COLONIALISM, ANTI-COLONIALISM AND THE IDEA OF PROGRESS

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Summary

The idea of progress has two related components. The first is that the human species universally progresses, albeit at different rates and to different degrees, from an original primitive or child-like condition, referred to as savagery, through to barbarism, and culminates at the apex of progress in the status of civilization. The second component of the idea of progress holds that human experience, both individual and collective, is cumulative and future-directed, with the specific objective being the ongoing improvement of the individual, the society in which the individual lives, and the world in which the society must survive. For some thinkers it seems logical that what follows from the general idea of progress is the notion that progress is directed in a particular direction, or that history is moving forward along a particular path toward a specific end. History, in this conception, is not merely the cataloguing of events, but a universal history of all humankind, a cumulative and collective history of civilization, that is, History. The notion that different peoples or cultural groups are at different stages of development along the path of universal progress has led some to deem it necessary to try to ameliorate the condition of those thought to be less civilized. This enterprise has

variously been known as the "white man's burden," the "burden of civilization," or the "sacred trust of civilization." The general aim of these often violent and overly-zealous "civilizing missions" was to ameliorate the state of the "uncivilized" through tutelage, training, and conversion to Christianity. With European expansion, wherever "civilized" and "uncivilized" peoples existed side by side, there soon developed an unequal treaty system of capitulations, also known extraterritorial rights. In much of the uncivilized world this system of capitulations incrementally escalated to the point that it became full-blown colonialism.

1. Introduction

The idea of progress and theories of human evolution more generally have played a significant role in attempts to justify the colonization of one peoples by another. Ideas about progress, development and modernity have subsequently also played a prominent role as drivers of anti-colonial movements. Outlined below is the intimate relationship between ideas about the progress of individuals and societies and how these ideas have been used by some societies to justify the subjugation and colonization of other collectives of peoples. It is further shown how the passage of time has seen similar ideas about progress successfully deployed to advance arguments for the liberation and self-determination of colonized peoples.

Eric Wolf has made the point that many of us have grown up believing that the "*West has a genealogy, according to which ancient Greece begat Rome, Rome begat Christian Europe, Christian Europe begat the Renaissance, the Renaissance the Enlightenment, the Enlightenment political democracy and the industrial revolution. Industry, crossed with democracy, in turn yielded the United States, embodying the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*" (Wolf, 1982: 4-5). This commonly adopted and often warmly embraced evolutionary schema renders history as some sort of hierarchical "moral success story," a tale of civilization and progress, a race through time in which successive runners pass on the torch of progress and liberty. "*History is thus converted into a tale about the furtherance of virtue, about how the virtuous win out over the bad guys*" (Wolf, 1982: 5). This narrative goes a considerable way toward explaining how ideas about civilization and progress became influential factors in the theory and practice of colonialism.

Norbert Elias has described this general sense of superiority in terms of the very ideals of civilization and progress as expressing the "*self-consciousness of the West*." Moreover, this consciousness "*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*" (Elias, 2000: 5). This view of the West as boldly forging the way ahead on the path of progress and virtue is one that has been described by Robert Nisbet in his work on the idea of progress. "*The history of all that is greatest in the West,*" he tells us, that is, "*religion, science, reason, freedom, equality, justice, philosophy, the arts, and so on – is grounded deeply in the belief that what one does in one's own time is at once tribute to the greatness and indispensability of the past, and confidence in an ever more golden future*" (Nisbet, 1980: 8).

But just as the idea and space we call "the West" did not evolve in a vacuum, devoid of external influences, neither was it as homogenous and cohesive as this account suggests. It was not until around the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that European cleavages began to ameliorate, slowly being replaced by a modicum of cohesion and solidarity, at least among Western European nations anyway. Slowly and steadily, the expanding entity we now call the West was incrementally forged by and through the exploring nations of Western Europe. Moreover, it was in relation to and by way of contrast with this entity that the non-European world and its inhabitants came to be known and described. Equally, the "civilized" West also came to define itself in contradistinction to the "barbarians" and "savages" discovered beyond the European horizon. This process was neatly captured by Friedrich von Schiller in the late-Eighteenth century when he writes: "*A wise hand seems to have preserved these savage tribes until such time as we have progressed sufficiently in our own civilisation to make useful application of this discovery, and from this mirror to recover the lost beginning of our own race*". But these peoples painted an "*embarrassing and dismal ... picture of our [Europe/the West's] own childhood*," for Schiller declared them the "*barbarous remains of the centuries of antiquity and the middle ages*!" (Schiller, [1789] 1972: 325-27).

