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Civilization As Rhetoric

ANN HEMMING

In the autumn 1995 issue of *Comparative Civilization Review*, Roger Williams Wescott, in the article "Civilizations in Context," called for an "exploration of ideas that may serve to expand or reorient our perspectives on civilization and...the study of civilization." The following article explores the rhetoric inherent in the term, civilization. It clearly demonstrates that cultural imperialism emerged from this rhetoric and was entrenched in the textbook genre. The various usages of the term, civilization, have undermined the development of inclusive World Histories.

After decades of attempts to create an accurate representation of the world's regional histories in our world history textbooks, cultural imperialism remains entrenched in the discourse. In the opening paragraphs of a current and very popular World History textbook, *A History of World Societies*, the authors state that the "Eurocentric...West and East...have come into general use as a useful but artificial way to distinguish historical developments." This textbook opens its section on Egyptian civilization with a quotation from "the Greek historian and traveler Herodotus." Thus, the authors evoke the exoticism of a travelogue from the 5th century B.C. to introduce Egypt's glorious history beginning in the 3rd millennium B.C. No inclusive methodology of teaching history can overcome the cultural imperialism inherent in this rhetoric. Because the textbook genre is widely disseminated in the public arena, the following analysis of the term, civilization, contributes to the "reorientation of our perspectives" called for by Wescott.

The meanings of civilization are arbitrary and fluid. Peoples of the world are defined as civilized or uncivilized according to the political and economic climate of the time. The attributes of what constitute a civilized people also change. The eighteenth century produced a concept of civilized that embodied Western
European man. The opposite concept was the Noble Savage; which developed from exoticism, perpetuated as fact, in travelogues. The nineteenth century opened with a view that technology would destroy civilization. Later in the century writers struggled with whether or not the new sciences would improve civilization. As technology propelled Europe ahead in inventions, material goods, and military strength, a differentiation occurred between Western and non-Western regions. Race was used as one answer to the question of why some regions gained materially and others did not. Also, the idea that Western Civilization was in great decline was popular. Freudian psychoanalysis was added to the construct early in the twentieth century. Some ethnicities and women were defined as latently primitive. Many histories included sections on civil rights for women and minorities, a global perspective about customs throughout the world, and multi-culturism.

When only the urban European male was defined as civilized in the body of the text, it became futile to include units on the accomplishments of women or peoples of non-Western regions because they were perceived as uncivilized and inferior.

The biased use of the term, civilization, disenfranchised groups of people from the dominant culture because of its value-laden meanings. Today, it is necessary to substitute terms that are more equitable, such as society and social stratification, and to remove the value-laden imagery of the past from the classroom. For example, the two African societies of Hausaland and Yorubaland were socially stratified to the same degree as feudal European societies prior to the Industrial Revolution. Thus, an analysis and a comparison of the social stratification of the two societies facilitates a history without the value-laden dichotomy of civilized and uncivilized.

A review of the development of World Histories illustrates that the rhetoric of cultural imperialism existed in the genre and that it was linked to the politics of the period. In The Outline of History, popular for five decades, Wells found technology and modern science to be the driving force upon which civilizations were formed. Wells identified the “savage and primitive” mind with those who viewed the earth as flat. Into this category he placed the Chinese and the Babylonian astronomers. By this dis-
tion he was able to exclude from the categories of civilized peoples, those societies which had developed technologies more advanced than Europeans in ancient times. In his comments about the telescope and other inventions he equated technological discoveries with advanced civilization. In making the division of savage and civilized between pre-telescope and post-telescope, Wells excluded from the definition of civilization those non-Western societies, such as the Arabs and Mayans, which had superior knowledge in the fields of science and mathematics prior to the fifteenth century. He wrote that the development of the telescope by Galileo “released the imagination as no other implement has ever done.” He called it “extraordinary” that the Greeks did not invent the telescope. Therefore, Wells used blatantly Eurocentric rhetoric.

The image-making of who is and who is not civilized was often both subtle and insidious. The general concept of civilization was first presented as a general rubric, as the following passage from the Wells' text illustrates:

The rapidly developing science of psycho-analysis is searching through our dreams, and our inadvertent moods and our childish ideas and what remains ascertainable of savage thought, for the foundation substance of that more primitive being who is our substratum, and it is rapidly building up an interpretation of our feeling upon that search.

