukuyama 1989, 5) also produce them. Fukuyama and others claimed that the liberal soul would become the world soul at the boring end of history. However, contemporary US foreign policy, since Obama’s 2011

“Pivot to Asia” but especially since Biden took office, is revising that liberal dream through the discourse of the “RBO.” The liberal soul has forgone, for now, its universalist geographic ambitions and is looking to re-graph itself onto the Indo-Pacific, portraying itself in a battle—against China—for the world soul in this century.

Although the RBO discourse has been in use in the post-Cold War era as a synonym for “liberal international order” or “US-led international order,” it has gained renewed currency—especially with Biden’s presidency. Obama’s Pivot laid the groundwork for the RBO discourse. He was “fixated on turning the American attention to Asia” (Goldberg 2016), away from the Middle East and Europe. The Pivot had both geopolitical (military) and geoeconomic (Trans-Pacific Partnership, TPP) elements. However, from the very outset, anti-China geopolitics dominated (Ross 2012).

Obama labeled himself “America’s first Pacific President,” promising a “new era” (Allen 2009). Geoeconomically, the TPP “allows America—and not countries like China—to write the rules of the road in the 21st century” (Obama 2016)—that is, to order the Asia-Pacific. To Obama, this was urgent because “we should be promoting values, like democracy and human rights and norms and values” (Obama, in Goldberg 2016). In short, he laid the foundations for the United States’ value-laden Asia-Pacific containment strategy vis-à-vis China.

Through this narrative, the United States’ national and hegemonic interests masquerade as “values.” Thinly veiled in Obama’s Pivot is the American “right of our manifest destiny”—meaning that the United States was created and destined “by Providence” to “spread over this whole continent [...] the universal Yankee nation” (Prat 1927, 795). This primordialist myth of *Ursprung*—telos deeply informs what Hopkins calls the “American empire” and its “crusading foreign policy” (Hopkins 2018, 304). The resonance of universal liberal “values” turbocharged by American manifest destiny is “so clear, so pre-eminent, so indisputable” (Prat 1927, 795) in the Pivot that it is unassailably placed beyond legal-political debates among most US Republican and Democrat elites. It is rendered quasi-transcendental. Disagreements are over methods between liberals and neocons. The object, to paraphrase Thatcher, is to change the world soul, and actualize “the universal [liberal] Yankee nation.”

Trump was unapologetic about personal and national interests. He ripped apart the thin veil of values over the RBO discourse. Geographically, during his administration, the Pacific geography became the Indo-Pacific (to bring India on board). He torpedoed the TPP in 2017, reduced the Pivot’s geoeconomic heft, and embarked upon a rancorous trade war with China. Meanwhile, Japan and India showed agency by promoting a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.” In 2018, the Pentagon created the “Indo-Pacific Command.” The US-led infrastructure-oriented BDN and PGII were launched in 2019 and 2022, respectively, to counter China’s BRI.

Geopolitically, during the Trump years, the Pivot expressed itself as the QUAD grouping. The latter was originally proposed in 2007 by Abe, then forgotten, and finally revamped in 2017 once all four countries publicly supported it. Given the failure of the TPP and lack of substance (so far) to the BDN and PGII, the geopolitical QUAD remains the core of the Pivot. The QUAD has generated some (geo)economic repercussions (such as supply-chain rerouting and the politicization of certain tech sectors such as 5G or semiconductors), but it is primarily a US-led geopolitical grouping, claiming to stand for the RBO.

The combination of such spatial assumptions and practices is the increasingly naturalized soulscape of the “Indo-Pacific.” This naturalization discourse allows US elites and pundits to call India a “natural U.S. ally in the new Cold War” (Mead 2020). It also enables Modi to present India as “a natural ally of the G7” (Modi 2021), that is, a new soulmate rendered natural in the Indo-Pacific soulscape.

