

“Civilization” and the Self-Critical Tradition

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Abstract Of all the terms in modern social science, none is more reviled by academics today than “civilization.” Post-colonial theorists such as Aimé Césaire and Edward Said have influenced generations of scholars who see the term as little more than a veil for scientific racism and colonial aggression. The sociologists Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu have also portrayed European conceptions of civilization as justifications for social hierarchy and exclusion. This article highlights the convergent denunciation of “civilization” by these theorists. The article provides a fresh perspective on the history of the word “civilization” by highlighting the role of the term in generating an atmosphere of self-critical reflection. The word “civilization” post-dates, and bears a strong trace of, Rousseau’s indictment of modern society in *The Discourse on Inequality*. The first author to use the word “civilization,” the Marquis de Mirabeau, spoke in a Rousseauian fashion of “false civilization” and “the barbarity of our civilizations.” In nineteenth- and twentieth-century usages, “civilization” was a central term in the framing of questions about the contradictory nature of progress. The term even figures prominently in debates about the basis of colonial authority—debates sponsored by some colonial administrators themselves. Some of the top colonial administrators in the early twentieth were pioneers in advancing cultural anthropology. These administrators forged the viewpoint that natives had valuable “civilizations” of their own. The radical theorists discussed in this article have portrayed “civilization” as a sign of colonial arrogance inherited from a hyper-rational and chauvinistic Enlightenment. In contrast, this article traces how a keyterm was born in the

liberal atmosphere of the Enlightenment and generated an expanding space of self-doubt afterward. When we appreciate that a large slice of modern Western civilization is a critical inquiry about the meaning of itself, and when we recognize that the language of civilization helped create a public sphere of doubt even within the colonial enterprise, we can conclude that the radical theorists discussed in this essay are less than reliable guides to the contours of European cultural history.

Keywords Civilization · Civilizing mission · Civilizing process · Colonialism · Post-colonialism · Enlightenment · Sociability · Pierre Bourdieu · Aimé Césaire · R.G. Collingwood · Robert Delavignette · Maurice Delafosse · Norbert Elias · Georges hardy · Edward said

“In good faith we must recognize, without priding ourselves on the fact, that ‘our’ civilization is the only one to take such an interest in other civilizations, indeed to accuse itself of having frequently done harm to other civilizations when they stood in the way of our lust for power.” Jean Starobinski¹

¹ Jean Starobinski, “The Word Civilization,” in *Blessings in Disguise, Or: The Morality of Evil* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 30. This article is an inspiration for my own. Starobinski is unusual in viewing the term “civilization” as a catalyst of debate, rather than (as post-colonial and other social theorists view it) as a mask of Western aggression. Unfortunately, Starobinski focused his analysis primarily on literary usages of “civilization” and did not consider the usage of “civilization” in colonial and other political contexts—so the article does not refute post-colonial theory directly. Bruce Mazlish, *Civilization and its Contents* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), is a wide-ranging history of the word. Some early chapters in the book are indebted to Starobinski and display an appreciation of the term’s complexity in the Enlightenment. But Mazlish subsequently defers to the interpretation of Norbert Elias, who is discussed in detail in this article. Mazlish considers “civilization” to be hopelessly biased and concludes with the suggestion that we abandon the term.

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“There must always be partisans of civilization.”² R.G. Collingwood

“Civilization” on Trial

Of all the terms in modern social science, none is more reviled by academics today than “civilization.” Even the term “race” enjoys more favor. Racial classification has justified slavery and segregation; it also undergirds affirmative action and other remedial policies. Often portrayed as a biologically obsolete concept, “race” remains a keyword in progressive thought.³ The antidote is in the poison. Yet, with “civilization,” the fashion is to assert that the term has never had a constructive inflection. Though coined in the liberal atmosphere of the French Enlightenment, the word seems to invite nothing today but sneering at western arrogance and imperialism. An English professor and leading post-colonial theorist observes:

Colonial and imperial rule was legitimized by anthropological theories which increasingly portrayed the peoples of the colonized world as inferior . . . The basis of such anthropological theories was the concept of race. In simple terms, the west-non-west relation was thought of in terms of whites versus the non-white races. White culture was regarded (and remains) the basis for ideas of legitimate government, law, economics, science, language, music art, literature—in a word, civilization.⁴

The word “civilization” has become one of those items that contemporary social theorists must constantly “unmask.”⁵ Scholars pass judgment on the term as if it has never been associated with anyone meritorious but is only a veil for wickedness. “Civilization” provides, according to one political scientist, “a veneer of large-mindedness” to justify why we “must take charge of the world.”⁶ A sociologist describes “civilization” as a “we concept” first used by the European

social elite to set itself apart from other groups, and later deployed to belittle and conquer non-European peoples.⁷

From a philosophical perspective, it is not clear why the academic Left views certain terms as redeemable, while others are relegated to the trash can of history. Clearly, the fact that a term has been central in past systems of injustice does not necessarily make the term taboo, as we see with “race.” The eminent Swiss literary critic and intellectual historian, Jean Starobinski, quoted at the beginning of this essay, saw redemptive features in the concept of “civilization,” while he recognized that the term could be abused. Starobinski’s essay appeared in a French volume entitled *Le Remède dans le mal*, but the English version of that book, entitled *Blessings in Disguise*, does not fully capture his message, that the limits and ills of European intellectual discourses are discernible through those same discourses. European thought, in other words, drives its own improvement.

Following Starobinski, I seek to explain how the word “civilization” has been discredited by radical theorists and scholars, and I aim to reinvigorate our appreciation of a fundamental term in Western thought. Starobinski focused primarily on literary usages of “civilization.” The present essay deals more with political thought; includes colonial discourses, which Starobinski did not treat at all. A basic argument in this paper is that the denunciation of “civilization” flourishes through a circular imitation process among radically anti-Western scholars. Each quotes the others to support a claim, that “civilization” is a cover for racism and aggression, a claim which none has provided even a prima facie case for. The negation of “civilization” is grounded more in empty theory rather than in systematic analyses of the term’s history, or *Begriffsgeschichte*.⁸ Two schools of theory are in question. The first is post-colonialism, particularly a kind of post-colonialism associated first and foremost today with the work of Edward Said. The second is the cultural sociology of difference, associate above all with Pierre Bourdieu. A brief word will be said about each here; fuller discussion will come later.

Post-colonialism has played a large role in equating “civilization” with scientific conceit and academic racism. Post-colonial thinkers have done well to draw attention to the most disparaging Western representations of non-Western peoples, and to the complicity of the sciences, including both physical and cultural anthropology, in endorsing these images. But they have sought to discredit as wide a

² R.G. Collingwood, *The New Leviathan or Man, Society, Civilization, and Barbarism* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1944; first pub. 1942), 348.

³ Alan H. Goodman, Yolanda T. Moses, Joseph L. Jones, *Race: Are We So Different* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), summarizes a variety of arguments concerning both the biological fictiveness of race and the social truth of the concept.

⁴ Robert J.C. Young, *Post-Colonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 2–3.

⁵ On unmasking as a feature in social thought, see Peter Baehr, “The Undoing of Humanism: Peter L. Berger’s Sociology of Unmasking,” *Society*, 50 (4) 2013, pp. 379–390; and Peter Baehr and Daniel Gordon, “Unmasking and Disclosure: Contrasting Modes for Understanding Religious and Other Beliefs,” *Journal of Sociology*, 48 (4) 2012, pp. 380–396.

⁶ William E. Connolly, “The New Cult of Civilizational Superiority,” in *Civilization: Critical Concepts in Political Science*, ed Brett Bowden (London: Routledge, 2009) vol 4, p. 194.

⁷ Johan Goudsblom, “Civilization: The Career of a Controversial Concept,” in *Civilization*, ed. Bowden, vol 1, 380. The four-volume collection edited by Bowden is saturated by contributions from post-colonial theorists and social scientists influenced by Norbert Elias. Bowden himself is a post-colonialist with an extremely negative view of the word “civilization.” See Brett Bowden, *The Empire of Civilization: The Evolution of an Imperial Idea* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁸ See Melvin Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

swatch of modern Western thought as possible—indeed, all of Western civilization from at least as far back as the Enlightenment. This anti-Western project, totalizing in its nature, involves associating virtually all modern intellectuals, academics, and artists with racism and imperialism. According to Edward W. Said, culture is not “monolithic”⁹—except that he makes Western culture entirely so. For modern Western thought has a “fundamentally static notion of identity” at its “core.”¹⁰ If Joseph Conrad was incapable of recognizing that the outlying regions of empire have a history and culture of their own, it is because of an “inevitable and unavoidable” politics and epistemology of the Western world.¹¹ “Without significant exception the universalizing discourses of modern Europe and the United States assume the silence, willing or otherwise, of the non-European world.”¹² Other phrases, such as “there was scarcely any dissent” and “there was virtual unanimity”¹³ serve to craft absolute generalizations about the role of humanistic culture in supporting imperialism.

What is most telling is not the post-colonialist’s interest in euro-centrism and discrimination, when they exist, but the theoretical need to affirm that these ills represent the “essence of experience in the West.”¹⁴ The denunciation of the word “civilization” helps create the desired effect. Since the term is widespread in its usage as well as encompassing in what it refers to, asserting that this one expression is inherently racist helps enormously to spread the blame across the West as a whole. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said isolates the terms “civilization” and “*mission civilisatrice*” several times¹⁵ as the emblems of Western self-superiority, though he does not provide a scholarly examination of how any specific authors use these terms. His knee-jerk denunciation of anyone who speaks of civilization is also evident in how he responded to Samuel P. Huntington’s famous “Clash of Civilizations” essay—by accusing Huntington, who is merely a conservative, of consorting with racist physiologists. According to Said, Huntington’s use of “civilization” was “the purest invidious racism of the same stripe as people who argue that Africans have naturally inferior brains, or that Asians are really born for servitude, or that Europeans are a naturally superior race. This is a sort of parody of Hitlerian science . . .”¹⁶

The German-born sociologist Norbert Elias is important because he claimed that the practices regarded as “civilized” in early modern Europe served as a marker of social

distinction and status. Especially in his analysis of France, Elias suggested that the idea of “civilization” was associated with the exclusive spirit of the royal court. He even detected the outlines of the colonial mentality in the courtly preoccupation with differences of rank. He thus suggested that both the domestic culture and the foreign policy of Europe were saturated with a spirit of ascendancy. The idea of “civilization,” he said, “sums up everything in which Western society of the last two or three centuries believes itself superior to earlier societies or ‘more primitive’ contemporary ones.”¹⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, the most frequently cited sociologist in the world, has endorsed these ideas.

