

Civilisation vs Barbarism: European Unity as Not-American

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Introduction

Confronted with the prospect of a rapidly escalating second Iraq war, Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida issued a plea to fellow philosophers and public intellectuals. This, however, was no ordinary existential cry for help. Rather, the plea had very real goals and ambitions in mind; indeed, Habermas and Derrida desired that their peers petition government officials and impress upon them the need for a united Europe. Only through European unification, Habermas and Derrida suggested, could Europe regain its position on the road towards perpetual peace as well as provide a politically powerful counterpoint to the “barbarism” of the United States. This argument is compelling for several reasons. Europe is placed on a trajectory towards some greater notion of civilization, even as this condition of civility is dependent upon the dissolution of diverse nation-states and peoples. At the same time, America – which Timothy Garton Ash describes as fundamentally connected to Europe – is constructed as the barbaric “Other,” an entity against which Europe must define itself.

Broadly construed, the purpose of this essay is to examine the intersections of civilization and barbarism in Habermas and Derrida’s desire to unify Europe. It is possible to ask: which has had a greater influence on European unity, the idea of a civilized Europe or the idea of its barbaric “Other”? Put more narrowly, was Habermas and Derrida’s desire for European unity conceived in isolation from the actions of other countries, or did their desire arise from the perceived barbaric tendencies of the American “Other”? The answer to this question is not simple. As demonstrated above, Habermas and Derrida seem to tread – and blur – the line between urging Europe to unite out of concern for its own benefit and, alternatively, promoting unification in order to counterbalance American global policy. For the purposes of this essay, I argue that neither motive had a greater influence, but rather that the two seemingly divergent concepts worked together to further promote European unity. In doing so, I first examine the concepts of civilization and barbarism; included in this section is a discussion of what these two terms have meant historically and for Europe. Secondly, I return to a discussion of Habermas and Derrida’s plea, this time

analyzing how Europe is constructed as civilized and America as the barbaric “Other” against which it is portrayed. Lastly, I conclude by scrutinizing if and how these constructions become conflated with the conception of unity and why, ultimately, this conflation poses a problem for the future of European unification.

Civilization v. Barbarism: Two Antithetical Ideas?

Before exploring how civilization and barbarism appear in contemporary European dialogue, it is useful to understand how these terms have developed and what they constitute historically. With this understanding, then, it will be easier to grasp the dilemma with which Habermas and Derrida struggle. Indeed, Habermas and Derrida are not original in the concept of placing civilization and barbarism within the same ideological framework. The symbiotic relationship of civilization and barbarism can be seen in the basic definitions contained within the Oxford English Dictionary. According to the OED, civilization is a “civilized condition of state; a developed or advanced state of society; a particular stage or a particular type of this.” Even from this elementary definition, civilization is rendered in opposition to some other entity. For a society to be labeled as developed or placed on a scale of development, it necessarily implies that the society had previously been something else, something less developed and less advanced.

Interestingly, the missing “half” of civilization is found within the OED’s description of barbarous. The OED determines that to be barbarous is to be “uncultured, uncivilized, unpolished: rude, rough, wild, savage, foreign. (Said of men, their manners, customs, products. The usual opposite of civilized.)” From this, a barbarian emerges as something both foreign and outlandish, not advanced and certainly not progressive. Contained within the OED’s definition is also an inherent sense of exclusion; those who are not civilized are portrayed as a savage and outside the settled way of life within a polity. This notion of exclusion anticipates the construction of some barbaric “Other” against the preferred state of being civilized. Thus, civilization and barbarism are developed as inherently linked concepts; it is almost impossible to conceptualize one without the presence – or at least the knowledge – of the other.

Having thus established what civilization and barbarism have meant generally, it is now possible to add another layer of meaning to the concepts. What do civilization and barbarism denote within a specifically European context? I argue that civilization and barbarism constitute one way in which to understand the relations between Europe and the non-European world; moreover, these words eluci-

date what is Europe and what is not Europe. Stated differently, they contain provide a lens through which it is possible to examine to what type of society Europeans aspire.

