Thomas C. Patterson. *Inventing Western Civilization*.

Laurence Grambow Wolf
Is the establishment of civilization a step in the progressive unfolding of human societies, or a disaster to be regretted? That it was furthered by the hard and cruel exercise of coercion and conquest, and therefore of exploitation, is undeniable. Once a self-sustaining agrarian kinship society has succeeded in harvesting enough energy from its natural environment to support a 'critical mass' of people, new means of administering this increased scale of human society could be invented. As far as we know, this began at Sumer. This did not, as a consequence, produce a democratic, co-operative commonwealth, but, instead, rule by kings and priests or priest-kings, bolstered by military power.

The 'surplus energy' which maintained the ruling class and its supporting civil, religious and military bureaucracies, also underwrote the development of the arts and crafts, which were applied to the construction of monumental buildings, weapons, ritual objects, and luxury items, each civilization developing its own forms of literacy and literature, philosophical speculations of a highly sophisticated nature, and, in recent centuries, modern science and technology, without which the present level of world population could not be sustained and could not even have been at all approximated.

We live, then, with a great paradox. Civilization has brought great blessings and devastating burdens. The dialectic of humane versus inhumane was brought about by significant, consequential movements to curb the curses of excessive power — representative government, civil rights, feminism, etc. That struggle remains a (the?) central problem of contemporary civilization. To lessen exploitation, to reduce the incidence of war and terrorist violence, to end poverty, and to provide for individual freedom, free of exploitation and group discrimination, is a struggle with no foreseeable conclusion, be it constructive or destructive. If we reject civilization, there is no alternative but unrealistic programs of return to a lesser level of societal complexity: an impossible return to an idealized 'golden age'.

T C. Patterson uses the term 'civilization' to cover both the
idea of a scale or level of societal organization, and also as a concept that has been used to justify and legitimate the position of ruling classes and their contempt for those below them, domestic and foreign. Perhaps we in the ISCSC erred in adopting the contentious term 'civilization' as the umbrella term for our intellectual concerns, and should have chosen 'complex society' as an untainted synonym. I still feel 'civilization' the more appropriate and more adequate general term for our endeavors.

The title of this slender volume led me to acquire it, only to discover that the author had a much different approach to the concept 'civilization' than I had grown accustomed to within the ranks of the ISCSC. Apparently he is unaware of our existence. The only ISCSCer he cites is Arnold Toynbee, with characteristic cogent brevity. Quigley, Coulborn, Sorokin, et al., are apparently intellectual terra incognita. Admittedly, his focus and purpose preclude much attention to our academic endeavors, but given his acquaintance with a wide range of pertinent scholarship, a brief mention would have been a reasonable expectation.

On the rear cover of the book, Martin Bernal, of "Black Athena" notoriety, is quoted: "In this wonderful book, Thomas Patterson effectively dethrones the concept of 'civilization' as an abstract good transcending human society. Combining the latest scholarship with his own sensitive thinking, Patterson shows the clear and specific class, 'race', and gender connotations of the term as it has been used and manipulated both historically and in the present age."

Lest we indulge in academic self-contemplation, we need to attend to this book, to remind ourselves, not only of the thoughts of other academicians, but also to the (lack of?) connection between our technically objective definition of the term and the history of its popular (and still current) usage.

"Inventing Western Civilization" is organized into five chapters, as follows: Inventing Civilization, Civilization and its Boosters, Civilization and Its Critics, Inventing Barbarism and other Uncivilized Peoples, and Uncivilized Peoples Speak.

The target of Patterson's critique — ire, I am tempted to call it — is that the "uncivilized" have been portrayed as savage, *au naturel*, lacking refined morals and manners, due to the fact that "An essential feature of civilization... is social stratification,—
that is, a set of hierarchical relations through which contempt for and fear of the 'other' are expressed." For the ruling class, it and its self-serving views are the mainstay of civilization and the one certain hope for the good of humanity. "Their fears ultimately rest on their distrust of the uncivilized masses." (p.21). In relating this to the current scene, I must take exception to giving Newt Gingrich three whole pages. This elevates him beyond Bodin, Hume, Locke, Montaigne and all the other savants who are quoted and discussed, with Patterson's characteristic brevity. Mr. Gingrich is quite pretentious enough without endangering the scholarly quality of this book with political polemics.

Characteristic of the tenor of Chapter Two is this quotation: "The idea of civilization was forged in the context of European overseas colonial expansion ... used by the elites of the states that launched these ventures, to distinguish themselves from the peoples they encountered" (p.30), those dreadfully uncouth pagans, savages, and barbarians. This started with the English conquest of Ireland and the conqueror's contempt for the Irish people and proceeded to the rest of the colonialized world. Patterson then illustrates how some of the ideas of Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, and A. Smith tied in with this set of attitudes, later carried on in the writings of H. Spencer and L.H. Morgan. It resurfaced in the pronouncements of US cold-warriors who informed the American public that we were saving civilization from the barbaric and despotic communists of the Soviet Union. His line of reasoning and exposition is another application of the Marxist idea that ruling classes proclaim ideologies that justify their rule which become ideationally hegemonic. "Civilization" and "civilized" are his choice of concepts to illustrate the historical trajectory of these class-based prejudices and biases. There is no one true way of attacking this topic. My own preference would be for a more inclusive definition of civilization, within which these ideas and the opposition to them could be treated dialectically.

In Chapter Three ("Civilization and its Critics") it is noted that critics arose early, Las Casas in the 1530s being among the most well-known. The Dutch rebellions against Spanish rule and the Digger movement in England in the 1640s are presented as popular uprisings against the 'civilized' ruling class. This is fol-
lowed by discussions of J-J. Rousseau, Johann Herder, Marx and Engels, and J.S. Mill, winding up with F. Nietzsche and S. Freud, treated succinctly and cogently. There is no space in 132 pages of text covering such a big topic over so many centuries to treat any one thinker fully. For that one must turn to other sources.

Let us now skip to the final chapter ("Uncivilized Peoples Speak"). The opposition of the oppressed from the 1750s to the present has been "ignored, denied their relevance, or attacked" as invalid (p.122), but this opposition has "stripped away the veneer of civility and culture, to expose the exploitation and oppression that underlay the hierarchical relations of civilized society" (p.131). Since Chief Joseph and Ida M. Wells, among others, are quoted, one is disappointed at the absence of Che Guevara, Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral, whom one would expect, given Patterson's views. Instead, he cites Chicago gangs as transcending ethnicity and racism, "imposed on their members by the state in a context shaped by violence" (p.124). "Imposed" is a great simplification of a complex sociological process, and detracts from the serious argument of "this wonderful book" (as Bernal would have it).

Concepts change drastically and in diverse ways from the time and milieu in which they originated. I doubt that I stand alone in considering "primitive" to mean "first" and "early," with no pejorative intent, and "civilization" as a technical term referring to a scale or level of societal structuration, roughly equivalent to "complex society" and bereft of the moral and/or biological ideas of superiority and ruling class justification. Every such society has a ruling class—of some sort. Given our present electronifying economy, I doubt that any future society will be classless, although socialists are still hoping for such, Patterson apparently among them. No school of thought has yet come up with an effective weapon against the exploitation of positions of power. This remains a centrally important problem, however one wishes to define "civilization".

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