It is true that the word “civilization” has sometimes been used to justify one’s claim to dominance. But it remains to be proven that the term has served only this purpose. Are we to suspect Robert Jackson of racism because he opened the Nuremberg trials by stating the following?

The wrongs which we seek to condemn and punish have been so calculated, so malignant, and so devastating, that civilization cannot tolerate their being ignored, because it cannot survive their being repeated.¹⁸

Today we take the legitimacy of the Nuremberg trials for granted. But the concept of an international court that could execute individuals for “crimes against humanity” was a novelty at that time and required a normative foundation. What of Abraham Lincoln, who used the terms “civilization” and “barbarism” when condemning atrocities against black prisoners of war? He ordered that for every black soldier of the United States “killed in violation of the laws of war, a rebel soldier shall be executed.”¹⁹ Lincoln used “civilization” to justify retaliation for atrocities; violence was needed to demonstrate the principle that black lives matter as much as white. Based on Jackson and Lincoln, one wonders if the purpose of the term “civilization” is not so much to *mask* how one exercises power over others as to *profess* the reasons for using force to achieve liberal ends, within excruciatingly complex political and legal contexts.

There is a need for a fresh retrospective on the history of the term “civilization,” a history that highlights the role of “civilization” in generating an atmosphere of reflection. For “civilization” never settled down into a slogan of domination. This concept is associated with a self-referential, self-questioning style of thinking. When civilization serves to

⁹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), xxiv.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xxv.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹² *Ibid.*, 50.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 53, for this and the previous phrase. See also 66.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xix, 29–30, 108, 170.

¹⁶ Edward W. Said, “Of Dignity and Solidarity,” *Counterpunch*, June 23, 2003. <http://www.counterpunch.org/2003/06/23/of-dignity-and-solidarity/>. Last visited Mar 4, 2016.

¹⁷ Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, vol 1: *The History of Manners* (New York: Urizen Books, 1978), pp. 3–4.

¹⁸ Robert Jackson, “Opening Statement Before The International Military Tribunal,” Nov. 21, 1945. <https://www.roberthjackson.org/speech-and-writing/opening-statement-before-the-international-military-tribunal/>. Last visited March 4, 2016.

¹⁹ Abraham Lincoln, Order no. 252, July 30, 1863. <http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/retal.htm>. Last visited March 4, 2016.

justify coercive interventions, it simultaneously initiates debates about matters of principle. Starobinski pointed out that the first person to use the word “civilization,” the eighteenth-century French economist, Mirabeau, spoke of “false civilization” and “the barbarity of our civilizations.”²⁰ Under the influence of post-colonial theory, scholars in many disciplines often assume that the primary function of “civilization” was to affirm the superiority of one’s own way of life. Yet, the coining of the word post-dates, and bears a strong trace of, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s profound indictment of modernity (to be discussed further below) in *The Discourse on Inequality*. The word “civilization” has predecessor forms in ancient, medieval, and Renaissance thought: *civitas*, *civilitas*, etc. These older terms may well have been used dualistically to distinguish humans from animals, or some human groups from others. But we must view the specific word “civilization” for what it was, a neologism of the era of Enlightenment: a new term, with self-critical qualities. From its inception, the term functioned as a tool for highlighting the achievements of one’s society *and* for putting it on trial. When the term was used to underscore Europe’s progress in commerce and science, this distinction often served a dialectical purpose: to raise the bar of moral expectations.

As one of the leading self-indicting concepts in modern Western thought, “civilization” was bound to complicate the thinking of colonial administrators. Rather than seeing “civilization” as a watchword of colonial arrogance inherited from a hyper-rational Enlightenment, one can detect a critical term, born in the Enlightenment and moving forward to open a space of self-examination within the practice of colonialism. Conquest, imperialism, and exploitation have existed across the millennia and in many parts of the world. The idea of “civilization” is not needed to justify the appropriation of other people’s territory and resources, or the worst imaginable atrocities. It is enough to believe that domination of the other serves the political and economic interests of one’s own state. When the ideal of bringing “civilization” to the colonized peoples did become an ingredient in the colonial perspective, it was no longer sufficient to justify colonialism in terms of the home country’s own interest. Colonialism had to be simultaneously justified in terms of the interests of another group—and this ideological imperative ultimately changed the process of domination considerably.

“Civilization” implied that the natives could evolve to the stage Europeans had already reached. Hence, civilization militated against gross racial stereotyping. Conversely, as we will see, those such as Gobineau who believed in the innate and absolute inferiority of certain races did not support the idea that natives could become civilized. “Civilization” also provided a framework of advancement in which natives could claim they had arrived, and no longer needed Europe. We can go even

further. In France, some of the top colonial administrators in the early twentieth century were pioneers in advancing cultural anthropology. Even more than academic anthropologists in Paris, colonial administrators forged the viewpoint that natives had valuable “civilizations” of their own. Between the two world wars, these ethnographically oriented colonialists advanced the hope for cultural exchange and the creation of a new multicultural personality type. To be sure, they envisioned this process as taking place under European oversight. But they agonized over whether Europe was worthy of its leadership. They publicized questions, which they knew very well to be intractable, about what justifies one civilization exercising power over another. The first generation of indigenous intellectuals opposed to colonialism sprung in part from the critical atmosphere provided by this colonial Enlightenment.

It is evident that I focus a good deal on France. This is to provide a laboratory in which we can isolate and test boundless claims made by certain post-colonial theorists and Bourdieu-style social scientists about the universal wickedness of the idea of “civilization.” Understanding French intellectual history is not an end in itself. It is a means of regaining consciousness of a liberal tradition of thought since the eighteenth century, a tradition that is not restricted to France. I conclude by drawing attention to a British philosopher, R.G. Collingwood, who articulated an ethical theory of “civilization.” If we are not all going to become what Collingwood called “partisans of civilization,” we must at least agree that we are witnessing today a questionable tendency to replace the tradition of debate about “civilization” with a blanket characterization of Western civilization as evil. “The modern European mind is a highly complex fact,” Collingwood wrote.²¹ This inquiry into “civilization” will at least bear out Collingwood’s second claim.

The “Civilizing Mission”: a Post-Colonial Symbol without a Colonial Referent

What is meant by post-colonialism in this discussion? I am isolating an influential current of theory that aims to unveil the presuppositions of Western colonialism as a system of oppression. Colonialism, in the theoretical context of post-colonialism, is not just a finite episode of history, or an example of modern statecraft blown off course. Colonialism is allegedly a core feature of the West, a mentality that has conditioned Western culture as a whole. Colonialism has the all-encompassing and all-determining place in post-colonial thinking that capitalism has in Marxist thinking. (We should note that both “isms” aim to identify more than a specific institution or practice; they articulate a whole stage of history.) In fact, post-colonialism sometimes appears as a variant of Marxism, and it preserves the holistic rhetoric of denunciation characteristic of Marxism.

²⁰ Starobinski, “The Word Civilization,” p. 7.

²¹ Collingwood, *New Leviathan*, p. 62.

The author of a history of post-colonial thought has described Marxism as “an indispensable tool,”²² and “the fundamental framework of post-colonial thinking.”²³

However, it is possible to turn Marxist theory itself against over-simplifications of the term “civilization.” The concept of hypostatization, is relevant here: the transformation of complex realities into facile symbols; the tendency to assume that whatever can be named with exactitude must actually exist in identical form as the naming sign.²⁴ This is a fallacy, a confusion of a model that admits only one or a few factors with a reality that has many. Since our inquiry is about the history of a term, “civilization,” some clarification is needed as to how this fallacy, of substituting an easy symbol for a complex reality, can take place when only the history of a symbol is in question. Post-colonialists fail to capture the nuances of the word “civilization,” because, when they refer to the term, they are generally quoting each other rather than anybody outside the post-colonial tribe.

To show how this is quite literally the case, consider the ubiquity in post-colonial scholarship of the French term *mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission). It appears repeatedly in post-colonial scholarship to add a patina of European sophistication to the discussion of colonial ideology. The idea is to refer to the arrogance of colonialists in what is allegedly their own idiom. But there is a problem here: the term was hardly ever used. I have tracked the usage of *mission civilisatrice* closely in numerous post-colonial writings. I have not found any post-colonial scholars using this phrase who provides examples of its usage in history.

Here are three illustrations—but I could provide many more—of post-colonial scholars who treat *mission civilisatrice* as a synopsis of colonial thought, without providing any instances of colonialists using the term.

- “The French ideology of the *mission civilisatrice* was subsequently taken up by all the European colonial powers . . . The confidence of universal values that paradoxically needed to be imposed on the rest of the world because they were not in fact at that time universal, was a legacy of Enlightenment thought. In its distortion into a civilizing mission, the revolutionary notion of universal human equality was turned into an oppressive form of cultural imperialism.”²⁵
- “The expression ‘mission civilisatrice’ became the predominant one for colonial France after 1789. The ‘superior

²² “Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory,” editors’ introduction in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 6.

²³ Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 6.

