

Civilization, Barbarism, Savagery

Civilization, barbarism, and savagery are three powerful notions. At least since the eighteenth century, they have played an important role in the human sciences, even as the vocabulary for these notions has shifted over time. During this same span of time, these notions have also played a central role in numerous ideologies of empire, exploitation, and genocide. Ultimately scholars of world history and other social theorists must ask whether intellectual uses of *civilization*, *barbarism*, and *savagery* can ever be free of these sociopolitical uses and consequences. Or is it the case, as the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (b. 1908) has suggested, that to affirm the distinction between civilization, on the one hand, and barbarism and savagery, on the other, is to take a fateful step into “barbarism” and “savagery,” in the sense of behaving toward Others in the fashion imagined to be characteristic of barbarians and savages?

Before Anthropology

The term *civilization*, as the embracive term for humanity’s cumulative achievements through time, did not appear before the second half of the eighteenth century, when it emerged in both French and Scottish intellectual traditions in the context of rising confidence in the progressive character of human history. Yet, for centuries before that, words derived from the Latin *civilitas* were used, often in association with *barbarism* and/or *savagery* (and their grammatical variants), to differentiate a speaker’s own properly organized society from the inferior life-ways of Others. As this formulation indicates, in these primary, or uncontested, uses of these terms, one finds a consistent conflation of the distinction between Self and Other with the distinction between superior and inferior peoples.

Though the terms *barbarism* and *savagery* circulated

The barbarian is first and foremost the man who believes in barbarism. . . • CLAUDE LEVI-STRAUSS (b. 1908)

as contrasts for *being civilized*, the two terms of inferiority had roots in distinct axes of comparison. *Barbarian* entered Greek as a term for peoples who, it was held, lacked intelligible speech. *Savagery*, on the other hand, emerged from the Latin *sylva* and referred specifically to those who lived in the woods, with human life in this habitat being taken as the antithesis of the “civil” society of cities. Yet, whether they are true or false, etymologies matter only when they are “remembered,” and in the centuries before Victorian anthropology codified a distinction between them, *savagery* and *barbarism* were often used interchangeably, without their different “roots” being called upon. Nonetheless, it seems fair to say that the etymological and narrower meanings of *barbarian* and *savage* shaped the overall pattern of their referential use prior to the mid-nineteenth century and thereby conditioned the distinction formalized in Victorian social anthropology (*savagery* as the earliest stage of human development, followed by *barbarism*). During the centuries of “exploration” before the late nineteenth century, peoples inhabiting dense forests and jungles were far more likely to be encountered overseas than on the Eurasian margins of Christendom. Consistent with this, the term *savage* came to be linked more tightly than the term *barbarian* to the peoples of the lands of “exploration” and “discovery,” notably Africa and North America. In this way it seems, *savages* became the more extreme contrast with *civilized* society. Finally, we should note—given that so few white people in the United States are aware of the fact—that at many moments during the history of the Americas, the term *savage* has had an expressive force and significance comparable to that of *nigger*.

We should also record, however, that nearly from the outset of early modern “discovery” and “exploration,” there were potent protests against the use of *barbarians* and *savages* as terms for Others. In 1550, for instance, Father Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474–1566) attacked the jurist Juan Ginés de Sepulveda’s claim that Indians were “barbarians,” although, significantly, Las Casas’s famous *Defense* was based on a systematic myopia in regard to many of the ways in which Aztec society was

Images such as this one of indigenous peoples encountered by European explorers had an enormous impact on the population back home. This drawing is titled *Figure of a Tattooed Native of the Marquesas* and is from the journal of Captain David Porter of the *Essex*, 1812–1814.

unlike that of “civilized” Christians. Moreover, consistent with his largely assimilationist vision, Las Casas conceded that Indians were “barbarians” on the basis of religion, because of their lack of Christianity. Some three decades later, however, the French essayist Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) offered a more radical critique of the conceptual distinction between *civilized* and *noncivilized*. In his essay, “On Cannibals” (1580), he wrote: “I find that there is nothing barbarous and savage in this nation, by anything that I can gather, excepting, that every one gives the title of barbarism to everything that is not in use in his own country.” Montaigne’s essay shows us that the struggle against Eurocentric ethnocentrism is not an invention of our time but is instead longstanding—preceding even the formation of what we today know as “Europe.”