Wells combined the nineteenth century idea that civilization was a higher phase of an organic process with twentieth century psychoanalysis. The concept of a primitive being was first introduced as part of the self; however, the image of this substrata was soon applied to groups in his discussion. Initially, Wells presented the practice of self-mutilation as an early developmental phase of man. In the following passage, Wells first depicted the female child as the undeveloped other; second, he added the religions of Islam and Judaism to the other:

There is a phase in the life of most little girls when they are not to be left alone with a pair of scissors for fear that they still cut their hair. No animal does anything of this sort. This, too, has left its trace in the rite of circumcision, upon the religions of Judaism and
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Islam.\(^{11}\)

Many levels of meaning occurred in this passage. Combined with the original rubric, the female other was literally reduced to the state of the undeveloped primitive, lower than an animal. Also, Wells implied that she is not to be left alone; she is not responsible for her actions. As such, he defined the female as the other, the female as primitive, and thus the female as a lower form of civilization. The omission of the male child from this passage implied that only the girl is primitive. This characterization of the female was similar to nineteenth century ideas on race, where a portion of the human race was separated from the body of people defined as civilized. Wells applied Freud’s concept of the savage and primitive to both gender and religion.\(^{12}\) It is also important to note how Wells’ rhetoric excluded from the higher states of civilization two major religions. Wells' rhetoric implied that those of the Judaic and Islamic cultures were part of the substrata, “the barbaric other:” the opposite of civilization. These examples show the well-established concepts of primitive and civilized, which existed in Wells' narrations.

By the mid-1930s a new trend in textbook publication took place. Texts began to be written by a group of authors instead of one individual. The content of the textbooks became more the responsibility of the publishing house and their editors, and less the primary works of scholars in the field. History education became less a scholarly endeavor and more an exercise in civics. Therefore, mandated education perpetuated assumptions and biases of the day instead of accurate history. Two textbooks written in 1934 and 1937 by the identical group of authors reflect the change from scholarship to civics and the simultaneous change in assumptions, which were based upon the changing depictions of civilization. The texts were *Our World Today & Yesterday: A History of Modern Civilization* (1934) and, under a new title, *History of Civilization: Earlier Ages* (1937) by the team of James Harvey Robinson, James Henry Breasted, and Emma Peters Smith.\(^{13}\) The marked changes were a blatant move toward a Eurocentric view of history and civilization. The Robinson-Breasted-Smith text books, only three years apart, provide an astounding example of how an individual can think beyond his
discourse and how radically a textbook can be brought back to conformity with the discursive milieu. The rhetoric of the texts mirrored the changing conditions of the era. The British Empire was at its height. Europeans traveled to the Middle East and Africa on a large scale. Africa was divided and dominated. And, the Middle East lost its historical brilliance to its deepest decline.

In the 1934 textbook, the following definition of civilization was brief and simplistic: "The history of civilization is the story of how man invented and discovered all those things which we now have and of which at the start he was ignorant." After a discussion of early man, the authors gave the following summary:

Thus far we have followed man's advance only in Europe. Similar progress had also been made all around the Mediterranean; that is about 4000 B.C., not only in Europe but in Asia, and especially in northern Africa, mankind had reached somewhat the same stage of progress.

The authors included Africa and Asia in this passage. (In the 1937 text, this inclusion of Africa was omitted.) In a section on Aegean history, the authors provided further characteristics of civilization. The authors stated that these "are the earliest evidences of a life of higher refinement on the mainland of Europe."

The attributes of civilization were trade, the use of art and artifacts, and refinement. According to the text, the "oriental civilization" transmitted these attributes of civilization to the "West." Additionally, Egypt, Crete, and mainland Greece were included in the overall description of trading and a life of luxury. The authors wrote: "So the Aegean islands formed, as it were, a bridge over which the older civilizations of the Orient slowly passed on their way to the Western world."