Immanuel Kant, in his conception of perpetual peace, provides one way in which to address this question. For Kant, all the world's societies are arranged hierarchically with respect to historical development (Tully 2002: 341). The highest state of development is one in which a single and universal culture and morality is attained. James Tully, in his article "The Kantian Idea of Europe," articulates, "It is the end-state to which all others are tending in due course, the level of development of all the capacities of the human species, and the level of perpetual peace" (2002: 341). Kant asserts that a final state of civilization is already known, and states are merely in the process of progressing towards this end. Perpetual peace is not specific to a certain group of people, but rather all civilizations are engaged in the pursuit of perpetual peace and can be ranked according to their progress.

Kant's argument contains important ramifications for Europe. He states that Europe acts as measuring stick against which all other cultures' can be assessed. In this understanding, the process of civilization "began in Europe, spread from Europe, and will reach its goal first in Europe" due to the superiority of European national characteristics (Tully 2002: 342). Kant writes:

"The inhabitant of the temperate parts of the world, above all the central part, has a more beautiful body, works harder, is more jocular, more controlled in his passions, more intelligent than any other race of people in the world. That is why at all points in time these peoples have educated the others and controlled them with weapons. The Romans, the Greeks, the ancient Nordic peoples, Genghis Khan, the Turks, Tamurlaine, the Europeans after Columbus's discoveries, they have all amazed the southern lands with their arts and weapons." (Kant, as cited in Tully 2002: 343)

Under this rubric, all non-European cultures rank lower on the scale of civilization, a scale that is calibrated to Europe's progression. From Kant's argument, it is possible to discern that the universal culture and morality will be inherently European and, as such, it is up to the rest of the globe to reach this end. It is not that the universal culture is right or necessarily European but, as Tully argues, that European culture "coincides with nature and history and the precondition of an eventual just national

and world order” (Tully 2002: 343). Moreover, this particular culture takes the form of the valuation of republican constitutionalism – an idea that directly developed from the European Enlightenment and liberalism. The progression to civilization along European lines is a natural phenomenon; in doing so, these non-geographical European nation-states become closer and closer to a non-barbaric state. Stated differently, the greater the state of Europeanization, the less “Other” a nation-state becomes.

The Return to the Plea for Unity: Habermas, Derrida, and the Otherization of America

As discussed above, there is a specific European connotation to the notion of civilization. The idea of civilization sprang from Greece, was transplanted by pre-modern states to other parts of the globe, and was modernized in terms of liberalism and republicanism by Kant. Umberto Eco, in response to Habermas and Derrida’s article, writes:

“Today, Western civilization (a civilization which tends to identify itself with the successful model in the globalization process) no longer coincides with Europe alone. At the same time, within Western civilization itself we increasingly recognize a European identity. This identity does not emerge so much when we (as Europeans) visit another European country [...] rather, a European identity reveals itself as soon as we come into contact with a non-European culture, including American culture.”
(Levy 2005: 16)

This recognizes a realization of Kant’s perpetual peace combined with a specific acknowledgment of a distinctive European identity; it is, one might say, a qualified Kantian conception of Europe. In this sense, civilization has progressed beyond the borders of geographical Europe and has come to constitute “Western” civilization. Within this context, however, a particular European identity has developed. There is something unique which distinguishes Europe from other western civilizations; more explicitly, Europe from America. It is with this understanding – of civilization as the realization of progression along European lines and barbarism as its antithesis – that it is possible to return to Habermas and Derrida.

The original question posed in the introduction of this essay asked which

had a greater influence on European unity: the desire to be understood as civilized or the opposition to barbarism. I argue that it both. Indeed, European unification is twofold: it is seen as necessary in order to provide some force against the barbaric forces of America even as it is seen as a realization of Europe's destiny and inherent progression towards some civilized end. This Janus-like approach to European unification can be seen in Habermas and Derrida's work entitled "February 15, or, What Binds Europeans Together: Plea for Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in Core Europe." Even from the title of the work, it is possible to see the two forces in play. There is a specific reference to what specifically binds Europeans together within the geographical – "core" – Europe. Moreover, the desire for coherent foreign policy implies the need to be united in the face of some "Other." Thus, from the beginning, there is a blurring between which has had a greater effect on European unity.