Victorian Anthropology

It is during the final decades of the nineteenth century, in the classic works of Victorian social evolutionary anthropology (e.g., Morgan, 1877), that we find the most thorough attempts to render *civilization*, *barbarism*, and *savagery* as stabilized terms of a formal and objective scientific discourse. This instance of scientizing both pre-saged and overlapped the production of “scientific racism.” In Victorian anthropology, *savagery* and *barbarism* were differentiated as sequential stages of social evolution. This schema reflected a much broader and quite sharp increase in the use of time as an idiom for conceptualizing human social variation, which arose in the wake of the “revolution in human time,” itself located

at the end of the 1850s and the beginning of the 1860s. In the new understanding of time, the beginning of human existence was located vastly deeper in the past than in the biblical chronology of some six thousand years. Concomitantly, recorded time suddenly appeared to be no more than a minuscule segment of the entirety of human existence. In this new intellectual context, Victorian anthropology identified living “savages” and “barbarians” with the newly recognized expanse of prehistory—peoples lacking writing with the time before writing—in support of elaborate models of generalized stages of human social evolution that, scholars held, preceded the advent of civilization.

Within anthropology, this pairing of living Others and prehistory, along with the knowledge produced in

A Ship's Captain on the Ainu of Japan

In A Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific Ocean, William R. Broughton, captain of the HMS Providence, presented his impression of the Ainu in the late eighteenth century:

This people appear to have intelligence. Their beards are long, black, and strong. They have brown skin and their heads are shaved with the exception of a tusk of hair the size of two fingers, which rests at the front of the head. They put their hands together below their heads as a greeting. They are dressed in bear skins and armed with bow and arrow. . . . The people seem to have no religion. They eat like barbarians, without any sort of ceremony. . . . They seem to have no government, no writing or books, and no one seems able to read or write.

Source: Broughton, W. R. (1804). *A Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific Ocean* 1804, 89ff.

this way, came under scrutiny from Franz Boas (1858–1942) and his students. Social change, the Boasians argued, did not proceed along a singular or universal path, as Victorian social evolutionary theory required. Moreover, other societies in the contemporary world were not the equivalents of earlier stages of European societies but were instead the present-day outcomes of quite different trajectories through time, reflecting other cultural values. The diversity of human societies in the world could not be mapped on to a singular path of human social evolution, but instead, exhibited a “great arc” of human possibilities (Benedict 1934, 24).

Language provided a crucial test of these issues for the Boasians. Starting from painstaking analyses of myriad non-European languages, the Boasians concluded that the existing languages of the world were equally “evolved,” as judged by their capacities for effective communication and conceptual abstraction. Linguistic differences were real—and took forms far more fantastic than could have been imagined without ethnographic research—but different languages could not, with any validity or objectivity, be sequenced. In sum: the view that

Others lack intelligible speech, or are otherwise barbarians, is an ethnocentric illusion—exactly as Montaigne had argued 350 years earlier.

The Boasian critiques turned cultural-social anthropology sharply against social evolutionary models. In addition, through undergraduate teaching and the public circulation of some of their work, the Boasians fostered a nontrivial degree of self-consciousness among a wider public about the ethnocentrism present when others are deemed *savages* or *barbarians*. Yet, it is also important to recognize the incompleteness of the Boasian displacement of social evolutionary thought. One important index of this incompleteness is the vocabulary that they endorsed (by example, at least) as a substitute for *savages* and *barbarians*—notably the term *primitives*. *Primitives* carries a social evolutionary vision of the human career in time: it points unabashedly to a much earlier past, and it associates both simplicity and a lack of development with temporal earliness. In this way it is a sanitization, more than an exorcism, of the Victorian anthropological meanings of *savagery* and *barbarism*. Moreover, what we too often overlook in evaluating this sort of shift in labeling is that if we use a new term to refer to the same set of elements as a previous term or terms—as when people use *primitives* to refer to peoples previously known as *savages* and/or *barbarians*—we leave intact the underlying classificatory distinction, in this case the distinction between *civilized* and *precivilized*. In other words, when we reproduce patterns of reference, we also reproduce categories of language and thought.

Disciplinary History

Although social evolutionary thought was to a significant degree displaced within anthropology by the Boasian critiques, it is also the case that such thought was transposed into other sites, within and outside of the academy. Disciplinary history is a key example. Although the new chronology of the 1860s made historical time but a brief portion of human time and thereby established a novel meaning of *history*, historians of the late nineteenth century steadfastly disregarded the new understanding of human time. In this way, history as a scholarly activity avoided affiliating itself

Allen's Law of Civilization: It is better for civilization to be going down the drain than to be coming up it. • PAUL DICKSON (B. 1939)

too closely, or at least too quickly, with the rejection of biblical authority represented by both anthropological models of *civilization*, *barbarism*, and *savagery*, on the one hand, and Darwinian theories of speciation, on the other. This situation changed during the first decades of the twentieth century with the work of James Harvey Robinson (1863–1936), the primary exponent of the “new history.” The long chronology was a central and abiding concern in Robinson’s work. For Robinson, it provided a vantage and scale that dwarfed the details of history on a smaller scale and thereby made visible the overall trajectory of the human career: it was the “building of civilization.”