²⁴ Julius I. Loewenstein, *Marx Against Marxism* (New York: Routledge, 1980), 93–95; Warren Breckman, *Marx, The Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 268

²⁵ Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, 89.

racess’ had a duty to educate, scientifically and morally the ‘inferior’ races.”²⁶

- “Europeans and the French in particular have often defined their own identity in relation to the ‘other’ as a figure of barbarism, fanaticism, and backwardness. France was the champion of the universalizing ideals of the *mission civilisatrice* for the colonized people.”²⁷

Reading outside of post-colonial scholarship, I managed to find one scholarly historian who quotes an instance of *mission civilisatrice* from the historical record.²⁸ There may well be a good number of other examples in primary sources I have overlooked. And one could very reasonably argue that even if the exact term was never current, the zeal for bringing Europe’s civilization to other peoples was in the air in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, it matters a great deal if there was a single, changeless colonial ideology, based on an uncontested crusade to impose French “civilization” on others, and tidily summed up by the concept of a *mission civilisatrice*—or, in contrast, if there was a serious debate about the legitimacy of colonialism, a debate in which the term “civilization” played a role in formulating competing viewpoints. It is historically misleading, indeed it is a scandalous “big lie,” all the more inexcusable because it functions in an academic context where precision and evidence are supposed to matter, for post-colonial scholars to suggest that a rarely used expression captures everything we need to know about colonial thinking.²⁹

²⁶ Bruno Charbonneau, *France and the New Imperialism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p. 36

²⁷ Driss Maghraoui, “French Identity, Islam, And North Africans: Colonial Legacies, Postcolonial Realities,” in *French Civilization and its Discontents*, ed. Tyler Stovall and Georges van den Abbeele (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003), p. 214.

²⁸ Agnes Murphy, *The Ideology of French Imperialism, 1871–1881* (Washington, D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 1948), p. 15, quoting the *Bulletin de la société de géographie commerciale de Paris*, 1879.

²⁹ I have focused my criticism in this article on influential theorists, not specialized historians. An entire review essay would be needed to cover how specialized, archivally-based historians have recently portrayed the so-called “civilizing mission” of French colonialists. Especially worthy of nuanced appraisal is the excellent book by Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republic Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). I would describe Conklin as a politically moderate and deeply insightful scholar. Conklin recognizes the existence of multiple conceptions of the colonial mission. Yet, she appears to view all modes of colonial thinking as intrinsically incompatible with democratic or universalistic values, a viewpoint that requires intensive philosophical analysis and cannot be demonstrated by history alone. Some of the trickiest issues concern the efforts of French colonial administrators to improve public health, abolish slavery, and enhance the status of women. Another problem I detect throughout the historiography is the absence of in-depth representation of colonial thinking—my coverage in this article of Delafosse and other colonial intellectuals is more detailed than one finds in the vast majority of books on French colonialism. Above all, historians tend to portray colonial thought as patently self-contradictory, while describing the first generation of anti-colonial intellectuals as “authentic.” Even those scholars who have observed how colonial and anti-colonial rhetoric were intertwined portray colonial thought as hypocritical and native anti-colonial thought as a positive breakthrough—an unacceptable dualism.

Aimé Césaire: the Origins of a Semantic Hatred

Where did the reduction of the word “civilization” to a symbol of colonial racism and arrogance start? Marx and Engels wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*:

The bourgeoisie . . . compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image.³⁰

But it appears to be Aimé Césaire who first amplified Marx’s claim into a lengthy study. Césaire, a poet and politician from Martinique, authored the *Discourse on Colonialism* (first published in 1950 and revised into its classic form in 1955). It is regarded as “a founding text of francophone post-colonialism.”³¹ This work has played a role in orienting post-colonialism toward the critical analysis of the language of colonialism, and above all “civilization.”

The influence of Marxism and the rhetoric of unmasking are evident in the text. A grand indictment of Europe at the beginning of the work sets an imperiously sarcastic tone toward “civilization.”

A civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization.

A civilization that chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problems is a stricken civilization.

A civilization that uses its principles for trickery and deceit is a dying civilization.

The fact is that the so-called European civilization – “Western” civilization – as it has been shaped by two centuries of bourgeois rule, is incapable of solving the two major problems to which its existence has given rise: the problem of the proletariat and the colonial problem; that Europe is unable to justify itself either before the bar of “reason” or before the bar of “conscience”; and that, increasingly, it takes refuge in a hypocrisy which is all the more odious because it is less and less likely to deceive.³²

Césaire affirms that all talk of “civilization,” is a “mystification” of capitalist oppression.³³ This is a text to be

reckoned with because Césaire continued his diatribe by analyzing the lexicon of a series of French authors whom he considered to be racist. One cannot accuse him as easily as some of his post-colonial successors of the fallacy of reification. His goal was to show that “all the abominations “of colonialism sprung from the basic distinction between “civilization” and “savagery.”

However, the manner in which Césaire cherry-picks quotations and lumps together as racists a variety of French authors is questionable. Many of the authors he discusses are little known today. Readers will take for granted the manner in which he characterizes them. Above all, he twisted the ideas of the French intellectual Roger Caillois, who receives the fullest criticism in his work: “The reader must excuse me for having talked about M. Caillois at such length.”³⁴

The focus of Césaire’s attack was an article Caillois published in two segments in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* in December 1954 and January 1955.³⁵ The article was a critique of Claude Lévi-Strauss, the leading anthropologist in France at the time. Césaire does not mention that Caillois’s piece is a commentary on Lévi-Strauss. We thus have a polemical triangle containing considerable room for misunderstanding.

Caillois himself was a hard-to-classify poet, essayist, and sociologist. He affiliated as a young man with the surrealists André Breton and Salvador Dalí. He founded in 1937 with Georges Bataille the *Collège de Sociologie*, an informal association of experimentally minded social theorists who promoted the comparative study of the sacred. He was a leader of the anti-fascist intellectual group Contre-Attaque and the founder and editor of the interdisciplinary journal, *Diogenes*, funded by UNESCO. Caillois also directed *La Croix du Sud*, which pioneered a series of French translations of contemporary Latin American authors such as Jorge Luis Borges and Victoria Ocampo. It is interesting to observe how Césaire turned the thought of this self-proclaimed “paradoxical intellectual”³⁶ into a simple paradigm of racism.

In the article of 1954–55 that Césaire singled out for criticism, Caillois made two arguments that Césaire construed as racist. The first had nothing directly to do with “civilization” and concerned the relationship between race and science. Caillois attributed to Lévi-Strauss the belief that science—both biology and cultural anthropology—provided the proof necessary to establish the equality of all races. For Caillois himself, the interaction between science and racial ideology is fluid. He knew that in the recent past, some scientists had argued in favor of innate differences among the races. A future alliance between science and racism was not out of the question. In keeping with his interest in the sacred, Caillois took

³⁰ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm#007>. Last visited March 4, 2016.

³¹ Jeannie Suk, *Postcolonial Paradoxes in French Caribbean Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 24. This book is also an excellent deconstruction of French post-colonialists claim to be able to condemn French culture from a standpoint outside of it.

³² Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 1. I have used this online version of the aforementioned edition: http://abahlali.org/files/_Discourse_on_Colonialism.pdf.

³³ *Ibid.*, 7 (following the pagination of the online version).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁵ Roger Caillois, “Illusions à rebours,” *Nouvelle Revue Française*, 1954, no. 24, pp. 1010–1024; 1955, no. 25, pp. 58–70.

³⁶ *On the Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, ed. Claudine Frank (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), editor’s introduction, p. 42.

equality to be a value whose meaning does not hinge on scientific conclusions. The concept of equality has a force of its own; it would be compelling even if there were fundamental differences among human groups.

This argument has merit. Our commitment to providing equal opportunity and treating people with dignity finds confirmation but does not hinge entirely on whether all humans have the same capacities. Caillois refers to a group of European scholars who, a few years after the end of World War II, issued a proclamation stating that nothing in the current state of scientific knowledge justifies racial discrimination. Caillois states that some leading Jewish figures protested.

They considered that it would wrong for others to persecute them, even if science, whose verdicts are unforeseeable, appeared to justify their elimination at a given moment. Indeed, this is a moral question and not a question of scientific truth or error. It is extremely dangerous to connect the two domains . . . For to depend here on the aid of scientific results is to concede that the force of a position belonging to a purely moral order can be weakened if the scientific results in question are damaged by subsequent research. It is not because science advises against it that it is wrong to lead Jews or blacks or anyone else to the crematorium.³⁷

Caillois added, “The science of tomorrow is never the science of yesterday.”³⁸

Yet, Césaire portrayed Caillois as if the latter believed the biological inferiority of blacks to be a foregone conclusion. Césaire described Caillois as a racist with a condescending attitude toward minorities.

“Having established the superiority of the West in all fields, and having thus reestablished” a wholesome and extremely valuable hierarchy, M. Caillois gives immediate proof of this superiority by concluding that no one should be exterminated. With him the Negroes are sure that they will not be lynched, the Jews that they will not feed new bonfires. There is just one thing: it is important for it to be clearly understood that the Negroes, Jews, Australians owe this tolerance not to their respective merits, but to the magnanimity of M. Caillois.³⁹

Césaire’s second attack on Caillois is evident in the above passage: It had to do with the question of whether European civilization was superior to other civilizations. Césaire summarized Caillois as if the latter believed that Europe was

entirely superior—“in all fields.” He accused Caillois of affirming “that the West alone knows how to think.”⁴⁰

These are not Caillois’s words or thoughts. We must again understand Caillois in relation to his target, Lévi-Strauss. The latter had recently published a small book for UNESCO, *Race and History*. The text was designed, in Lévi-Strauss own words, “to combat racial prejudice” by delineating “the contributions made by various races of men to world civilization.” Lévi-Strauss acknowledged that he was engaging in a gross simplification—he did not believe that specific civilizations are expressions of the intelligence level of specific races. There are numerous civilizations and relatively few races, he noted. But since “the man on the street” believes that the superiority of the white race is demonstrated by its apparently superior achievements, it is necessary to demonstrate that diverse civilizations have achievements as great as those of Europe. Lévi-Strauss described, for example, how kinship relations in Australian aboriginal civilization are as complex as “all the refinements of modern mathematics.”⁴¹

Caillois discerned an anti-Western bias at the heart of Lévi-Strauss’s thought: the famous anthropologist’s goal was not merely to show that other cultures had great achievements but to deny that the West had any of its own. Caillois was right. Lévi-Strauss argued that the West has only two features, both materialist in nature, that distinguish it. The first is the West’s knack for increasing the “per capita supply of energy.” The second is the West’s capacity to prolong the duration of human life.⁴² Lévi-Strauss emphasized that other civilizations have had the same commitments to enhancing productivity and longevity; the West’s advantage is only quantitative, not qualitative.