With the Biden administration, we are witnessing “America’s Pivot to Asia 2.0” (Forough 2022a). The value rhetoric has vehemently returned. Biden contends that there is a global battle between democracies (represented by the United States, manifestly) and authoritarianism (represented by China, obviously). His 2021 Democracy Summit can be interpreted as a new Cold War battlefield preparation. US policies are still predominantly securitized (i.e., anti-China). The emphasis on security has been further solidified with AUKUS, which infuriated European elites. It showed that this new Cold War is not as straightforward as the old one.

RBO is a civilizational discourse in that it promotes a particular sociopolitical system and context of meaning (the liberal civilization) rooted in a specific geography (Western Europe and North America) as the ordering trope for the world soul. This discourse “lends itself to the simplistic view of world politics as a clash of civilizations” (Wirth 2022). Skinner, a policy planner in Trump’s state department, gave US-China trade tensions a civilizational-racial explanation by calling them “a fight with a really different civilization [...] It’s the first time that we will have a great power competitor that is not Caucasian” (Musgrave 2019).

The choice of this “vacuous phrase [RBO] at the core of Biden’s foreign policy” (Beinart 2021) is not accidental. Its lack of substance enables its spiritual potency. The rules and order concepts play the same role for the United States as harmony for China or *nezam* for Iran: a reductive instrument of ordering, governance, and mobilization rooted in the mythologized *Ursprung* of “the universal Yankee nation” and its spatiopsiritual “right to manifest destiny” (Prat 1927, 795). The narrative assumes that the United States (and, by extension, the Western liberal civilization) has always stood for order and stability, thereby implying that “others” (such as China) stand for disorder and chaos. “RBO” and “democratic” become euphemisms for “civilized.” It has overtones of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century abuses of the word civilization. China (plus Iran and Russia) is rendered the opposite of civilization, the unruly, lawless “other.” “Authoritarian” becomes a new euphemism for “uncivilized.” To go back to Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky, one can argue that Hilary Clinton could only make such a remark about her grandchildren by consciously or unconsciously endorsing the civilizational affects behind that remark.

An alternative concept such as “international law”—with tangible respected institutions (such as the ICC) accompanying it and ones that can pin down China’s aggressive or illegal moves (e.g., in the South China Sea)—was not chosen precisely because it does not have the necessary ambiguity for spiritual myth-making. Demonizing China would be difficult based on international law, when the United States itself has not joined a number of pertinent institutions here (e.g., the ICC or UN Convention on the Law of the Sea). In their empty yet potent affect, rules and order become discursive tropes (for the United States) with which to define a new soulscape (the Indo-Pacific), to transubstantiate the bodies politic in it, to portray it as a “civilized”-versus-“barbarian” battlefield, and in which to naturalize new soulmates (e.g., India, Japan, and South Korea) as well as depict “others” (China). Through such discursive maneuvers,

RBO hides the “inconvenient truth” that instead of “shared values” its proponents only, in fact, have “shared interests” (Wirth 2022).

Geographically, a “new Cold War” is not easy to pull off however. In the Cold War, each bloc’s geopolitical and geoeconomic geographies more or less overlapped, which is not the case now. The Indo-Pacific’s economy is China-led and its hard security US-led. If the United States’ securitized approach continues, it is uncertain whether it can wage—let alone win—a new Cold War against a geoeconomic superpower (China). Australia, Japan, New Zealand and all Association of Southeast Asian Nations countries, some of which are considered new US soulmates, joined the China-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)—the largest free trade deal in the world. The United States recently introduced the “Indo-Pacific Economic Framework” (IPEF). We have to wait and see if it remains mostly an idea on paper (like the BDN or PGII so far) or whether it will eventually gather substance.

To sum up, the Indo-Pacific has decentered the transatlantic geography, which housed the Western liberal soul during the Cold War. “The West” as “a postwar invention, the symbolic supplement to NATO and OECD” (Osterhammel 2000, 22)⁶ is steadily retreating as the world’s geopolitical epicenter. This retreat, Trump’s presidency, the rise of the Indo-Pacific, QUAD, AUKUS, Brexit, migration issues, and the Russia–Ukraine war, inter alia, have caused intense soul-searching in Europe.