Within their article, Habermas and Derrida reference the destabilizing influence of the United States in global politics. They write:

"Like searchlights, [American humanitarian aids and military forces alike] picked out the civilized barbarism of coolly planned death (of how many victims?), of torments long since totted up (of how many injured and mutilated, how many thirsty and hungry?), of the long-planned destruction (of how many residential districts and hospitals, how many houses, museums, and markets?). As the war finally began, the Ernst Jünger aesthetic of the skyline of the nighttime of Baghdad, illuminated by countless explosions, seemed almost harmless." (Levy 2005: 4)

This very visual description of American politics portrays the second Iraq war as a barbaric act. While the two authors qualify the barbarism as "civilized," it can be assumed that this is used ironically. Under the influence of barbaric Americanism, thousands have died, villages and livelihoods have been destroyed, and the capital of a sovereign nation has been destroyed.¹ These acts, for Habermas and Derrida, have removed America from membership in European civilization and placed it firmly within the "less developed" (to borrow Kant's phrasing) sphere of barbarism. In this respect, America becomes the "Other," the entity that is not Europe.

Not only is America placed on a lower rung of the civilization ladder, but

1 Interestingly, Habermas and Derrida also draw the comparison between America at war with Iraq and the First World War (as seen by the reference to Ernst Jünger), which was a time at when Europe itself was not unified nor had any plans to be. Is it possible that they intended to place America on the scale of progression towards civilization as well? And that Europe's necessary opposition was just a further definition of Kant's scale of perpetual peace? Indeed, I think it is possible.

Habermas and Derrida call for European unification in light of the failure to prevent the Iraqi-American conflict. Alarmed by the Spanish call for allegiance to George W. Bush in 2003, several thousands of people throughout Europe took up mass demonstrations to protest the alignment of Europe and America in foreign policy matters. Habermas and Derrida see this as a civilized unification effort in opposition to the American barbarism. They articulate, “In this world, the reduction of politics to the stupid and costly alternative of war or peace simply doesn’t pay. At the international level and in the framework of the UN, Europe has to throw its weight on the scales to counterbalance the hegemonic unilateralism of the United States. At global economic summits and in the institutions of the WTO, the World Bank, and the IMF, it should exert its influence in shaping the design for a coming global domestic policy” (Levy 2005: 6). Here, Europe emerges as a united entity against the negative influences of the United States. Rather than being reduced to the barbaric choices of either war or peace, Europe needs to enter the global policy-making arena with a unified front in order to demonstrate the benefits of civilization. Only through the consciousness of shared political fate can Europe unify and, in doing so, portray itself as the rational and civilized alternative to barbarism (Habermas and Derrida in Levy 2005: 7). By demonstrating *en masse*, Europeans shown their willingness to be recognized within the context of a European single and universal culture, a la the perpetual peace argument put forth by Kant and appropriated by Habermas and Derrida.

However, for the two philosophers, the opposition to barbarism is not the only factor shaping European unification. Indeed, they write, “Are there historical experiences, traditions, and achievements offering European citizens the consciousness of a shared political fate that can be shaped together? An attractive, indeed infection ‘vision’ for Europe will not emerge from thin air. At present, it can arise only from the disquieting perception of perplexity. But it can well emerge from the difficulties of a situation into which we Europeans have been cast” (Levy 2005: 7; emphasis in original). Here, Habermas and Derrida acknowledge that there is a certain European legacy that presupposes a willingness to progress towards unification. The fact that thousands of people, albeit across national boundaries, demonstrated against a barbaric “Other” is not in itself a sufficient and long-term reason for European unification. Moreover, this outcry against America is indicative of a pre-existing desire for civilization to distance itself from barbarism. The feeling of unity and the desire to unify emerges from the specific context of the second Iraq war but does by no means originate from this sole event.