As Oswald Spengler explains, the "*Western European area*" came to be "*regarded as a fixed pole, a unique patch chosen on the surface of the sphere for no better reason, it seems, than because we live on it.*" Moreover, "*great histories of millennial duration and mighty faraway Cultures are made to revolve around this pole in all modesty.*" It is from and in relation to this select and privileged corner of the globe, and its successor the West, that all other peoples and events were "*judged in perspective*" (Spengler, 1962: 13) – politically, socially, morally, technologically. If they did not compare favorably, which was generally the case, then civilized Europeans often took it upon themselves to take uncivilized nations under their colonial wing, more often than not by violent conquest.

Elias has also highlighted, that "*it is not a little characteristic of the structure of Western society that the watchword of its colonizing movement is 'civilization'*" (Elias, 2000: 431). For centuries now, those considering themselves civilized have often been tempted to take on the duty of bringing enlightenment and salvation to the uncivilized hordes of the world – all in the name of civilization and progress (Bowden, 2009a). This has particularly been the case when the exploring nations of Europe have come into contact with indigenous peoples during their voyages of discovery and subsequent settlement. For instance, following the Spanish discovery of the Americas, Franciscus de Vitoria claimed that the Amerindians "*really seem little different from brute animals and are utterly incapable of governing, and it is unquestionably better for them to be ruled by others than to rule themselves*" (Vitoria, [1539] 1964: 120-21). And so the Spaniards conquered and colonized the Amerindians.

One of the justifications for dispossession and oppression was often couched in terms of the self-appointed duty of "civilized" European nations to bring the blessings of civilization and progress to the "savage" and "barbarian" hordes; variously known as the "white man's burden," the "burden of civilization," or the "sacred trust of civilization." Perhaps surprisingly, such language was still being used centuries later in

important statutes such as the Covenant of the League of Nations, further entrenching the principle of foreign rule. Article 22 of the Covenant states that the welfare of "*colonies and territories*" that "*are inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves*" constitutes "*a sacred trust of civilization.*" The Covenant adds that the "*best method of giving practical effect to this principle is that the tutelage of such peoples should be entrusted to advanced nations who by reason of their resources, their experience or their geographical position can best undertake this responsibility.*" And so the Mandate System and colonialism persisted for decades to come.

While much time separates these two important moments in history, much of the thinking underpinning these developments is remarkably similar. This could be considered somewhat surprising given the considerable progress that had been made in many branches of human endeavor in the intervening years. Nevertheless, whether it was the Spanish in the Americas in the fifteenth century or British settlers in Aboriginal Australia in the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries, the general aim of these often violent and overly-zealous "civilizing missions" that became full-blown colonialism was to ameliorate the state of the "uncivilized" through tutelage, training, and conversion to Christianity.