The EU/Europe: In Search of a Soul

“It [the European community] needs a soul, the conscience of its historical affinities and of its responsibilities, in the present and in the future, and a political will at the service of the same human ideal.”

—Robert Schuman, For Europe (1964, 58)

Despite apparent associations with the RBO, the EU has for decades been trying to construct a uniquely European civilizational soul. Two narratives stand out here: first, the racially charged religious–civilizational narrative of “Judeo-Christian values” (JCVs) or a “Judeo-Christian tradition” (JCT) expounded by the (far-)right and, second, the mainstream discourse of ESA. The latter seeks to chart a uniquely European path forward in this century, independent of the United States and China.

The (far-)right has produced an unabashedly essentialist civilizational narrative, which defines “Western civilization” in terms of “JCVs.” Coined in the nineteenth century, “Judeo-Christian” initially referred to early Christian communities close to Judaism in terms of either praxis or dogma (Nathan and Topolski 2016, 3). During the Cold War, it became a symbolic term in the United States for “constructing” the soul of the “godly West” against “godless communism” (Aiello 2005). For Eisenhower, for instance, JCT constituted the foundation of American democracy (Silk 1984, 65).

More recently, this trope has been picked up by the (far-)right in Europe and the United States. Romney in his 2012 electoral campaign said that he stands for JCVs. His running mate, Ryan, attacked Obama as someone who would undermine “Judeo-Christian, Western civilization values” (Walshe 2012). In 2017, Trump said he wanted to “stop

all attacks on Judeo-Christian values” (Jenkins 2017). Similar references to JCVs are abundant in the (far-)right parties in European countries. Even the manifesto of the AFD, a German far-right party with widely known connections to neo-Nazis, invokes the “Judeo-Christian” foundation of “our culture” as opposed to “Islam and its tense relationship with our value system” (AFD Manifesto 2017, 47).

Obviously, “Judeo-Christianism” is a highly reductive “myth” (Cohen 1969). Advocates of this narrative tap into a mythologized *Ursprung* to define what they see as “Western civilization.” It becomes a “dog-whistle peddled by the far right” (Warren 2017) in a mix of white nationalist, anti-Islam, anti-immigrant, and anti-EU sentiments. It is historically, theologically, and politically misguided. Historically, this *Ursprung* narrative conveniently ignores centuries upon centuries of Christians oppressing Jews, leading to the Holocaust. Theologically, it aims to assimilate Jewishness into Christianity, and continues the “de-Judaizing of Christian theology” (Cohen 1969). Politically, the “hyphen” in “Judeo-Christian” does violence in a “mytho-pathological way that disjoins Jewishness from the social and political practices of Jews and conjoins it to a generalized notion of the West” (Grossman 1989, 115). Many of its advocates, conveniently ignoring their anti-Semitic past, now embrace Israel as a new geographic frontline for the West. Geographic boundaries are redrawn in a Western civilizational clash against Islam. Huntingtonian reverberations are hard to miss.

The mainstream narrative of ESA (Lippert, von Oндарза, and Perthes 2019) is more nuanced, multifaceted, and still open-ended. Whereas the proponents of JCVs view North America and Europe as one Western civilization, the policy elites advocating ESA aim to define Europe on its own terms. ESA’s discursive foundations go back to the 1950s. Schuman and other EU founders warned against a purely technical–economic union and promoted Europe as a “state of mind” (Subotic 2011), a soulscape if you will.

During the Cold War, (Western) Europeans “striv[ed] for self-assertion and self-determination” and planned “to create a European Defence Community in connection with the European Political Community” (Lippert, von Oндарза, and Perthes 2019, 6). In recent years, against the backdrop of global economic and political shifts, ESA has become a buzzword in European political circles. It appeared in the EU’s 2016 global strategy. France has been its outspoken advocate, even pushing for a European army independent of NATO. Inspired by Schuman, Von der Leyen’s State of the Union speech, titled “Strengthening the Soul of our Union,” called for reducing the EU’s reliance on both the United States for security and Asia for microchips (Von der Leyen 2021).