Thus, Habermas and Derrida’s article can be understood as support for

both impetuses for European unity: the opposition to some barbaric “Other” and the desire to be civilized. Indeed, the two authors recognize these influences on their support for unification when they write:

“Distinguishing between the legacy we appropriate, and the one we want to refuse, demands just as much circumspection as the decision about the interpretation through which we appropriate it for ourselves. Historical experiences are only candidates for a self-conscious appropriation; without such a self-conscious act they cannot attain the power to shape our identity.” (Levy 2005: 10).

Here, it is possible to infer how Derrida and Habermas themselves attempt to resolve the tension between the different influences on European unity. The intellectual history of civilization – as passed down by the Greeks and Kant – are inherited for all Europeans. However, acting on such a legacy is not a given. For example, an act of self-conscious appropriation – such as the rioting in response to the Spanish desire for allegiance to America – represents both the recognition of Europe as a civilized country and the creation of American outside of this realm. Europeans and Europe, by appropriating the legacy of civilization, refuse to be considered barbaric; as Umberto Eco would argue, they refuse to be considered Western in the blanket sense of civilization, but rather as Europeans apart from the civilized barbarism of another Western country – America.

Problems: Conceptualizing Europe as Not-America

The dual conception of European unity, however, is not without its potential pitfalls. Timothy Garton Ash, author of *Free World*, argues that America can be understood as fundamentally and intimately connected to European unity. Indeed, his argument marks a return to the yin and yang of civilization and barbarism: if America is the only thing allowing Europe to be civilized through its unity, then it also acts in a reciprocal manner. Europe, in turn, becomes America’s “Other.” He writes, “In the beginning, the United States was the new Europe. It defined itself against what Alexander Hamilton called ‘the pernicious labyrinth of European politics.’ Bad old Europe was, in this sense, America’s founding ‘Other.’ The temporal adjective – old – was as important as the spatial noun: Europe. European nations might forge their identities from an imagined past; American identity would flow from an imagined future” (2005: 88). With these words, Garton Ash points out a problem

of conceptualizing Europe and America— in modern usage – as antithetical ideas. By posing themselves as opposite to the United States, Europe and Europeans risk being labeled as antiquated and outdated in the eyes of the world. Indeed, critics of a Europe that has united to combat the barbarism of another country could argue that Europe was simple a reactionary force and not a driving force in world policy, as America could be. Perhaps barbarism is the new civilization. In imagining a future, it could be argued, America forges ahead on the road to civilization while Europeans linger, unsure of whether unification is the path to civilization in and of itself or if the opposition to supposed “barbaric acts” is enough to provide justification for unification. In either conception, Europe risks being labeled reactionary, old, and outdated.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of this essay, I have attempted to portray the conceptions of civilization and barbarism as inherently connected. Moreover, I have argued that this conception has certain connotations for how Europe can be understood as unified in the modern age. Two paths existed by which Europe could unify itself: through the singular desire to achieve civilization or through opposition to some barbaric “Other.” By examining the writings of Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, I argued that this conception of unification has a specific European dimension that can be revealed through an analysis of Immanuel Kant’s notion of perpetual peace. By appropriating this idea, Habermas and Derrida both advocate the unification of Europe – and Europeans – through the desire to become more civilized as well as to provide a counterpoint to American policies and barbarism. This construction, while useful for elucidating key assumptions and anxieties about how Europe will function, is not without drawbacks. Indeed, being seen as solely a reactionary to American politics risks hindering Europe’s influence on a global scale, regardless of whether it’s unified or not. However, it is here that Habermas and Derrida would disagree. Unification, in and of itself, is its own goal that is inherently connected to a specifically European progression towards civilization. Opposition to American policies is merely one manifestation of such a progression. While to the two influences must be understood together in order to conceptualize European unification, what is most important is European is progressing through history towards civilization. In the end, Habermas and Derrida argue, this is the idea that matters and is most natural to European history – not what provided the impetus.

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