

German Historical Institute  
London

THE 2005 ANNUAL LECTURE

Europe, the “West” and  
the Civilizing Mission

*by*

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London 2006

Published by  
The German Historical Institute London  
17 Bloomsbury Square  
London WC1A 2NJ  
Tel: 020 - 7309 2050 Fax: 020 - 7404 5573/7309 2055  
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ISSN 0269-8560  
ISBN 0 9533570 9 0

Nowadays, historians (at least some of them) are engaged in fascinating and fashionable *jeux d'échelles*: Doubts are being cast on national history proper. A bit of 'entanglement' of one particular national history with a neighbouring one is highly appreciated. Geographical areas that are usually kept apart are integrated into one encompassing vision. Quite a few of those taking part in the discussion advocate the 'Europeanization of German history', others go a step further and suggest that European history be 'globalized'.<sup>1</sup> British imperial history is recommended as a stepping-stone on the way to world history.<sup>2</sup> The global is discovered in the local, and local specificity is placed within ever-increasing concentric contexts stretching towards globality.

The immodest title of this modest lecture may raise the expectation that a contribution will be offered to this debate about the scale of history in time and space. 'The West' is clearly more than Europe, and the 'civilizing mission' obviously refers to the question of the universal validity and attractiveness of 'Western' world-views, political norms and styles of life. However, there are several ways of arguing in favour of 'big history' approaches. Some of them have already been explored in this Institute. One is more abstract and 'theoretical', based on first principles.<sup>3</sup> Its main assumption is that a 'global age' demands global history. It boasts an ancient pedigree, and with Reinhart Koselleck the point may even be made that the conceptual tools for world history have been available since late Antiquity.<sup>4</sup> A rival line of argument, the one pursued tonight, is much more low-key and pragmatic. It simply assumes that some problems already come in a global format. To put it differently (since we are all constructivists now): There are problems of historical investigation and judgement that

are best developed within a vast frame of reference. For practical purposes, they can easily be broken down into manageable pieces, but it is sometimes more sensible to start out from an Olympian point of view, to work from the top down, rather than to scale a ladder from the local bottom up to ever higher spatial levels.

This seems also to be true for concepts. A number of keywords of the modern age, though originating locally (mostly in Western and Central Europe), have had a universal resonance. Their meanings have taken on lives of their own, not completely tied to their historical origins. Thus Occidental 'modernity'—sociologists tell us—has split into 'multiple' modernities in the various parts of the globe, each with its own characteristic solutions to general problems of social organization and cultural interpretation.<sup>5</sup> Other concepts are universal in an even more fundamental sense. They came into being, polygenetically as it were, in different and unconnected circumstances. Most human communities, for example, have a sense of 'justice' and 'responsibility' and many know how to distinguish 'rational' behaviour from its opposite. Such notions are in a sense specific and culture-bound. But they are at the same time translatable and suited to mutual recognition. To put it in the crudest possible terms: Chinese, Arabic or European ideas of justice or rational inquiry may, at any given time, differ enormously. Yet, they all answer recognizably to common questions about a good order or an adequate explanation of natural phenomena.<sup>6</sup>

'Civilization'—in the normative sense of 'being civilized'—is one of those genuinely universal concepts.<sup>7</sup> We find semantic equivalents in classical Chinese or Arabic, and perhaps everywhere over and above a certain density and intensity of courtly and urban life.<sup>8</sup> The idea of different degrees of 'brutishness' and 'refinement' is

wide-spread. Warrior classes, their task accomplished, have often sheathed their swords and re-invented themselves as gentlemen, and guardians of the word (priests, scribes, secular teachers or others) have usually seen their professional purpose in the domestication of other segments of society. The trouble with 'civilization' is that it is meaningless without an inferior counterpart. Much more than 'justice' or 'rationality', it is what Koselleck calls an 'asymmetric counterconcept': a concept in need of its less-valued opposite.<sup>9</sup> Even if one is weary of 'binary codes' and of endless invocations of 'the Other', there is no denying that any ideal of civilization depends on what it is not: savagery, barbarism or even a different, but deficient manner of being civilized. If such contrasts were to remain static and frozen or, fashionably speaking, purely 'exclusivist', the idea of civilization would be much less worrying than it actually is. In fact, it is rare for those who glory in their own cultural perfection to enjoy its fruits in tranquil self-sufficiency. The presumed barbarians rattle at the gates; achievement is threatened by exhaustion, routine and the loss of virtue; and sometimes the civilized take the offensive: They develop a passion (or a rational strategy) to de-barbarize the barbarians. Thus is born civilization's unruly offspring: the 'civilizing mission'.