That Robinson’s embrace of the long chronology brought social evolutionary thought into his “new history” is particularly evident in his entry “Civilization” in the 1929 edition of *The Encyclopedia Britannica*. There Robinson bypassed the work of Franz Boas, who had been his colleague throughout Robinson’s twenty-three-year career at Columbia University, and endorsed the “ingenious analogies” drawn by “anthropologists” between “Tasmanians, Australians, Eskimos, etc.” and “the Neanderthal race.”

Consistent with this, Robinson was a central figure in the complex process that resulted in civilization, rather than the nation-state, becoming the most prominent unit of historical analysis in undergraduate teaching in the United States during much of the twentieth century. During the 1920s and early 1930s, it was primarily Robinson’s students, along with a small number of other historians greatly influenced by him, who took the lead in introducing and institutionalizing what quickly became the standard survey of Western civilization (known as “Western Civ”). In so doing, these curricular innovators drew heavily on both Robinson’s essays and, even more directly, his graduate-level teaching at Columbia. In particular, Western Civ echoed Robinson’s “new history” in both its reliance on the long chronology and its presentation of history as the movement of the civilizational Self away from and ahead of primitive Others.

It is important to note, however, that even as Western Civ embedded social evolutionary thought in its narrative of history, it also promoted a broadly cosmopolitan

ethos and worldview. With its focus on “the West” as a civilizational area, Western Civ encouraged its addressees (U.S. undergraduates) to identify with something above and less parochial than “the nation,” in contrast to the more narrowly patriotic form of history taught in secondary education. So too, the Western Civ narrative depicted Western civilization as drawing on sources from all over the map of Europe. It thus offered a welcoming tale to the children of immigrants who, during the 1920s and 1930s, were diversifying the student bodies on U.S. college campuses, supplementing and quickly outnumbering the children of the established Protestant elite. Finally, in the Western Civ narrative, civilization was something possessed not by virtue of birth, but rather by means of the transmission of knowledge—as in formal education and schooling. Western Civ thus offered an account of history that, allegorically, rejected the notion of ascribed status and affirmed the ideal of merit-based system of achievement. In sum, although Western Civ was always intensely Eurocentric (by virtue of identifying the West as the primary site and agent of the building of civilization), in its heyday it was also “cosmopolitan” and “progressive” in these nontrivial ways.

That social evolutionary thought had been elaborated as a theoretical position in Victorian anthropology was, ironically, an important condition of possibility for its critical examination by the Boasians. The movement of social evolutionary thought into history produced much less critical examination, both in Robinson’s day and since. In part this is because even as history departments taught Western Civ at the introductory level for many decades (as many still do), most historians worked with dramatically shorter segments of time in their research and upper-level courses. In so doing they set aside, but did not explicitly examine or critique, the social evolutionary vision of Western Civ. It would be an error, however, to overlook the extent to which the geographic coverage of history departments, and many other facets of the organization of historical knowledge, are shaped by the distinction between *civilization* and *precivilization*.

An important exception to the prevailing disciplinary practice of side-stepping this complex issue can be found

Without deviation, progress is not possible. • FRANK ZAPPA (1940–1993)

in the field of African history, as evidenced by Steven Feierman's essay, "African Histories and the Dissolution of World History" (1993). A primary target of Feierman's discussion is the very notion of *civilization*. The civilization concept, says Feierman, involves "a complex of elements" that historians and other social theorists have claimed are mutually reinforcing: "political and economic hierarchy, towns, commerce and intercommunication, writing, the plough, high densities of population and historical dynamism" (Feierman 1993, 177). However, when we broaden our research to include African histories, we find numerous cases in which these "interrelations do not hold" (Feierman 1993, 177). No basis exists, then, for continuing to treat these elements as the components and indices of a distinct stage (or even form) of human sociality. As Feierman concludes: "The elements have no explanatory significance if treated as a check list" (Feierman 1993, 178).