In the 1934 text, the authors directly narrated the loss of these civilizations without rhetoric in the following passage: into this "civilized world on the north of the Mediterranean" came "uncivilized Northerners...a large group of tribes called the Greeks." The authors identified the origins of these Northerners as the same Indo-Europeans who settled in regions stretching from northern India to the Atlantic coast of Europe. According to the
authors, the splendid civilization was "destroyed by Greek invaders." The Greek civilization was built upon this earlier foundation, according to the 1934 textbook. The authors labeled this section "Original Barbarism of the Greeks." The authors used the term "barbarism" to refer to both Western and non-Western regions. Thus, the 1934 rhetoric was inclusive to a degree rarely seen. In contrast, in the 1937 textbooks, Indo-Europeans were divided into Eastern and Western and the fact that they were originally one people was de-emphasized. The authors narrated several millennia of history through a brief "gaze" of the Greeks in the following passage: "had the gaze of the Greek nomads been able to penetrate beyond the Aegean isles, they would have seen a vast panorama of great flourishing Oriental states." Next, the 1937 textbook repeated the 1934 narrative of the Greek entry into the Aegean but with a marked change in rhetoric. In the first text, the Greeks were portrayed as destroyers of the Aegean world and barbarians. In the second text, the Greek warriors became pastoral nomads "with their families in rough carts drawn by horses in search for greener pastures." The 1937 image of the Greeks as peaceful families replaced for the 1934 image of the Greeks as "invading armies." Furthermore, the editors substituted the title "Beginnings of Higher Culture Among the Greeks" for a section which had been titled "Original Barbarism of the Greeks."

A brief comparison of a few titles from the Table of Contents summarizes the rubric created in the textbooks. In the Robinson, Breasted, and Smith textbook of 1934 the subtitle "Egyptian Civilization" introduced the topic, "Beginnings of a Higher Civilization." In the 1937 text, specific reference to Egypt was dropped from the title and thus the link between Egypt and higher civilization was severed. Two blatantly Eurocentric titles were added: "How the Greeks Did More to Enrich Our Civilization Than Any Other Ancient People," and "How the Romans Established a Great Empire and Brought Greek Civilization Nearer Us." The authors concluded the description of the development of Western Civilization with the section titled: "How Barbarous Peoples Invaded the Roman Empire and Created Such Disorder That for Several Hundred Years Our Forefathers Forgot Much That the Greeks Had Known." Moreover, the authors dis-
cussed the important iron age under the sections on Greece or the West in the 1937 text, instead of under the sections on the Hittite Empire in the 1934 text. The entire orientation of the narrative changed in the second text from the civilized, Oriental, East to the West as exclusively civilized.

The World History textbooks by Wells and Robinson-Breasted-Smith had the largest share of the textbook market and were released in revised editions throughout the 1940s. Few other World History textbooks were written in the 1940s because during World War II resources were limited. In 1946 an extremely popular new textbook came on the market by Emma Peters Smith and others, World History: The Struggle for Civilization. She was one of the authors in the two Robinson-Breasted-Smith texts. Many editions of this textbook were used during the fifties and sixties. American imperialism was the avenue to achieve world peace and the textbook identified imperialism as a goal for students. Imperialism is usually defined as the domination, politically, socially, and economically, of one region over another. Schools used this textbook for decades. The rhetoric of the text reflected the political climate of the post World War II era. Germany was the enemy of World War II and, thus, was classified as barbaric in ancient history. The authors classified German tribes as “the same great group of Indo-European peoples as the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans,” which was an unusual classification in the genre. The term, barbarian, was liberally applied to the Germanic tribes in their history of Rome. Under the section title “Effects of the Barbarian Invasions” the authors wrote:

Effects of the Barbarian Invasions — In judging the effects of the German invasions on the civilization of Europe, we must be careful not to exaggerate the numbers of newcomers in the fifth century.

Under the heading “Barbarian Tribes Overrun Europe,” the following statement created a dichotomy of the self, as British, and the other, as both German and Hun:

Even Britain was conquered by Germanic tribes, the Angles and Saxons. To add to the universal disorder, the Huns, who had been
devastating the Eastern Empire, now turned to the West. Under their leader, Attila, these savage Asiatic people invaded Gaul. But the Romans and Goths united against this dreaded foe and defeated them at the battle of Chalone in 451. Attila died soon afterward, and the Huns never troubled Europe seriously again.