'Civilizing mission' is not a term of general usage, its German equivalent – *Zivilisierungsmission* – has not yet been admitted to the 'Duden' dictionary. Germans have had their special problems with 'civilization'. At a time when some of them still believed that they were born to lead the world, the word *Zivilisation* was considered *undeutsch* – not genuinely German. The apologists of German imperialism preferred to talk about *Kulturarbeit* – even a mission, for Germans, had to be hard work.<sup>10</sup> The French notion of *la mission civilisatrice*, by contrast,

is generic and fairly precise, but quite narrow, since it gave the name to a specific colonial doctrine of the Third Republic.<sup>11</sup> It is too restricted for the present purpose. *La mission civilisatrice* was but the most flamboyant version of a much more general European attitude. The civilizing mission of the United States used to come under the label of a 'manifest destiny' and has recently reappeared as the 'war against terror'.<sup>12</sup> And the Chinese, ardent civilizers of long standing, simply call it *hanhua*: sinicization.

To cut through this maze of meaning, we need a preliminary definition. It will not really survive intact the rest of this lecture, but some kind of starting point is urgently required. A definition might run like this: The 'civilizing mission' is a special kind of belief with, sometimes, practical consequences. It includes the self-proclaimed right and duty to propagate and actively introduce one's own norms and institutions to other peoples and societies, based upon a firm conviction of the inherent superiority and higher legitimacy of one's own collective way of life. Note that 'mission' here is not restricted to the spreading of a religious faith. It denotes a comprehensive *Sendungsbewusstsein*, a general propensity to universalize the Self.

'Civilizing mission', thus defined, is, of course, a core element in the ideology of modern imperialism. Yet, it is not as obsolete as imperialism and empire. The civilizing mission persists in numerous genetic mutations. Its rhetoric flourishes, and it evokes strong reactions. They range from uninhibited enthusiasm to bitter contempt. At one extreme, we get passionate defenders of the idea that, after the providential defeat of Communism in the Cold War, the rich, powerful and free nations are called upon to make the world, once and for all, safe for democracy and enterprise. The temporary use of eco-

conomic and military coercion, in this view, is justifiable in pursuit of a greater common good accruing to all. This kind of interventionist Wilsonianism is not exactly a novelty. Some people, however, call it the programme of the New American Empire.

At the other end, the civilizing mission is furiously denounced not so much by national governments (who appreciate that so-called civilization often comes along with financial grants, loans and military assistance) as by post-colonial theorists. For them, the civilizing mission joins Orientalism, Euro-Centrism, the McDonaldization of the world and possibly racism as expressions of the despicable arrogance of an unreconstructed West. The civilizing mission, in this view, disregards cultural pluralism. It is a great equalizer, the weapon of a 'hegemonic culture' that does not want to help the less privileged, but drenches everything in shallow consumerism. The Self extinguishes the Other.

It cannot be the task of the historian to adjudicate in this quarrel about the merits and faults of the civilizing mission. It would also mean asking too much, if he were expected to come up with general rules for the wisdom and legitimacy of current implementations of a civilizing mission. Was NATO right to intervene in Kosovo? Are there tenable reasons left in support of a war to liberate the peoples of Iraq from Saddam Hussein's tyranny? Could and should the genocide in Ruanda have been prevented by foreign military invasion? Do economic 'shock therapies' with all their unpleasant side-effects really clear the ground for the sprouting of 'civil society'? It is the business of legal theory, moral philosophy and well-considered political judgement to grope for answers to such questions. What the historian can do is to dispel myths about the civilizing mission, to

correct the enthusiasts as well as the demonizers in the light of past experience.

First of all: Is the civilizing mission a European invention and a unique expression of Western hubris? Yes and No. Certainly there is no precedent in history for the West's success in disseminating its own mores and cultural models. At the same time, other cultures accomplished durable forms of 'cultural hegemony'. The closest runner-up behind the West was China.<sup>13</sup> It is nowadays developing its own kind of modernity and is turning itself from a victim into an agent of globalization. For many centuries, China dominated its own Asian sphere of influence through a shrewd mixture of military coercion and cultural persuasion. The modern concept of 'civilization' was introduced to China only in the late nineteenth century via the famous Japanese scholar Fukuzawa Yukichi who in turn adopted it from popular European authors like François Guizot and Henry Thomas Buckle. But something similar was known to classical China: a highly developed idea of what it meant to have language and script, rituals and moral rules, refinement in the conduct of life, and the benevolence of sage kings and emperors. The major difference from modern Western notions of civilization is the lack of connotations of *civitas*, the city, citizenship. The relentless urge of the Chinese elite to civilize others was directed at the peasantry, at non-Han-Chinese (today called 'minorities') within the realm and at 'barbarians' along its borders. Since, more often than not, the barbarians were at least as strong as the empire itself, it was a matter of policy and sometimes survival to soften their fierceness and to pacify them through gentle moral authority. The Chinese were so deeply convinced of their own cultural superiority and they had such a firm belief in the basic goodness of the barbarians, that

simply upholding the brilliant model of Chineseness seemed to be enough to prompt everyone to strive for improvement. The Chinese empire conducted no crusades, dispatched no missionaries and rarely supported forcible sinicization. The confidence of the Chinese *literati* in the attractiveness of their own culture was strengthened by a memory, kept alive through the classical literary canon, of the Chinese people's own barbarian past. The Chinese had struggled very hard to outgrow their humble origins. Civilization was an achievement, and others were encouraged to make a similar effort.