Claudine Frank has suggested that Caillois was particularly irritated because Lévi-Strauss sustained the kind of anti-occidentalism that Caillois himself had subscribed to in his youthful days as a surrealist.⁴³ The surrealists aimed to break completely with Western science and logic. In the 1930s they were driven, as Caillois describes, by “the impassioned belief that their civilization was hypocritical, corrupt, and repugnant, and the purity and fullness for which the need was felt must be sought elsewhere, anywhere and ideally at the opposite ends of the geographic and cultural spectrum.”⁴⁴ By the 1950s, however, Caillois no longer believed that appreciating other civilizations precluded highlighting valuable features of Western civilization. Caillois expressed agreement with Lévi-Strauss that the West is not absolutely superior. There

³⁷ Caillois, “Illusions à rebours,” 1954, p. 1018, note 1.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, p. 21.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 19.

⁴¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Race and History* (Paris:UNESCO, 1952), pp. 5, 6–7, 28.

⁴² Ibid, p. 32, and summarized by Caillois, “Illusions à rebours,” 1954, 1019, and 1955, p. 61.

⁴³ *On the Edge of Surrealism*, Frank’s Introduction, p. 48.

⁴⁴ Caillois, “Illusions à rebours,” 1955, 67. Also cited by Frank, p. 48; the translation here is mine.

is no process of evolution that subsumes all civilizations; hence, none is definitively ahead of the others. Civilizations, according to Caillois, are “concurrent,” not part of a linear sequence.⁴⁵ But Caillois faults Lévi-Strauss for reducing the character of the West to industry and hygiene—for not recognizing in Western civilization “numerous other factors, perhaps more original”⁴⁶ than longevity and the per capita supply of energy. The West has “a tenacious curiosity,” including “a curiosity concerning other cultures.”⁴⁷ The truly distinguishing feature of *la civilisation Occidentale*, Caillois states, is “that it has produced ethnographers.”⁴⁸ The West also invented archaeology and museums.⁴⁹ Only the West engages in the study of other civilizations for the sake of framing criticisms of one’s own way of life. For Caillois, serious cross-cultural inquiry is a Western activity. According to Caillois, Lévi-Strauss ought to have recognized that, in the very act of comparing cultures, he was dependent on the West for the moral and intellectual conditions of his work.⁵⁰

Césaire devoted 1400 words to his critique of Caillois, but he did not recreate Caillois’ thought accurately. In Caillois, we see a comparative thinker attempting to identify comparison itself as a distinctive Western achievement. He discerned a unique value in our capacity to frame ourselves vis-à-vis other civilizations. In Césaire, we see a native of Martinique, who was educated in France, who wrote in French, who published with a French press, who was heavily influenced by Baudelaire, Marx, and other European critics of modernity, struggling to write a cultural declaration of independence, not only from colonialism but from all things European. This quest for a new beginning expressed itself by negating the existence of a self-critical matrix of thought in Europe, an intellectual resource which contributed decisively to Césaire’s own formation.⁵¹ Césaire denounced the discourse of “civilization” in France as a thoroughly racist idiom, as if this repudiation could prove that he was not Europe’s progeny. In post-colonial thought, the denial of any positive inheritance has endured ever since.

⁴⁵ Caillois, “Illusions à rebours,” 1954, p. 1011.

⁴⁶ Caillois, “Illusions à rebours,” 1955, p. 62.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* After completing a full draft of this article, it became evident to me that Lévi-Strauss was deeply perturbed by Caillois’s argument that the West was uniquely disposed to inquire into other cultures for purposes of developing self-criticism. The anthropologist continued to argue with Caillois in *Tristes tropiques*. Though Caillois is not named, anyone familiar with the debate between the two cannot miss how Lévi-Strauss tried to hammer out a rebuttal in the chapter entitled “A Little Glass of Rum.”

⁵¹ This critique of Césaire is consistent with the analysis of his poetry in Suk, *Post-Colonial Paradoxes*.

“Civilization” in the French Enlightenment

In the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1750), Jean-Jacques Rousseau claimed that the intellectual disciplines conspired with government to deprive men of their natural liberty.

The sciences, letters, and arts, less despotic and more powerful perhaps [than government] place garlands of flowers on the iron chains of mankind, extinguishing in them the original sentiment of freedom for which they seem to have been born, making them love their slavery, and forming what one calls civilized peoples.⁵²

The French term *civilisation* appeared for the first time in 1756, in the Marquis de Mirabeau’s *L’Ami des hommes*. (The English “civilization” first appeared in 1767, in Adam Ferguson’s *Essay on the History of Civil Society*.⁵³) Thus, prior to the appearance of the noun “civilization,” there was already a moral debate, popularized by Rousseau, about the

⁵² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse sur les sciences et les arts*, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p. 7. When quoting French texts through this article, I have used the English “civilized” and “civilization” to translate the French cognates “civilisé” and “civilisation.” The only exception is here: I have used “civilized peoples” to translate Rousseau’s “peuples polices.” Published English translations generally translate the French term in the same way. Prior to the appearance of the French word “civilization” a few years after Rousseau’s discourse, the French word “police” sometimes denoted a law-abiding and polite society. As Lucien Febvre acutely noted, however, the term “police” was also associated with royal absolutism, and particularly, with the growing authority of the Lieutenant General of Police in Paris. There was thus a need for a term that indicated a state of order and refinement, without implying that this order emanated above all from royal authority—and this was one reason that “civilization” became more popular than “police” over the course of the French Enlightenment. Febvre authored the first scholarly article on the history of the word “civilization.” His main thesis was that in the eighteenth century, civilization was part of an evolutionary scheme of progress, and in the nineteenth century, European thinkers came to recognize that every civilization is unique. Lucien Febvre, “Civilisation: Évolution d’un mot et d’un groupe d’idées,” in *Civilisation: Le mot et l’idée*, ed. Henri Beer (Paris: La Renaissance du Livre, 1930), pp. 1–55. The discussion of “police” is at pp. 12–15. The articles in this collection aim to show that a social scientist can study “civilizations” without moral bias. The articles thus illustrate the spirit of ethnographic relativism in the inter-war period that I examine later in this article. However, it is striking that none of the articles discusses the colonial usages of “civilization.” The contributors to the volume included Marcel Mauss, the leading cultural anthropologist in the French university system. Febvre was the leading cultural historian. This conference has considerable significance for the history of the word “civilization,” but I have opted to focus, in the present article, on a different group of inter-war thinkers, the colonial administrators in West Africa. Suffice it to say that the academics in Paris developed a sanitized concept of “civilization” in the interests of promoting value-free “social science.” In their conference papers, they avoided analyzing any contexts in which “civilization” was intertwined with colonial power, and they were actually scolded for this by a colonial administrator who was in attendance; see pp. 141–142. It was precisely because they grappled with issues of policy that the colonial administrators developed nuances in their thinking about “civilization” that academics in Paris did not register. See the section of the present article entitled “A Gushing of Antinomies – The Colonial Enlightenment.”

⁵³ Starobinski, “The Word Civilization,” pp. 4–5; Brett Bowden, *The Empire of Civilization*, pp. 16–17. My discussion of Mirabeau follows closely that of Starobinski.

contradictory nature of progress. The debate Rousseau framed was about the value of socio-economic modernization compared to primitive independence. Far from serving as an anchor for the capitalist worldview, the word “civilization” helped to sustain this debate about the meaning of economic growth.

An economic thinker with an anti-statist vision, Mirabeau sought to discover principles of prosperity that operate apart from state control. Yet, unlike Adam Smith and what we generally regard as classical economics, Mirabeau associated prosperity with the need to maintain the primacy of agriculture over commerce. This gave his thought a conservative or pastoral dimension that coexisted with the competitive vision of industry we often find in early advocates of laissez-faire. For Mirabeau, all economic value stems from the soil. He also regarded agriculture as the moral basis of society, the source of those “bonds” that make a “society” out of individuals. Commerce may supplement but must not displace agriculture, “which is the most sociable of all the arts.”⁵⁴

With his penchant for neologisms, Mirabeau was one of the first to use the French word “sociability” (*sociabilité*), and the first to use it as a key concept in a piece of political theory. Sociability, or the “natural tendency of man to unite with his fellows,” is “inherent in the human substance.”⁵⁵ From sociability “all the virtues derive.”⁵⁶ The antithesis of sociability is another natural drive, “cupidity,” from which all the vices flow. While agriculture strengthens the sociable bonds of family and locality, commerce activates cupidity, setting humans against each other. A well-ordered regime, a “civilization,” “animates” sociability and “represses” cupidity.⁵⁷ The trick is to disencumber agriculture from the regulatory state and promote “competition” (*la concurrence*), while avoiding a reckless unshackling of the economy that would move society into a predominantly egoistic stage. A “civilization” needs checks or brakes (*freins*), and without them society will become a band of “civilized pirates.”⁵⁸ The most important check on cupidity and commerce is religion, which, even if it is false, according to Mirabeau, “is the first and most useful brake on humanity, the first spring of civilization.” For religion “reminds us constantly of confraternity, softening our heart, elevating our spirit . . . and interesting us in the fortune of others.”⁵⁹ Mirabeau’s image of “civilization is not racist; it is not evolutionary, not euro-centric. It is, above all, a fragile complex that must be guarded against some of the very tendencies that it produces.

⁵⁴ Victor de Riquetti, marquis de Mirabeau, *L’Ami des hommes, ou, Traité de la population* (Avignon: n.p., 1756), p. 97.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 456.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

The word “civilization” would figure recurrently in the French Enlightenment in discussions of the dialectic of progress. L.S. Mercier, in his *Tableau de Paris* (1782) decried the growing sexual licentiousness of his time. “Is this where the progress of civilization and the arts must lead?”⁶⁰ Neither Mirabeau nor Mercier discussed France’s empire. But the most important expression of the dialectic of civilization in the French Enlightenment was all about colonialism.