Moreover, if we stubbornly hold on to the civilization "complex" and insist on using it to perceive African histories, we will overlook and misrecognize quite different linkages. For example, Feierman discusses how trade in the Kongo during the seventeenth century—involving, on an annual basis, ivory from as many as four thousand elephants and as much as 36 metric tons of copper—was supported not by anything recognizable as a "state," but rather by a dispersed "healing association" or "drum of affliction" (Feierman 1993, 178). The overall point then is that the civilization concept serves us poorly when examining African histories, and this is sufficient to conclude that it lacks universal applicability and validity.

Contemporary Political Uses of Civilization

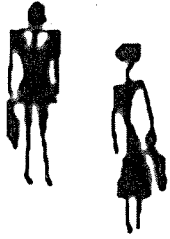
Research in both cultural-social anthropology and African histories thus contests the coherence of the *civilization/precivilization* binary. In addition, both fields have documented the recurring use of this distinction in support of projects of astonishing brutality, often in the name of "modernization" and "progress." Nonetheless, the distinction remains a potent one, and in the contemporary moment it is used with particular verve by leading

figures in the neoconservative movement which, particularly in the United States, has gained so much power since the 1960s.

The administration of President George W. Bush, for example, has repeatedly invoked images of a struggle between "civilization" and "barbarism" to conclude that the United States must wage war, rather than peace, in response to the violence of September 11, 2001 and other terrorist acts. Critics, however, argue that such rhetorical demonizing serves to preempt a recognition of the modernness of so-called Islamic fundamentalism and of the primary factors that fuel global terrorism today, notably: (1) a widespread sense of desperation in many societies in response to the global maldistribution of political agency and the consumption of resources, (2) the global trade in weapons, including weapons of mass destruction, resulting largely from the Cold War, and (3) resentment in Islamic societies toward the U.S. government's uncritical support for Israeli state policies of oppression toward Palestinians. The Bush administration's goal of vanquishing the "barbarians" in our midst does not, critics argue, engage these root causes of terrorism.

A second context in which the neoconservative movement has invoked *civilization* in recent years is in response to the movement to expand marriage to include same-sex couples. In February 2004, for example, George W. Bush endorsed an amendment to the U.S. Constitution to limit marriage to heterosexual couples, arguing that marriage so defined is "the most fundamental institution of civilization," as demonstrated by "millennia of human experience." In response, the American Anthropological Association, drawing on its Boasian heritage, passed a "Statement on Marriage and the Family," which reported that anthropological research offers no evidentiary support for Bush's claims in this regard.

The distinction between civilization and precivilization is sufficiently established in contemporary knowledge of humanity that many, and perhaps most, world historians would question the idea of doing without it. Greater care and reform may be warranted, but not, on such a view, relinquishing the very idea of civilization. Yet for others, the intellectual and social-political record of civilizational



thinking is sufficiently grim that, at the very least, the time has come for a moratorium on the use of notions of *civilization*, *barbarism*, and *savagery*—however euphemistically expressed.

Daniel Segal

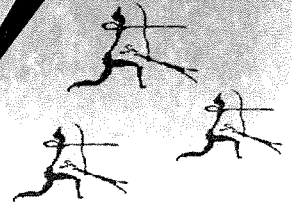
See also Anthropology; Cultural Ecology; Ethnocentrism; Race and Racism

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Berkshire Encyclopedia of

World History



VOLUME **I**

William H. McNeill

Senior Editor

Jerry H. Bentley, David Christian,
David Levinson, J. R. McNeill,
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Editors

A BERKSHIRE REFERENCE WORK

BERKSHIRE PUBLISHING GROUP

Great Barrington, Massachusetts U.S.A.
www.berkshireworldhistory.com



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Cover design: Lisa Clark, LKC Design

For information:

Berkshire Publishing Group LLC
314 Main Street
Great Barrington, Massachusetts 01230
www.berkshirepublishing.com

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Berkshire encyclopedia of world history / William H. McNeill, senior editor ; Jerry H. Bentley ...
[et al.] editorial board.

p. cm.

Summary: "A comprehensive encyclopedia of world history with 538 articles that trace the development of human history with a focus on area studies, global history, anthropology, geography, science, arts, literature, economics, women's studies, African-American studies, and cultural studies related to all regions of the world"—Provided by publisher.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-9743091-0-9 (alk. paper : v. 1)

1. World history—Encyclopedias. I. McNeill, William Hardy, 1917– II. Bentley, Jerry H., 1949–
III. Christian, David, 1946–

D23.B45 2004
903—dc22

2004021830