2. Civilization and Progress

It is difficult to explore the idea of progress without also delving into the related idea of civilization. As the French linguist Jean Starobinski notes, the "*word civilization, which denotes a process, entered the history of ideas at the same time as the modern sense of the word progress. The two words were destined to maintain a most intimate relationship*" (Starobinski, 1993: 4; italics (turned bold for distinction here) in original). The extent of the interrelation between the ideas of civilization and progress is evident in Nisbet's questioning of "*whether civilization in any form and substance comparable to what we have known ... in the West is possible without the supporting faith in progress that has existed along with this civilization*" (Nisbet, 1980: 9). In exploring the nature of this relationship it becomes evident that these twin ideas have played a significant role in the pursuit of a wide-reaching philosophy of history that explains the existence of the diversity of peoples that make up our world. The nature and significance of this pursuit is hinted at in Nisbet's claim that "*No single idea has been more important than ... the idea of progress in Western civilization for nearly three thousand years.*" While ideas such liberty, justice, equality, and community have their rightful place and should not be discounted, it "*must be stressed: throughout most of Western history, the substratum of even these ideas has been a philosophy of history that lends past, present, and future to their importance*" (Nisbet, 1980: 4). The significance of the idea of progress is further revealed when Starobinski's point that "*civilization* is a powerful stimulus to theory" leads to the conclusion that "*Despite its ambiguity ... the temptation to clarify our thinking by elaborating a theory of civilization capable of grounding a far-reaching philosophy of history is thus irresistible*" (Starobinski, 1993: 33-34). Indeed that has proven to be the case, for in recent centuries a diverse range of thinkers who have sought to undertake precisely that task.

In essence, the capacity for reasonably complex socio-political organization and self-government according to prevailing standards has long been thought of as central requirements of civilization (Bowden, 2004a; Bowden, 2009a; Bowden, 2009b, Vol. 1). The presence, or otherwise, of the institutions of society that facilitate governance in accordance with established traditions – originally European but now more broadly Western – have long been regarded as the hallmark of the makings of, or potential for, civilization. Central to the ideal of civilization are its tripartite components as identified by R. G. Collingwood: economic civilization, social civilization, and legal civilization (Collingwood, 1992). What they amount to is socio-political civilization, or the capacity of a collective to organize and govern itself under a system of laws or constitution.

An exemplar of the importance of society to the qualification of civilization is John Stuart Mill's recipe in which he lists the "ingredients of civilization." Following Montesquieu to some degree, Mill states that whereas

> *a savage tribe consists of a handful of individuals, wandering or thinly scattered over a vast tract of country: a dense population, therefore, dwelling in fixed habitations, and largely collected together in towns and villages, we term civilized. In savage life there is no commerce, no manufactures, no agriculture, or next to none; a country in the fruits of agriculture, commerce, and manufactures, we call civilized. In savage communities each person shifts for himself; except in war (and even then very imperfectly) we seldom see any joint operations carried on by the union of many; nor do savages find much pleasure in each other's society. Wherever, therefore, we find human beings acting together for common purposes in large bodies, and enjoying the pleasures of social intercourse, we term them civilized* (Mill, 1977: 122).

Just as the ideal of civilization includes different aspects – such as the arts and the "hard" and "soft" sciences – so too the idea of progress encompasses a range of elements. The most significant of these are identified by Ruth Macklin in the following assertion: "*It is wholly uncontroversial to hold that technological progress has taken place; largely uncontroversial to claim that intellectual and theoretical progress has occurred; somewhat controversial to say aesthetic or artistic progress has taken place; and highly controversial too assert that moral progress has occurred*" (Macklin, 1977: 370). In speaking of moral progress, Macklin is referring to what is "wholly a *social* concept;" one which encapsulates only "*events, institutions, and practices in countries, cultures, societies, eras, or periods in history*" (Macklin, 1977: 370; italics in original). As to whether it is highly controversial to assert that there has been progress in the social sphere is a point open to debate, for this is at odds with the claim that the idea of progress constituted an article of faith for much of the past three centuries. Like Macklin, E. H. Goddard and P. A. Gibbons note that there is a general historical consensus that "*Progress has certainly taken place in science, in thought, and in all branches of knowledge.*" But unlike Macklin, they argue that there has long been a widely held conviction "*that progress has taken place in social order and political institutions.*" They conclude that much of recent history is characterized by a general belief that "*all the great branches of human achievement, art, science, religion, politics, society, thought, everything in fact which goes to constitute what we call civilization,*

are affected by a discussion of the reality of progress" (Goddard and Gibbons, 1926: 1-2).