In 1770 the first edition appeared of the *Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*. Composed primarily by Guillaume-Thomas Raynal, this monumental text, consisting of several thousand pages became one of the bestselling works of the eighteenth century. J.G.A. Pocock described it as “the first major history of the world-system; the first attempt to deal philosophically and critically with the European conquest of the planetary ocean.”⁶¹ The text deploys the terms “civilized” and “civilization” to refer to a superior way of life, but it refers to no place in particular. “Civilization” is used abstractly for the ideal of a more humane international order.⁶²

This popular work posed acute questions about the justification for European expansion. Whenever Raynal attributes civilization to Europe itself, he quickly establishes that Europeans do not measure up to it in their behavior in the colonies. Transplanted abroad, “civilized men” raised in “civilized towns” where they were “accustomed to respecting their fellows,” rapidly become “barbarous.”⁶³ The following passage, a declamation against the extermination of Native Americans by the Spanish in the mid-eighteenth century, highlights the contradiction between European violence and European religion.

Good God, exterminating humans! Are we speaking of wolves? And why exterminate others? Because they have proud souls, because they have a sense of their natural liberty, because they do not wish to be our slaves? And we consider ourselves civilized, and Christian?⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, vol. 1 (Amsterdam: n.p., 1782), p. 132.

⁶¹ J.G.A. Pocock, “Commerce, Settlement, and History: A Reading of the *Histoire des deux Indes*,” in *Articulating America: Fashioning a National Political Culture in Early America – Essays in Honors of J. Pole*, ed. Rebecca Starr (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 16.

⁶² My discussion of Raynal resumes some of the points I have made in “Uncivilised Civilisation: Raynal and the Global Public Sphere,” in *Raynal’s Histoire des deux Indes: Colonialism, Networks and Global Exchange*, ed. Cecil Courtney and Jenny Mander (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2015), pp. 103–117.

⁶³ Guillaume-Thomas Raynal, *Histoire des deux Indes* (Geneva: Pellet, 1780), vol. 5, p. 216.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, vol 3, p. 448.

The profound impact that this criticism had on European intellectual consciousness is evident in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, first published in 1776. The professor of moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow is too often regarded as an unqualified apologist for commercial development, even though long stretches of Book V of *The Wealth of Nations* contain a Rousseauian critique of the loss of civic virtue due to the division of labor in what Smith repeatedly calls "civilized society." Also often overlooked is that Smith raised the possibility of doubt about the whole project of European commercial expansion.

The discovery of America, and that of a passage to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope, are the two greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind. Their consequences have already been very great; but, in the short period of between two and three centuries which has elapsed since these discoveries were made, it is impossible that the whole extent of their consequences can have been seen. What benefits or what misfortunes to mankind may hereafter result from those great events, no human wisdom can foresee. By uniting, in some measure, the most distant parts of the world, by enabling them to relieve one another's wants, to increase one another's enjoyments, and to encourage one another's industry, their general tendency would seem to be beneficial. To the natives however, both of the East and West Indies, all the commercial benefits which can have resulted from those events have been sunk and lost in the dreadful misfortunes which they have occasioned.⁶⁵

The Enlightenment bequeathed a practice of self-questioning and self-accusation. It transmitted an ability to formulate the dark sides of European development and expansion, and to consider the perspectives of non-Europeans. One of the most awkward moments in *Culture and Imperialism* is when Said recognizes the existence of anticolonialism in the French Enlightenment but dismisses it. "Without significant exception this literature either was specialized—as, for example, in the Abbé Raynal's celebrated report on the colonies—or belonged to a genre (e.g., moral debate) that used such issues as morality, slavery, or corruption as instances in a general argument about mankind."⁶⁶ The meaning of "specialized" is obscure here; it does not fit Raynal's work well at all. And there is no reason to consider other critiques of colonialism as less important simply because they were part of a broad philosophical inquiry. It is not clear what

range of discourse would satisfy Said. His judgment on the Enlightenment thinkers, that they "do not dispute the fundamental superiority of Western man,"⁶⁷ is simply invalid.

Norbert Elias and the Omission of Empathy from the Civilizing Process

The sociologist Norbert Elias did not receive a full time academic appointment until he was 57 years old. In 1954 he became a Lecturer in the sociology department at Leicester University. Twenty years later he would be hailed as one of the greatest sociologists of all time. A 1998 poll by the International Sociological Association ranked Elias's *The Civilizing Process* as the seventh most important sociological book of the twentieth century.⁶⁸

In a previous article, I discussed how *The Civilizing Process*, when originally published in German in the 1930s, was reviewed critically by some leading European scholars. When it was republished in German and other languages in the 1970s and early 1980s, it was received with enthusiasm, especially by social scientists seeking to preserve Marxism by reconfiguring it.⁶⁹ The 1970s was a period of reorientation for many scholars who identified with the basic Marxist project of criticizing the perennial inequalities of modern society. The challenge was that Marx's economic determinism was becoming passé. Elias's work on the civilizing process facilitated the transition from an economic to a cultural Marxism.

A number of factors induced the academic Left to put less emphasis on capitalism and more emphasis on government and culture. The reputation of Max Weber, who emphasized the state and religion no less than business and class, was at a high point in the 1960s and 1970s. Scholars of the French Revolution, inspired by Tocqueville, were deconstructing the interpretation of the Revolution as an outcome of the rise of capitalism and the "bourgeoisie" against "feudal" society. Student protest in the 1960s highlighted the excitement of the political, the existence of un-predetermined moments in history when speech, organization, and decision-making can turn the direction of history. The brilliant thought of Michel Foucault erupted in the 1960s and provided a model, radical in its critique of "power," but devoid of a concept of economic class. Foucault dispensed entirely with the idea that any sector of society, such as the economy, structures all the other sectors. In doing so, he averted posing as the champion of any particular social group; his work encourages every person to become liberated from all forms of "discipline" in modern society.

⁶⁵ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan (London: Methuen & Co., 1904), book 4, ch. 7. In a footnote, Cannan suggests that Smith based this passage on a reading of Raynal.

⁶⁶ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 97.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁶⁸ http://www.isa-sociology.org/books/vt/bkv_000.htm. Last visited March 7, 2016.

⁶⁹ Daniel Gordon, "The Canonization of Norbert Elias in France," *French Politics, Culture, and Society*, vol. 20, no. 1 (Spring, 2002), pp. 68–69, 76–77.

Foucault's anarchism, I believe, was as problematic as Weber's political sociology for those who wished to keep capitalism, or something homologous to it—something massive, intransigent, and hierarchical—at the center of social theory and criticism. Admittedly, the factors I have mentioned as responsible for a reorientation of the academic Left in the 1970s do not do justice to the complexity of the scene. But the center of gravity in Leftist social science clearly shifted at that time from the denunciation of capitalism and its cultural byproducts to cultural studies per se as the site of critical excavation. Eisenstadt has referred to this change as the “civilizational turn” in social science: a turning away from class analysis to the study of “the imaginary” and “cultural creativity” as the basis of social classification and exclusion.⁷⁰ The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu emerged as the leading figure in this context.

Bourdieu, who died in 2002, is “probably the most cited scholar in the social sciences” and clearly the most frequently cited in sociology, according to Etienne Ollion. Ollion has encoded citations in such a way that he can discern how Bourdieu today “is considered a mandatory reference” on certain topics. “The citation becomes a ritual. In some cases, the author has obviously not read the text in question.”⁷¹ Bourdieu is known for key concepts such as symbolic violence, cultural competition, and cultural capital. The first term in each of these pairs (symbolic, cultural) is evidence of the move away from economics; the second term (violence, competition, capital), however, is reminiscent of Marx's picture of the bourgeois economy. Bourdieu adroitly transferred the Marxist idea that capitalism is a matrix of inequality and oppression onto the vista of education. This he did by emphasizing how scientific establishments, university entrance requirements, and so forth, all manufacture social class and distinction.

In the writings of Elias, Bourdieu found confirmation of his vision of high culture as a system of exclusion that changes only in order to update its capacity to keep out the lower classes. With the endorsement of Bourdieu, Elias's work on the civilizing process came to the front ranks of social science. A number of scholars have noted parallels between Elias's preoccupation with “civilization” as a marker of distinction and Bourdieu's concern with cultural privilege.⁷² Beyond such general affinities, they shared an interest in turning Weber's political sociology in the direction of the pre-political or social

bases of power. Marx had spoken of how the bourgeoisie exercised a “monopoly” over the means of production; Weber parried that the modern state, with its “monopoly” on the means of violence, was just as important a factor in modern history. As Bourdieu pointed out, Elias focused on the fate of those social strata, above all the nobility, which previously wielded instruments of violence but lost military and political power in the wake of state centralization. As Bourdieu said, Elias “drew out all the implications of Weber's analysis” by focusing on how the nobility morphed from a warrior class to a courtier class preoccupied with maintaining standards of civilized behavior.⁷³

According to Elias, aristocratic civility involved mastery of the handkerchief, table manners, and the repression of bodily functions and all violent tendencies. As other social groups imitated the aristocracy, the latter was obliged to intensify its aesthetic self-image to maintain its distance from those below. According to Elias, the courtesy literature of the early modern period displayed an endless ratcheting up of civility—a process by which society as a whole became more self-conscious and self-regulating in the area of everyday manners, while the elites constantly raised the bar of civilized behavior so that they alone met the highest standards of taste, judgment, and refinement.⁷⁴

Elias held an additional attraction for Bourdieu. The German-born thinker portrayed the French elite as having the most exclusive mentality within the Western civilizing process. Elias insisted that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the standard of French civility was set at the royal court. Since the etiquette of the French court was designed to acknowledge all the subtle degrees of nobility and to accentuate the superiority of the nobility as a whole vis-à-vis other classes, the model of French manners, according to Elias, was particularly hierarchical. The non-noble classes did not resist the courtly model but instead aspired to be included in the courtly elite. Although this effort to assimilate to the court was often in vain, the French middle and lower classes developed no “counterconcepts” to the courtly model. According to Elias, Germany was different because independent intellectuals and members of the bourgeoisie proclaimed the development of inner “culture” to be more valuable than the external and exclusive traits of “civilization” cherished in France.⁷⁵ As I have argued before, it is difficult not to see the imprint of early twentieth-century German nationalism

⁷⁰ S.N. Eisenstadt, “The Civilizational Dimension in Sociological Analysis,” *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 62, no. 1 (August, 2000), pp. 1–21.

⁷¹ Etienne Ollion, “Death Is Not The End: The Rise and Rise of Pierre Bourdieu in U.S. Sociology,” Oxford University Press Blog, <http://blog.oup.com/2015/07/pierre-bourdieu-us-sociology/>. Last visited March 7, 2016.