The division between Britain and Germany and the definition of Germanic tribes as the barbaric other was extraordinary in the textbook genre. This passage clearly demonstrates the political impact on the designations of civilized and barbaric. Excluding the treatment of Germany, the authors’ definition was otherwise blatantly Eurocentric:

Our Civilization is our way of life... We call our civilization Western because its roots lie in the Western World. It is the Civilization which came to us through Europe rather than from the East through India, China, or Japan.

Another addition to the definition was a division between workers and elites in the analysis of the attributes of early, civilized peoples. The authors applied both broad Marxist theory and the work ethic to the discussion, which was exemplified by the following statement: the “idle merely used and enjoyed what others provided. It is the workers who have been the makers of civilization.” They inferred an exploitive relationship between the worker and the idle and simultaneously praised work as the driving force behind development. Thus, the authors thoroughly mixed Marxist rhetoric with the rhetoric of the Protestant work ethic.

The third addition to the definition of civilization employed the metaphor of a great treasure hunt: “Buried in the earth, metals, coal, oil, and gas awaited his discovery.” The text implied that the earth yielded treasures for man’s use and that the more treasures that were gained, the greater the civilization. The beginning of civilization and the departure from the savage occurred precisely when man “could combine them (the earth’s treasures) and transform them for his own benefit.” This moment included the development of the human mind, “nature’s greatest gift.” As man manipulated and controlled his world by conquering
every corner of the globe, he became civilized. This construct of civilization coincided with the surge in American foreign affairs.

In general, by the mid-twentieth century a definite separation of Western Europe from Mediterranean countries occurred. Instead of viewing the world from the vantage point of a universal Mediterranean trading conglomerate, the world was divided into East and West. The authors defined Western Civilization as advanced, civilized, and the Eastern Civilization as inferior, primitive. When an historical event or series of events during a time frame did not fit the false dichotomy, the time frame was simply placed under a different rubric. The themes of the positive attributes of technology, and the superiority of the West dominated the genre and the ideas of civilization as a decaying old organism faded. The growth of civilization replaced the notion of civilization in decline. Materialism, advanced technology, and economic gain were thought to be the best way of life. A general tone of progressiveness prevailed in these textbooks. This belief in the progressiveness of the West led to the opposite impression: that non-Western customs and characteristics were less progressive. In the 1960s, many new textbooks were written. Editors produced them as an amalgamation of scholars; therefore quality historiography was random at best. Some experimented with inclusive formatting. A few texts recognized the Meso-American achievements, especially in the field of mathematics, and one recognized the value of the oral tradition. However, a general regression toward Western centered perspectives, and the elevation of imperialism as an ideal, still prevailed in spite of a few new developments.

In the early 1960s, Leften Stavrianos proposed to reorganize World History to create a “true global history.” He wrote the textbook, *A Global History of Man.* He promised to present “today’s world events in terms of our global history North, East, South, and West. Stavrianos organized his history under the following titles found in the Table of Contents: “The Environment of World History,” “Man, Race, and Society,” “Civilized Man Lives in Regional Isolation,” “Civilized Man Lives in Global Unity,” (under which the first section was “Europe Unites the World 1500-1763”), “The World’s Major Cultural Areas,” (under which the first chapter was “The United States”), and finally “Global
History Today and Tomorrow.” The reorganization did nothing to create an accurate inclusive history. The themes were extremely Eurocentric and negated an accurate understanding of the global dynamic, especially, the reference to relative isolation and to “Europe unites the world.” Cultural borrowing occurred significantly during the time of “relative isolation.” Furthermore, any unity brought by Europe was not a positive force during the centuries of 1500-1763. These were the centuries of the slave trade and the destruction of the complex societies of Africa. On a global scale, these centuries could hardly be considered unifying. Any semblance of global unity that existed during the 1500s was brought by the administrative strength of the Ottoman Empire, not Europe. International trade by way of the Middle East was only beginning its decline.

No thematic organization of a history can compensate for the basic rhetoric, which portrays peoples of the world in an inferior position on an imagined scale of advancement, as the following passage of Stavrianos illustrates:

The climate in most of the Americas was more suitable for Europeans than the climate in most of Africa. The smooth-flowing rivers of the Americas made it easy to penetrate the continent, whereas most African rivers have waterfalls which blocked the path for explorers. But more important is the fact that on the whole, the American Indians were not as advanced as the African negroes. And they were not as advanced because their contacts with the peoples of Eurasia had ended about five thousand years before.