ESA is the ongoing discourse of a continent engaging in intense civilizational soul-searching to find its own place in a transitional world. For different actors, it means different things. Some see the alliance with the United States as indispensable. Some do not. While for Von der Leyen, this soul should reflect the EU, others call for devising a specifically European civilizational narrative, which “means casting as our hero ‘Europe’ the ancient civilization, rather than the EU as a young political project” and emphasizing “European values” as opposed to “universalist value narratives” (Dams and Sie Dihan Ho 2021, 1).

For some, the EU—as an international actor—should be seen not as “military power Europe” but as “normative power Europe,” because its unique political form “predisposes it to act in a normative way” (Manners 2002, 242). For others, this view is too self-congratulatory. If one sets the standard for “normative power” as the drive “to overcome

⁶“NATO” stands for The North Atlantic Treaty Organization and “OCED” for The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

power politics” while “emphasizing the rights of individuals and not only the rights of states to sovereign equality,” then one has to note that it “is not altogether straightforward to conclude that the EU is a ‘normative’ power” (Sjursen 2006, 249). All powers—the United States and China included—have a normative dimension to their foreign policy. “Norms” in the EU’s soulcraft resonate clearly with harmony, order, and rules in Chinese, Iranian, and American soulcraft, respectively.

What is more, with the Russian invasion, the EU is more explicitly becoming a power politics and military actor. Not being so is key to being a normative power. It is unclear if/how the EU can solve this contradiction post-February 2022. The attempts to define the EU’s autonomous soul are likely to be turbocharged now. In fact, the establishment of the “European Political Community” as a platform and The Brussels Institute for Geopolitics as a think tank in October 2022 are clear manifestations of this European soul production. No matter its content, the import of ESA is clear: while European political elites still mostly support the US-led RBO discourse, there is a growing consensus that the EU has to fend for itself in this century, independent of the United States.

Geopolitically, the more the United States has pivoted to the Indo-Pacific, the more the ESA discourse has intensified. Brexit as well as Trump’s “America First” policies (dismissing NATO and the EU) have intensified this soul-searching. With the embarrassment of the Kabul evacuation, AUKUS, as well as recent Russian–NATO tensions, the ESA has come to the fore again. While still endorsing the RBO narrative, European policy elites sense that the latter “raises more questions than [it] answers” (Wirth 2022). The EU has labeled China not only a “systemic rival” and “competitor,” but also a “cooperation partner” while trying to ink a trade deal with it. US policymakers find this incoherent. European states and companies see their interests jeopardized in a deteriorating US–China trade war. This seeming incoherence is due to the delicate (im)balance between European security dependence on the United States and geoeconomic dependence on Asia.

Geoeconomically, the 2008 financial crisis strained transatlantic relations and made China a pillar of the global economy. The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), like the TPP, did not ultimately materialize. In the meantime, China has been rising. In the past two decades, China and the EU have become crucial economic partners and competitors. The EU has tried to act independently by formulating its Global Gateway to compete with China’s BRI. This is happening while the BRI encompasses various European countries through cooperation platforms such as the 16 + 1. EU–China trade volumes were at historic highs in 2021. EU–China geoeconomic relations therefore remain contested yet profoundly interconnected.

The (re-)emergence of the ESA discourse in this century should therefore be understood (1) against the backdrop of these political and economic dynamics and (2) as a civilizational undertaking. This discourse is civilizational for two main reasons: first, its proponents invoke a holistic continental history to define the European soul. Second, ESA is (theoretically) a comprehensive narrative encompassing all aspects of the European life and civilization, seeking economic, political, security, financial, digital, and even cultural autonomy (Lippert, von Oндарза, and Perthes 2019). It remains to be seen how Europe/the EU will go about redesigning its soul given the contemporary shifts, what *Ursprung* myths it will be rooted in, and which spiri-

tual norms will be mobilized to embody and order its body politic.

Soulcraft and Statecraft: Theorizing the International Relations of Souls

“But the way is open for new versions and refinements of the soul hypothesis.”