The aspects of civilization and progress most relevant here are those relating to social co-operation or degrees of socio-political organization. The logic underpinning this is based on the argument, as seen in Thomas Hobbes, that some degree of socio-political organization is a basic necessity for the foundation of civilization and, hence, progress. This is readily distinguishable in the following well-known passage from Hobbes' *Leviathan*:

> *Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of Warre, where every man is Enemy to every man; the same consequent to the time, wherein men live without other security, than what their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them with all. In such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continual feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short* (Hobbes, [1651] 1985: 186).

What Hobbes is effectively arguing here is that without initial co-operation in political society, there is no knowledge of science and technology, no philosophy and fine arts, no personal property, wealth, or wellbeing, and naturally, "*no progress in these things*" (Van Doren, 1967: 376). For Hobbes, at least in the first instance, progress in society and politics comes prior to every other form of progress and, moreover, progress within the other sub-elements of civilization is contingent upon it. Or, as Friedrich von Schiller would later put it, "*would Greece have borne a Thucydides, a Plato, and an Aristotle, or Rome a Horace, a Cicero, a Virgil, and a Livy, if these two states had not risen to those heights of political achievement which in fact they attained*?" (Schiller, [1789] 1972: 329). Once this initial societal condition is secured, however, there is no reason why progress in other fields should not surpass the rate of progress in the socio-political arena. On this basis it is argued that civilization and progress would provide "*superior institutions for organizing people more rationally*" (Norgaard, 1994: 51).

Of particular importance in respect to colonialism are the normative demands of the ideas of progress and civilization. As Starobinski points out, "*as a value, civilization constitutes a political and moral norm. It is the criterion against which barbarity, or non-civilization, is judged and condemned*" (Starobinski, 1993: 31). A similar sort of argument is made by Anthony Pagden, who states that civilization "*describes a state, social, political, cultural, aesthetic – even moral and physical – which is held to be the optimum condition for all [hu]mankind, and this involves the implicit claim that only the civilized can know what it is to be civilized*" (Pagden, 1988: 33). The suggestion that only the civilized know what it means to be civilized is an important one; for as Starobinski argues, the "*historical moment in which the word civilization appears marks*

the advent of self-reflection, the emergence of consciousness that thinks it understands the nature of its own activity." More specifically, it marks "*the moment that Western civilization becomes aware of itself reflectively, it sees itself as one civilization among others. Having achieved self-consciousness, civilization immediately discovers civilizations*" (Starobinski, 1993: 32; italics (turned bold for distinction here) in original).

The oft-overlooked implications of this value-laden conception of civilization led to what Georg Schwarzenberger called the "*standard of civilization in international law*" (Schwarzenberger, 1955); or what Gerrit W. Gong later termed the "*standard of civilization in international society*" (Gong, 1984). Historically, the standard of civilization was a means used in international law to distinguish between civilized and uncivilized peoples in order to determine membership in the international society of states. The concept entered international legal texts and practice in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries under the influence of anthropologists and ethnologists who drew distinctions between civilized, barbarian, and savage peoples based on their respective capacities for social co-operation and organization. Operating primarily during the European colonial period, the standard of civilization was a legal mechanism designed to set the benchmark for the ascent of non-European states to the ranks of the civilized "Family of Nations," and with it, their full recognition under international law. A civilized state required: a) basic institutions of government and public bureaucracy; b) organizational capacity for self-defense; c) published legal code and adherence to the rule of law; d) the capacity to honor contracts in commerce and capital exchange; and e) recognition of international law and norms, including the laws of war (Gong, 2004; Bowden, 2004b). If a nation could meet these requirements it was generally deemed to be a legitimate sovereign state entitled to full recognition as an international personality.

The inability of many non-European societies to meet these European established criteria and the concomitant legal distinction that separated them from civilized societies led to the unequal treaty system of capitulations. The right of extraterritoriality, as it was also known, regulated relations between sovereign civilized states and quasi-sovereign uncivilized states in regard to their respective rights over, and obligations to, the citizens of civilized states living and operating in countries where capitulations were in force. In much of the uncivilized world this system of capitulations incrementally escalated to the point that it became the large-scale European civilizing missions that in turn became colonialism.

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