⁷² Bowen Paille, Bart van Heerikhuizen, Mustafa Emirbayer, “Elias and Bourdieu,” *Journal of Classical Sociology*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2012), pp. 69–83. Peter Burke, “Norbert Elias and the Social History of Knowledge,” *Human Figurations*, vol. 1, issue 1 (Jan. 2012), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0001.102>. Last visited March 7, 2016.

⁷³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998; first pub. 1994 as *Raisons pratiques*), p. 42. See also Pierre Bourdieu, Loïc J.D. Wacquant, and Sama Farage, “Rethinking the State: Genesis and Structure of the Bureaucratic Field,” *Sociological Theory*, vol. 12, no. 1 (Mar. 1994), p. 5.

⁷⁴ These are the principal theses of Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, vol 1: *The History of Manners*.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 21–39.

on the young Elias's comparison of a superficial France to a more reflective Germany.⁷⁶

Elias's tendency to exaggerate the legacy of courtly manners in France served the interests of Bourdieu and others who abandoned economic Marxism but wished to construct a new cultural nemesis of the same magnitude as Marx's bourgeois economy. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu, wrote:

With the aid of Norbert Elias's analyses, I do indeed emphasize the particularity of the French tradition, namely, the persistence, through different epochs and political regimes, of the aristocratic model of "court society."⁷⁷

As Norbert Elias very clearly shows, bourgeois intellectuals were much earlier and much more completely integrated into the world of the court in France than in Germany. The conventions of style and forms of civility ... derived in the case of France, from court society, whereas in Germany the intelligentsia, especially in the universities, set itself up in opposition to the court and the French models it was importing, summing up its vision of "high society" in the antithesis between "Civilization" characterized by frivolity and superficiality, and "Culture," defined by seriousness, profundity and authenticity.⁷⁸

What Elias asserted and Bourdieu endorsed is a remarkable homogenization of French history. They claimed that the entire French Enlightenment evolved within the absolutist courtly tradition. They did not register the existence of debate and conflict over fundamental moral and political issues in the Enlightenment. This amounts to denying that there was an Enlightenment at all.

Elias created this unified picture of French courtliness by simply omitting discussion of the wide range of French Enlightenment thinkers who did not fit his model. Even his ingenious treatment of French etiquette books—a genre that historians had not paid much attention to before Elias highlighted its importance—omits debate over what constituted good manners, because Elias only focused on the courtly style of etiquette. There were other styles. Subsequent to Elias's work (again, it was first published in the 1930s), scholars have confirmed the growth of what Jürgen Habermas described in broad terms as the formation of an alternative "public sphere" in the European monarchies during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This space of sociability and criticism emerged in

salons, cafes, coffeehouses, and Masonic lodges—in other words, apart from, and in opposition to, the royal court.⁷⁹ An inclusive code of "politesse" and the "art of conversation" gained preference in the Enlightenment over the rituals of courtly behavior. Elias claimed that in the French courtesy literature, one could detect the spirit of superiority that would lead colonialists to use "civilization" to justify their aggression against native peoples. But since there was a kind of politeness that Elias did not register, the relationship of aristocratic ideas of politeness to colonial ideas of "civilization" is more complex. In fact, one can posit a liberal tradition bridging French politeness and French colonialism by means of an empathetic tradition of thinking.

According to the chevalier de Méré (1610–1685), a very influential author on courtesy who articulated the ideal of an "art of conversation" for persons not living in the royal court, an accomplished speaker must first be an attentive listener. One "must put oneself in the place of those whom one wishes to give pleasure to." The goal of conversation is not to confirm a hierarchy of ranks but to include people of diverse backgrounds and to generate an exuberant atmosphere that all can enjoy. This means reciprocity, talking in turns. It means being able to discern sentiments that are not one's own. Méré spoke repeatedly of *conformité* and *sympathie*. Civility means empathic communication, the capacity to dwell within and enjoy an inter-subjective space.

It is necessary to observe what goes on in the heart and mind of the persons with whom one is communicating and to be accustomed from the start to recognizing the sentiments and ideas of others by their nearly imperceptible signs.⁸⁰

A series of widely read French authors on politeness amplified Méré's inclusive ideas. The most prolific was Jean-Baptiste Morvan de Bellegarde (1648–1734), author of about twenty books on the art of civil behavior, with titles such as *Reflections on What is Pleasing and*

⁷⁶ Gordon, "The Canonization," pp. 77–84.

⁷⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. xi.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 73–74.

⁷⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991); Reinhard Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998); Daniel Gordon, *Citizens Without Sovereignty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Peter France, *Politeness and its Discontents* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Starobinski, "The Word Civilization."

⁸⁰ Antoine Gombaud, Chevalier de Méré, "De la conversation," *Oeuvres completes du Chevalier de Méré* (Paris, 1930), vol. 2: pp. 106–107; "De la delicatete dans les choses," in *Ibid.*, 3:p. 132. For fuller discussion of Méré's ideas on civility and conversation, see Gordon, *Citizens Without Sovereignty*, pp. 101–104. However, the idea of a linkage between the idea of empathy espoused in the art of conversation, on the one hand, and the effort of colonial administrators to attain empathetic understanding of native civilizations, on the other, is specific to this article.

Displeasing in the Commerce of the World. The general spirit of his work is signaled in the preface to the English translation of one of his books: “This author not only takes all occasions but sometimes goes out of his way to speak of the natural freedom and equality of mankind.”⁸¹ Bellegarde rejected the courtly preoccupation with ceremony and rank, which Elias saw as the source of all French ideas of civilization. Bellegarde condemned those who brag about their social background and those whose speech is a torrent of “formalities,” for “when freedom is banished from conversation, it is not longer anything but an embarrassment and little war.” “We must suffer with good grace those who contradict us. It would be an unbearable tyranny to try to fix the thought of others under one’s own opinion.”⁸² Another popular Old Regime author on courtesy, François de Callières (1645–1717), purported to explain the “science” of getting along with others in polite society. He rejected the “strange jargon” of courtly etiquette and articulated the ideal of a “polite, obliging, and gracious person.” The primary habit that impedes true civility is the failure of people “to journey outside of themselves.” The person who wishes to create pleasure in polite conversation “must shed his own disposition in order to be accommodating to that of others.” And he repeated, “One must, so to speak, go outside of oneself in order to put oneself in the place of the person one wishes to please.”⁸³

Elias did not register these inclusive and self-critical conceptions of civility in the Old Regime, in part because he wished to sustain a stark contrast between French “civilization” and German “culture.” But it is also evident that he streamlined the French concept of “civilization” in order to link it directly with colonial arrogance. “The concept of civilization has the function of giving expression to the continuously expansionist tendency of colonizing groups.”⁸⁴ The convergence of Elias’s analysis with post-colonial theory is striking, and helps to explain the tendency of scholars today to regard “civilization” as nothing more than an icon of a Western imperialism presumed to be devoid of any understanding of native cultures. Yet, having observed the self-critical edge of “civilization” in French thought, we should expect some surprises when we look closely at colonial discourse.

⁸¹ *The letters of Monsieur l’Abbé de Bellegarde* (London, 1705), translator’s introduction. The work translated was not Bellegarde’s private correspondence but his book, *Lettres curieuses de littérature et de morale*.

⁸² Jean-Baptiste Morvan de Bellegarde, *Réflexions sur ce qui peut plaire ou déplaire dans le commerce du monde* (Paris, 1690), 183, 208–209, 211.

⁸³ François de Callières, *De la science du monde et des connaissances utiles à la conduite de la vie* (Paris, 1717), pp. 4–5, 21.

⁸⁴ Elias, *History of Manners*, p. 5.

“A Welling-Up of Antinomies”: the French Colonial Enlightenment

The word “civilization” became so common in the nineteenth century that it is not possible to affiliate it with one political ideology. One can still generalize that the term continued to be employed to frame critical reflection on the nature of progress. “Civilization” served as a prophetic warning. For Tocqueville, the term highlighted the paradox that the growth of equality could give rise to “despotism.”

Chains and executioners, these are the crude instruments the tyranny used to employ, but in our time, civilization has perfected everything, including despotism, which appeared to have nothing new to learn. Princes used to materialize violence; the democratic republics of our time have rendered it as intellectual as the will that they seek to coerce.⁸⁵

John Stuart Mill, influenced by his reading of Tocqueville, also used “civilization” to denote the antinomies of progress. In his article “Civilization,” published in 1836, a year after the first volume of Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, Mill noted that “the question has been seriously propounded, whether civilization is on the whole a good or an evil.” For European liberals, the term retained an ironical sense. According to Mill “civilization” is “the cause of much good . . . but we think there is other good, much even of the highest good, which civilization in this sense does not provide for, and some which it has a tendency (though that tendency may be, counteracted) to impede.”⁸⁶

When this self-reflective term entered into colonial settings, it did not paper over moral questions; it highlighted them. This is not to say that the term “civilization” is innocent of all associations of racism, or that the term was always used in a self-critical spirit. The preeminent racist thinker in nineteenth century France, Gobineau, used the term “civilization” 431 times in his *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* (1853). However, for the post-colonialist who presumes a tight fit between colonial racism and the term civilization, there are a few surprises. Gobineau criticized his contemporary, François Guizot, a liberal politician and author of *The History of Civilization in Europe*, for “restricting civilization too much,” i.e., restricting it to the most commercially advanced countries, that is, to Europe. “I do not feel that I am bound to respect only Europe,” stated Gobineau. “We must shake off

⁸⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1992; first pub. 1835), p. 76.

⁸⁶ J.S. Mill, “Civilization,” first pub. April, 1836 in *The London and Westminster Review*; online at <https://www.laits.utexas.edu/poltheory/jsmill/disc-disc/civilization/civilization.html>. Last visited March 7, 2016.

our prejudices.” Guizot’s principal failing, in the eyes of Gobineau, was to recognize no civilization in Asia. A second complication is simply that Gobineau was against colonialism. He did not think that the “advanced” races could do anything to civilize the “inferior” ones; he saw only a risk of contamination in Europe’s movement into other continents.⁸⁷ Gobineau’s thought suggests that biological racism and the idea of spreading civilization are not always natural partners.