—Nietzsche (2000, 579)

“Writing has nothing to do with meaning. It has to do with land-surveying and cartography, including the mapping of countries yet to come.”

—Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 11)

Soulcraft is part and parcel of statecraft. The contemporary yearning for soul production is both driven by and driving global shifts, including the end of the unipolar moment, capitalism’s multiple crises, climate change and its techno-geopolitical implications, Afro-EurAsia supplanting the West, the rise of China, the United States’ push for a new Cold War against China, the European search for an autonomous soul, new security groupings (QUAD or AUKUS), the summoning forth of new like-minded soulmates (e.g., India for the United States or Russia for China), economic pacts (RCEP), failed economic pacts (TTIP and TPP), competitive infrastructural initiatives (BRI, INSTC, and EAEU versus BDN, PGII, and Global Gateway), the creative recasting of imperial pasts, the reductive remembering of hegemonic futures, and the constructing of geographies—of connectivity, clash, dialogue, friction, coexistence, competition, and win–win. Against this backdrop, global and regional actors strive to (re)produce their own unique historical–spiritual space or soul in large (trans)civilizational contexts of meaning. Put together, these dynamics can be described as the international battle for the (world) soul of this century.

This article mapped out some illustrative examples of soulscapes such as Sinosphere, Afro-EurAsia, Iranosphere, Europe, and the Indo-Pacific. Critical geography, informed by a critical approach to history and the *Ursprung* concept (à la Benjamin and Kraus), proved particularly useful in theorizing and mapping out these soulscapes. Such critical approaches equip us with analytical concepts (e.g., space-framing assumption and space-producing processes) with which to uncover the hidden hyphen in the geo-graphy of soul production.

As for soul-framing assumptions, these international actors take reductive leaps into their polyvalent historical–civilizational *Ursprung* and reduce it to a single locus, which becomes spiritual in that they render it primordial, ahistorical, and quasi-transcendental. By denying that polyvalence, they negate the redemptive power of *Ursprung* envisioned by Benjamin and Kraus. They charge history with a regressive now-time, and repackage it to suit their geopolitical, geoeconomic, and hegemonic ambitions. The glorified *Ursprung* becomes the reactionary telos.

A primary characteristic of all soul narratives is that they are brimming with hegemonic value-laden concepts of order (China’s harmony, Iran’s *nezam*, the United States’ rules, and the EU’s norms). Through ordering (i.e., creating hegemonized social relations), these souls embody—or transubstantiate (into)—a body politic and govern or steer it toward a (reactionary) telos. Weil seems prophetic in calling order “the first of soul’s needs” (Weil 2003 [1943], 9).

Ordering occurs at two dialectically interlinked levels: national and international. For Putin, the Russian civilizational “soul” is both a national (Westphalian) and a transnational (pre- and post-Westphalian) enterprise. For Xi, harmonizing the Afro-EurAsian world soul (through defining a “common human destiny” and “harmonious world”) is a necessary extension of engineering China’s soul as a civilizational state. For Biden, the fight “to win this century” is inextricably linked to the fight against Trump for “America’s soul.”

Soul-producing processes accompany those assumptions. To give a seat to their envisioned soul and souldier on for primacy (the United States or China), relevance (Russia, Iran, or Turkey), or autonomy (the EU), these actors resort to soul-producing geopolitical policies and geoeconomic (infrastructural) initiatives. These serve to both metaphorically and literally cement the soulscapes discussed above.

These souls and soulscapes are constructed and narrated spiritually. For instance, the “Silk Roads” are romanticized in a one-eyed nostalgic fashion, which renders the past connectivity ahistorical, as if devoid of any wars, depredations, or catastrophes. Silk Roads become the spiritual world soul that subsumes numerous civilizational souls (China, Iran, Russia, Turkey, and many others). Such romanticized readings become the flipside of Huntington’s infamous thesis. While the latter reductively sees almost only clashes between civilizations, the former only sees connectivity and win-win. Both readings serve geopolitical and geoeconomic power projects.