Even though he later enumerated the architectural splendors of the Incas, Aztecs, and Mayans, the creation of advanced and non-advanced peoples created a false rubric, which negates an inclusive methodology. The image disseminated to the public was an inferior other for Africans and Native Americans.

Throughout the 1970s-1990s William McNeill, Arnold Toynbee, and others, experimented with methods of writing a world history inclusive of all societies of the globe. In 1972 Toynbee wrote:

My own definition of civilization in ethical terms is also applicable to Africa, now that the richness of Africa’s religious and philo-
philosophical heritage is at last being revealed to Western eyes...A Western observer must be struck, however, by a crucial deficiency in the world explaining cosmologies which have been evolved, in fascinating diversity, among the indigenous African communities.  

Again, even the greatest minds of the mid-twentieth century could not conceive images too far beyond their discourse. David Wilkinson, in his article "Decline Phases in Civilizations, Regions and Oikumenêς," cited McNeill as making scholars aware of world systems.  

He cited 1990 as the date McNeill brought these ideas to the debates. However, the following quotation illustrates that McNeill contributed the formalized concept of world systems at least as early as 1967:

> It therefore becomes possible to survey the epochs of World History by studying first the center or centers of primary disturbance, and then considering how the other peoples of the earth reacted to or against what they know or experienced (often at second or third hand) the innovations that had occurred in the prime centers of cultural activity...In such a perspective, geographical settings and lines of communication between different civilizations became centrally important.  

Next, McNeill gave an "organizing idea" and explained how civilization moved from center to center. McNeill then created his narrative history around the description of an interaction between selected centers. This model of centers was in fact McNeill’s key contribution to the writing of inclusive equitable and factual world histories. And actually, Lane-Hunt-Goldman introduced the concept of civilization as centers in 1948: "The progress we can see in history consists partly in the spread of civilization from a few centers."  

Scholars have been searching for ways to create inclusive World Histories for decades. Methodology alone does not solve the problem. Cultural Imperialism within the rhetoric must change before progress can be made. McNeill continued his discussion of civilization with the following statement:

> Indeed, from the time when human societies first attained civilized complexity and size, no more than four civilizations ever co-existed in the Old World; and in the New, where Amerindian develop-
ment remained always weak and retarded, no more than three distinct civilizations ever emerged.\(^43\)

Later he again stated "Amerindian development always remained weak and retarded," he placed Mayan history as lower than European or Chinese history.\(^44\) G. S. Marshall Hodgson succinctly captured the problem in 1974 when he wrote the following:

Even in the remarkable work of William McNeill, *The Rise of the West*—by some tests, the first genuine World History ever written—the Westernistic image still prevails in the evaluation of Islam, despite his Toynbeeian awareness of the importance of non-Western cultures and the influence of an anthropological diffusionism in forming his work...\(^45\)

However, one must recognize McNeill's immense contribution to the problem of inclusiveness. Even in his early 1967 textbook, McNeill searched for more inclusive uses of terms. For example, McNeill's use of "culture" was unusually inclusive in the literature. "Cultural activity" did not connote a specific value judgment. Culture became an action rather than a state of being. Actions are neutral, whereas states of being can have inherent qualities attached such as race or gender. McNeill's constructions of the term, civilization, are pioneer endeavors toward an equitable presentation of all peoples of the globe and their histories. He replaced race or ethnicity as determiners of a civilization with determiners such as the movement of ideas, cultural borrowing, the effects of trade and disease, or the environmental capability of food production. As with all intellectuals, he wrote within his climate of opinion. However, he paved the way for a more representative definition of civilization.

In conclusion, it is not enough to re-organize the same misconceptions. A realization of the historical roots of today's stereotypes is necessary to eradicate Eurocentric rhetoric. New, more accurate images of cultures need to be formed in the image-making of our words. The plethora of new archaeological data that substantiates the sophistication of cultures in history, especially in Africa and the Americas, needs to enter the textbook and the classroom.
NOTES

10. *Ibid.*, 120
17. *Ibid.*, 28
25. 1934, 30 and 1937, 121.
38. Global, 46
43. McNeill, vi-v.
44. Ibid., 76.