The post-colonial critique of “civilization” finds its strongest confirmation in the period from about 1870–1900. Following France’s loss in the Franco-Prussian War, “civilization” took on its most nationalist form. This is the period in which the politician Jules Ferry spoke to the Chamber of Deputies of the urgent need for French expansion and “the duty to civilize the inferior races.”⁸⁸ However, even in this period, the spirit of debate around the term “civilization” was in evidence. Georges Clemenceau replied to Ferry that ever since the Germans had declared the French to be an inferior race, he hesitated to accept that any “human or civilization is inferior.” And he stated that “the problem of civilization” consists in trying to eliminate violence as much as possible in both domestic and international affairs.⁸⁹ Our focus, however, will be the decades after 1900. A sketch of three principal colonial administrators in West Africa will illustrate the complex interaction between the concept of “civilization” and colonial ideology.

Maurice Delafosse was a Commissioner of Indigenous Affairs in the Ivory Coast, 1894–1897, and afterward Consul of France in Liberia. From 1909 to 1915 he moved to Paris and taught at the Colonial School, founded in 1889, for the training of administrators of the French empire. He also taught at the School of Oriental Languages. In 1915, he was given charge of Civil and Governmental Affairs for all of French West Africa. Delafosse remained in Dakar until 1918, after which he returned to France and resumed teaching. Post-colonial theorists have mostly ignored Delafosse. But specialists of the history of anthropology have expressed admiration for him. Here is a segment of James Clifford’s profile of Delafosse in *The Predicament of Culture*:

A scholar of great erudition, he made contributions to African history, ethnography, geography, and linguistics. At the Ecole Coloniale . . . he taught the fundamental equality (though not the similarity) of races. Different

milieux produce different civilizations. If the Africans are technically and materially backward, this is a historical accident; their art, their moral life, their religions are nonetheless fully developed and worthy of esteem. He urged his students toward ethnography and the mastery of indigenous languages.⁹⁰

Emmanuelle Sibeud, a French specialist of the history of anthropology, goes further and credits Delafosse, along with other colonial administrators, with leading an “ethnographic revolution” that took place from about 1905 to 1925. The disciplinary innovation that Delafosse spearheaded would alter his own conception of colonialism. Sibeud states that Delafosse’s commitment to the advance of anthropological understanding was “epistemological before being political.” The change itself consisted in raising ethnography, the direct observation and recording of foreign cultures, to the level of a science. Previously, only physical anthropology, which emphasized the study of bones and racial classification, enjoyed academic prestige. Cultural anthropology was associated with philosophy, spiritualism, and amateurism. It had few respected practitioners. Marcel Mauss, who held the only professorship in cultural anthropology in France, did no field work. Delafosse and other colonial administrators played a role in replacing arm-chair cultural anthropology with in loco observation. Delafosse, as much as anyone, helped to raise the prestige of cultural anthropology compared to physical anthropology. In 1910, he co-founded the Institut d’Ethnologie.⁹¹

A suggestive fact that should make post-colonialists consider colonial administration as a site of critical thinking is this: Delafosse coined the term “Islamophobia” in a 1910 article on the place of Islam in West African cultures. He wrote, “France has no more to fear from Muslims in West Africa than from non-Muslims . . . We are therefore duty-bound to strive to maintain the status quo and remain absolutely neutral with regard to all religions.”⁹² A scholar has commented that Delafosse’s criticism of Islamophobia in France “should lead us to appreciate the pluralism that characterized the European discourse regarding Islam. Even during the colonial period, far from encountering monolithic rejections of Islam, we come across authors

⁸⁷ Arthur de Gobineau, *The Inequality of Human Races* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1967), pp. 35, 37, 81–83, 179.

⁸⁸ Jules Ferry, “Les fondements de la politique coloniale,” (28 July 1885), <http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/decouvrir-l-assemblee/histoire/grands-moments-d-eloquence/jules-ferry-1885-les-fondements-de-la-politique-coloniale-28-juillet-1885> Last visited March 7, 2016.

⁸⁹ Georges Clemenceau, “La colonization est-elle un devoir de civilization,” Chamber of Deputies 31 July 1885. <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/histoire/7ec.asp>. Last visited March 7, 2016. (It is not clear why the URL for Clemenceau’s speech is compact compared to the URL for Ferry’s.)

⁹⁰ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 61.

⁹¹ Emmanuelle Sibeud, “The Metamorphosis of Ethnology in France, 1839–1930,” in *A New History of Anthropology*, ed. Henrika Kucklick (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 96–110; for the discussion of the impact of Delafosse and colonial administrators on cultural anthropology, pp. 101–106.

⁹² Maurice Delafosse, “L’état actuel de l’Islam dans l’Afrique occidentale française », *Revue du monde musulman*, vol. 11, no. 5, 1910, p. 53. See also Fernando Bravo López, “Towards a Definition of Islamophobia: Approximations of the Early Twentieth Century,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 34, issue 4 (2011), p. 567.

positioning themselves against blatantly Islamophobic viewpoints, and identifying and discussing them.”⁹³

The primary influence of Delafosse stemmed from his insistence on the removal of prejudice in the study of African civilization. His capacity to be explicit about what constituted prejudice in anthropology and history made him a respected figure among egalitarian reformers (post-colonialists aside) well into the twentieth century. In 1968, an American press reprinted an English translation of some of Delafosse’s writings on Africa as part of its series on “Negro Culture and History.” The presence in this series of Alain Locke and other distinguished African American intellectuals indicates that the aim of the press was to support the civil rights movement by raising appreciation for African and African American cultures. The reader of this text learns from Delafosse from the start, in an introduction called “How Little We Know of the Negroes,” that all the condescending preconceptions of Africans—ranging from the view that they are little different from apes to the view that they are human but that their civilizations lag behind those of Europe on a linear scale—are false.⁹⁴

Influenced by Delafosse, the colonial administrator Georges Hardy also became an accomplished linguist and author of books on African history and art. He became inspector of schools in French West Africa, and in 1926 he assumed the directorship of the Colonial School in Paris. Hardy brought the mindset of a culturally relativist ethnographer squarely into the discussion of specific colonial policy issues. His work has received very little attention, but he clearly played a major role between the two world wars in dramatizing what he called “Our Great Colonial Problems.” In the 1929 book bearing this title, he addressed himself to “the general public” and said there was a need for everyone in France to comprehend the dilemmas of colonial governance.⁹⁵

Post-colonial theorists have gone far beyond criticism of the specific abuses of colonialism and have claimed that colonialism per se is indicative of a racist, inflexible, and irredeemable Western framework of cognition. Delafosse, clearly permits us to view colonialism in opposite terms, as one of the places in which Western thought became more inclusive. Hardy’s book may well be the finest example of colonial intellectual flexibility between the two world wars. Throughout the book he frames “problems” that invite contradictory solutions, each of which will tend to be disastrous if not complemented in some ways by its opposite. There is no truth in colonial administration but

only a “a welling up of antinomies.”⁹⁶ One must try to ameliorate the life of indigenous peoples without uprooting it; stimulate new enterprises without diminishing traditional economies; provide opportunities for acquiring French without devaluing native languages. The word “problem” is everywhere. An early chapter addresses “Indigenous Societies and the Colonial Problem.” The question is how to administer colonies once one recognizes that “a society is never without civilization.”⁹⁷ Hardy rejects the view that Africans have no history,⁹⁸ and that “indigenous societies offer nothing that merits the word civilization.”⁹⁹ He also rejects the position that civilizations form a linear sequence. He affirms instead that they are largely “incommensurable” with each other.¹⁰⁰ Hence, the goal of French colonialism cannot be to ignore African culture and transform Africans into Europeans.¹⁰¹

Another section entitled “The Debate about Principles” focuses at length on the dilemmas of educational policy. Should the French fund Islamic schools? Should the language of instruction be in French? The inquiry again leads to a statement of the impossibility of finding fixed solutions:

Nowhere in the French or foreign colonies is it possible to resolve these problem in a clear-cut fashion . . . The colonial world is singularly mobile, and the factual basis of problems changes at every moment. The misery and the grander of colonial education is in the recognition of this perpetual quest for solutions that are elusive.”¹⁰²

In the final analysis, Hardy is of course a colonialist. He had to provide a reason for the French empire, and a modus operandi for the colonial administrator. He suggests that the French presence is justified because the native is poor, underfed, and insecure. Indigenous colonialism in West Africa was widespread and vicious before the arrival of the French (a claim he attempted to support in detail in his historical writings). He suggested that granting independence to the colonies would only lead to the resurgence of “ferocious tyrannies”¹⁰³ far worse than the European intervention. There is a need for political security and agricultural improvement. The French can bring pasteurization and hygiene. They can help to improve the condition of women. While African civilizations have their own ethics, there are certain practices, such as trial by ordeal and slavery, which must be limited. Hardy clearly believes in certain universal principles that ought to frame all civilizations, even as civilizations diversify in many ways (an idea that Collingwood will develop, as we will see). But any policy imposed must be

⁹³ Fernando Bravo López, “Towards a Definition of Islamophobia: Approximations of the Early Twentieth Century,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 34, issue 4 (2011), p. 567.

⁹⁴ Maurice Delafosse, *Negroes of Africa* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press Series in Negro Culture and History, 1968), xxv–xxxiii. This volume combines Delafosse’s *Les noirs de l’Afrique* (1921) and *Civilisations Négro-Africaines* (1925).