Through a Katzensteinian critical approach, this article showed that it is indeed possible to save the concept of civilization in IR from Huntington’s polemical jaws. Souls were defined as historical-spiritual spaces construed as vital forces animating civilizations, which were defined in turn as contexts of meaning or social systems. In this sense, the two are distinct but interlinked analytical concepts. Some world souls (e.g., the Silk Roads or RBO’s liberal soul) subsume various civilizational contexts into one soulscape (e.g., Afro-EurAsia or Indo-Pacific). Some souls (Russia’s or Iran’s) reductively claim a specific polyvalent civilizational space as their own. A soul therefore acts as a purported essence which, according to soul makers, permeates, vitalizes, and orders their civilization—if, indeed, not the whole human civilization.

Souls, I have argued, need not be the sole purview of philosophers, poets, policymakers, or pundits. We live in a neoliberal world in which “we are taught that [even] corporations have a soul, which is the most terrifying news in the world” (Deleuze 2017, 6). This is a world in which both liberal and non-liberal systems manufacture souls, which entail ordering tropes, souls that order bodies politic, define friends and foes, undergird economic-infrastructural visions, operate in the murky historical zones between myth and reality, between dreamed pre-Westphalian pasts and envisioned post-Westphalian futures, between *Ursprung* and telos, souls that envisage new geographies, and deploy tanks, nuclear submarines, and hypersonic missiles to bring forth those geographies.

Against this backdrop, it is high time that IR and political science paid attention to souls, soulcraft, soulscapes, world soul, and the international battle for hearts and souls as an unexamined yet prevalent and profoundly potent component of IR theory and practice. Such a musty concept as soul can shed considerable light on global affairs, especially if approached critically. Analyzing soulcraft reveals not only soul-framing assumptions and soul-producing processes, but also their inherent (re)visions for the national, regional, and global reordering.

Studying souls also reveals multiple other dynamics, discussing which was beyond the limited scope of this article. Further research into soul(craft) should be conducted with a view to refining the definitions of soul, soulcraft, soulscape, and world soul; unpacking the relations between various souls, soul makers, and their multiple (internal and external) audiences; examining the relations between souls and their economic, political, legal systems; and analyzing how souls and dynamics of capital or climate construct and constrain each other. For instance, part of the logic behind the BRI (and its Silk Roads and Sinosphere dimensions) going westward was the surplus capital and infrastructure and construction overcapacity in China in tandem with uneven infrastructural development in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America.

Further research could also investigate how specific souls are cemented through infrastructure initiatives and military strategies; how various world souls compete for primacy; how souls are gendered or mediated; how their image is produced, managed, received, or perceived; how they are embodied through personalist or democratic rule; how souldiers wage wars (e.g., Ukraine) or condition the possibility of war (e.g., Taiwan); and crucially importantly for critical schools of thought, how hegemonic souls produce subaltern anti-souls and inversely how the subaltern produce soulscapes of resistance against hegemonic souls.

Critical investigations of souls should move beyond the pretense of scientific objectivity and physics envy. Research, theorizing, and writing international politics are not automatically good or bad—nor are they neutral. (Critical) IR should therefore not succumb to the numerous structural, systemic, and methodological pressures that hegemonic souls exert upon it through the academic-political and military-industrial complex or through the neoliberal market logic; it should not essentialize and validate those souls’ hegemonic narratives and ordering tropes.

Instead, (critical) IR and political science should aspire not only to unmask the reductionism of the hegemonic souls, deconstruct their logics of order and relations of power, lay bare their polyvalent origins, and promote that polyvalence but also to critically revise and refine “the soul hypothesis.” This theoretical refinement is a critical soul-surveying opportunity at three interlinked levels: first, for the individual theorists to conduct soul-searching on themselves as subjects situated within a knowledge-production system sponsored by a hegemonic soul; second, to critically assess the field and the institution of the university as parts of the hegemonic soul-production chain; and, third, for both theorists and the field to help map out landscapes of resistance against hegemonic souls and summon forth emancipatory polyvalent geographies of souls yet to come.

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