⁹⁵ Georges Hardy, *Nos grands problèmes coloniaux* (Paris: Armand Colin 1929), p. 2

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 45–46.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 96.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

tempered by “the care to maintain the original framework”¹⁰⁴ of native civilization. Hence, the importance of “conciliation” and “moderation,”¹⁰⁵ which are key words in his conception of colonial governance. The administrator must seek to “progressively diminish the number and importance of mutual misunderstandings”¹⁰⁶ and be prepared to “diversify solutions.”¹⁰⁷ Since the differences in civilization between Europe and Africa “are not all necessarily to our advantage,”¹⁰⁸ the European too must be prepared to change. The learning of languages and pursuit of cultural contact is essential to the end goal, which is the cultivation of “symbiosis” and “solidarity.”¹⁰⁹

In a surprising discussion near the end of his book, Hardy states that abstract theory cannot serve as a guide to the administrator. The colonial administration would benefit from a new kind of “literature” which should put aside the usual “pictureseque descriptions” and communicate what it is like “to live intimately in a colonial population.” He recommends the composition of “novels” that will aid Europeans in attaining a better “psychological” understanding of indigenous peoples.¹¹⁰ The colonial administrator Robert Delavignette, who served as a clerk in the Niger and as Commissioner of the Cameroons, and who succeeded Hardy as Director of the Colonial School, took this suggestion literally. In his 1926 novel *Thoum*, published under a pseudonym because it portrayed colonialism unfavorably, Delavignette provided European readers with a sense of how natives in West Africa perceived French bureaucracy. “White men are the paper people,” explains one native to another. “He uses and makes paper for everything. Papers for us, our fields, our herds, our wells, our villages, our tales; papers for births and deaths; papers for the rain; papers for the grasshoppers.”¹¹¹

Delavignette believed that every colonial civil servant should be trained as a researcher and in ethics, so as to develop a feeling of empathy towards Africa.¹¹² According to William B. Cohen, Delavignette represented to young African intellectuals the best in the French tradition.

Africans were drawn to him and found him a sympathetic listener. He knew and admired African peasant society but also had an appreciation for the young, black intellectuals in Paris trying to

assert the genius of their culture, to express what came to be known as *négritude*. Delavignette helped the literary careers of a number of young blacks by reviewing or even writing prefaces for their works, making them known to the general public.¹¹³

Léopold Senghor, a theorist of “negritude” and the first president of Senegal, wrote, “What makes Robert Delavignette a pioneer . . . is that in the colonial era itself he overcame the dichotomy of white-black, Europe-Africa, in order to create a symbiosis.”¹¹⁴

In a 1931 paper on “The Knowledge of Indigenous Mentalities in French West Africa,” Delavignette stated:

For a long time, native customs were considered oddities which did not interest serious-minded people . . . But this is changing. Present research is starting to influence public opinion. We can no longer maintain these hierarchic divisions between the civilization of colonial peoples and ourselves.¹¹⁵

He credited colonial administrators, who had first-hand knowledge of native civilizations with teaching the general public in France that Africans were not “primitive.”¹¹⁶ Delavignette tried to span two cultures and to represent in his own person the possibility of being both African and European. The ideal of being a participant in both African and French civilizations was the theme of his contribution to the official publications of the Colonial Exposition of 1931.¹¹⁷ The same year he won the prize for best colonial novel for his *Paysans Noirs*. In contrast to colonial novels that expressed confidence in the superiority of Europeans, Delavignette portrayed a young white administrator filled with anxiety and who learns to respect the traditions of the African elders.¹¹⁸

Delavignette envisioned the French empire as a loose federation, a kind of union that “is the opposite of domination.” The union would put Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and animists in contact. It will create “a new and total human solidarity.”¹¹⁹ Colonial administrators were agents of the

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 52.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 51.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 196.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 146.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 196.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 209.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 200.

¹¹¹ Robert Delavignette, *Toum*, cited from *Robert Delavignette and the French Empire: Selected Writings*, ed. William B. Cohen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 33.

¹¹² Robert Delavignette, “L’Ecole Coloniale” (1937), in *Ibid*, pp. 40–41.

¹¹³ Ibid, editor’s Introduction, p. 2.

¹¹⁴ Cited in editor’s Introduction, p. 2.

¹¹⁵ Robert Delavignette, “Connaissance des mentalités indigènes en AOF,” in *Ibid*, 69.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Robert Delavignette, *afrique* (Paris: Editions Géographiques, Maritimes, et Coloniales, 1931).

¹¹⁸ See the very positive appreciation of Delavignette’s *Paysans noirs* in János Riesz, *De la littérature coloniale à la littérature africaine* (Paris: Editions Karthala, 2007), pp. 269–286. Riesz argues that Delavignette successfully blurred the boundary between European and African literature and provided a model that African writers could and did follow.

¹¹⁹ Robert Delavignette, “L’Union française—à l’échelle du monde, à la mesure de l’homme,” (1945), in *Ibid*, p. 88.

French government in the African world, and agents of the African world in France. “We symbolized a power that was very ambivalent and thus not without ambiguities,” he wrote in 1962, when it was evident that the French empire was disappearing.¹²⁰ Looking back on his service, he saw that his brand of liberal colonialism played a role in undermining French colonialism. “Ironically, the very progress that colonization had introduced in Africa was ultimately to turn against Europe.” Colonization promoted anthropological understanding, which characterized humankind “by a plurality of civilizations.” Promoted by colonial authorities, ethnography “disqualified the simplistic distinction between superior and inferior civilizations as well as the neat division of our planet into civilizing peoples and peoples to be civilized.” This new framework undermined the self-assurance that had originally inspired European expansion. The proclamation of a “plurality of civilizations,” Delavignette stated, began to sound the death knell of colonialism.¹²¹

The Future of Debate about Civilization

In a recent book about twentieth-century films portraying colonialism, Jon Cowans states that “few have spoken with any precision about how and when colonialism became discredited in the West.”¹²² Cowans writes that “the study of attitudes—particularly Western attitudes—about colonialism remains in its infancy despite a half century of scholarship on colonialism and decolonization.” Said and other post-colonial thinkers who have repudiated everything having to do with colonialism have made it extremely difficult to articulate an agenda of issues for debate. Yet, it is only debate that can advance the level of analysis.

I have suggested that the colonial administrator-cum-scholar justified colonialism at a high intellectual level, while providing the terms for a critique of colonialism. The complexity of colonial theory was much greater than is generally acknowledged in post-colonial textbooks.¹²³ Exactly how much theoretical integrity colonial theory has is one major question for further debate. It has not been my goal to defend the practices of colonialism but rather to demonstrate that some colonial administrators grappled seriously with the concept of “civilization,” a term that had an illustrious history

¹²⁰ Robert Delavignette, *L'Afrique noire française et son destin* (1962), in *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹²¹ Robert Delavignette, *Ibid.*, pp. 99–100. (Cohen arranged selections from Delavignette writings thematically, so that different extracts from a given work appear in different parts of the volume.)

¹²² Jon Cowans, *Empire Films and the Crisis of Colonialism, 1946–1959* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2015), p. 1.

¹²³ *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, is a series of post-colonial readings by diverse authors; there are no extracts from “colonial discourse” permitting the reader to study colonial thought on its own terms.

dating back to the Enlightenment, a term that promoted critical self-consciousness and tended to moderate rather than inflame colonial excess.

The fullest articulation of the kind of liberal colonialism that French administrators like Delavignette espoused is actually found in the writing of the British Idealist philosopher, R.G. Collingwood, particularly his book *The New Leviathan: Or Man, Society, Civilization and Barbarism* (1942). Collingwood found one of the finest metaphors to express the legitimacy of multiple civilizations:

Whether civility is one ideal or many ideals I will not yet ask; but even if it is one ideal there may be many approximations to that ideal, differing among themselves as shots on a target may differ not only as being at different distances from the centre but as being distant from it in different directions.

Each shot is called a “civilization.” Different communities, each of which has undergone the process of civilization in a certain way and to a certain degree, exhibit different conditions as the results that this process has severally achieved in them.¹²⁴

At the same time, Collingwood stated that not every group is a “civilization.” The process of “civilization” unfolds only when a community first becomes a “society” premised on values of self-respect and respect for others: ethical principles that Collingwood derives from his extensive inquiry into human nature. Collingwood was an admirer of Hobbes. Freedom is the natural right of humankind; its existence in this world, however, is due only to artificial arrangements. The fundamental question is not merely whether humans ought to treat each other with dignity but whether they can do so, whether they even aspire to do so, without a power that authorizes and instills humane principles over other ideologies—by force, if necessary (consider that Collingwood wrote his book during the war against Nazism). “Civilization,” which Collingwood described as the arousing of human consciousness of itself as free will, is a process, one that “can be immanent or transeunt [i.e., stimulated from outside].”¹²⁵ When he asks, “How in fact do people socialize, or civilize, non-social communities?”¹²⁶—he was acknowledging that a paternalistic imposition of civilized values is unavoidable.

Of course, this is exactly what post-colonial theory rejects. But the rejection goes too far in its revulsion for every type of intervention, its assumption that given the supposedly warped nature of all Western thought, all civilizing efforts are nothing but the will to power. Are we to abandon all options of U.N.,

¹²⁴ R.G. Collingwood, *The New Leviathan, or Man, Society, Civilization, and Barbarism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1944; first pub. 1942), p. 285.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 283.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 309.

American, or European intercession around the world for humanitarian purposes? Are we to let genocide unfold because it is an indigenous practice that our “civilization” should not judge? Are we to abandon the enforcement of criminal law in our own society? Are we to reject the molding of children through education, and when necessary compulsion, into a mindset such that they come to recognize their own autonomy and the right of others to autonomy? Was the imposition of the Reconstruction Amendments to the Constitution illegitimate because the Southern states did not agree to them, and if this imposition is legitimate, what makes it distinct from colonialism? Collingwood views colonialism as one of a series of educational and legal practices without which it is impossible to envision the forging of a humane world. And his work suggests that if one rejects not just the abuse of colonialism but colonialism in every form, one risks losing a grip on the very meaning of freedom.

Collingwood did not believe he had the last word. He conceived of philosophy in a civilized society to be an ongoing process of question and answer.¹²⁷ Radical post-

colonial theory, which purports to have reached a stage beyond (as “post” implies) colonialism, simply does not sustain a conversation with the past. Those who believe that belonging to a civilization means learning from past thinkers and leaders and not just judging them with knowing superiority must reject post-colonialism because it denies that the value of all previous conversations and traditions. I cannot claim to offer a full-blown philosophy of civilization. I do hope that I have supplied the outlines of a kind of intellectual history that is an alternative to works as such as Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*: an intellectual history that focuses on Western civilization as a locus of high-level and exemplary debate about the meaning of itself.

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¹²⁷ Ibid, p. 326, p. 336. See also R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978; first pub. 1939), Chap. 5, “Question and Answer,” pp. 29–43.