A dramatic example of such an effort was offered by the Manchus north of the Great Wall.<sup>14</sup> In the early seventeenth century, guided by their prince Nurhaci, one of the most formidable state-builders of the age, this small people of boreal hunters (with the help of Chinese 'advisers') taught itself how to run the Chinese empire and how to play the intricate games of Chinese culture. When they took over the Dragon throne and much of the attached state apparatus in 1644, they were extremely well prepared. Within a generation, the emperors of the new Qing dynasty, while deliberately preserving traces of their savage past (such as a penchant for personally hunting the tiger in Manchuria), were credibly assuming the roles of sage kings, supreme fountains of Confucian prestige and patrons of the arts: a huge experiment in 'self-improvement' – with only marginal influences transmitted from Europe by the court Jesuits. Being firmly entrenched at the apex of the Chinese empire, the Manchus then applied the well-proven methods of exhortation and imperial control to their Mongolian and Tibetan subjects.

All this may sound 'pre-modern' and therefore, perhaps, not really relevant to our subject. The Chinese

urge to civilize was non-colonialist and detached from a religious mission. Nonetheless, it derived from a strong *Sendungsbewusstsein*, it was based on secular and inner-worldly standards of cultural perfection, and it was driven by a belief in the inherent magnetic power of one's own civilization. The barbarians were expected to *lai Hua*: literally: to 'come to China', to turn their hearts and minds towards the shining culture at the centre of the known world. In a strikingly similar way, today's Western proponents of a soft and peaceful civilizing mission put their trust in the intrinsic virtues of democracy, the rule of law and free enterprise. At least, developments in Central and Eastern Europe west of Russia since 1991 seem to support such a non-obtrusive understanding of the civilizing mission. The virtues of Western Europe, so the argument runs, speak for themselves.

For lack of time and knowledge, let me skip the complicated genealogy of ideas about civilizing in the Occident.<sup>15</sup> They have Roman, Biblical and Augustinian roots, they can be found during the Middle Ages,<sup>16</sup> and it could be suggested that the Counter-Reformation was intended to be one massive project of re-civilization. Early modern overseas empires were rarely suffused with civilizing missions. Apart from the Spanish monarchy, nobody even dreamt of creating a homogeneous imperial culture.<sup>17</sup> For the English and the Dutch, *imperium* was a commercial venture with little need of moral regulation. Missionary zeal would only have disturbed business and fractured the fiction of imperial harmony. The idea that European laws should be introduced outside areas of European settlement was left unthought.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, until the closing decades of the eighteenth century, a kind of power-political and cultural equilibrium prevailed between Europe and Asia.

European elites were intrigued by innumerable differences between European and Asian countries. But they did not yet rank mankind on a static scale of civilization, with themselves at the top and the others distributed across the lower rungs. There is a special step to be taken from a pride in one's own civilization to the belief that the world would be a better place if others would abandon their own ways and share in the superior culture.

Such a step was taken during the *Sattelzeit*, the all-important age of turmoil and transformation that began in the 1760s and lasted until the 1830s. Following numerous other historians, C. A. Bayly has recently reaffirmed the significance of this period as a threshold in global history.<sup>19</sup> Whatever the intellectual origins of the civilizing mission may have been, this was an age of practical implementation. New sources of a heightened European self-confidence were not missing: military victories over a broad range of peoples from the Indians in North America to the Indians in South Asia, scientific and technological break-throughs, the discovery of the nation as an energizing principle. The Enlightenment was not as culpable as it is nowadays often made out to be.<sup>20</sup> While it certainly did not, as its detractors allege, provide blueprints for a 'logocentric' subjugation of the world, it did at least, especially in its final phase, put a new emphasis on pedagogy. The truth, once discovered, was there to be taught and applied. Another important discovery of the Enlightenment was the process of civilization, described by David Hume and William Robertson in their histories of England and Scotland, respectively, and cast into a model of mankind's rise through stages of material subsistence and intellectual awareness by Adam Smith, Turgot and Condorcet.<sup>21</sup>

The message to would-be practitioners of the civilizing mission was ambiguous. It depended on one's patience and one's confidence in the natural course of things. You either watch societal evolution unfold undisturbed; then you need no civilizing mission. Or evolution requires prodding and encouragement. In that case, those peoples groaning under despotism and the debris of dead traditions would be grateful for a little help from their friends.

Applications of the civilizing mission varied across a broad range, and to some extent, they expressed themselves in national styles. The Germans have to be left out of the picture. Their *Bildungsidee*, coming into its own in this epoch, was a programme of personal *self-cultivation* – with a certain complement of political utopia.<sup>22</sup> For want of outer and even inner barbarians, the process of civilizing turned individualist, inward and reflective. When, for once, Germans were allowed to participate in a major civilizing venture, they more than fulfilled their brief: In 1832, the Great Powers placed the newly-created Greek state under Bavarian tutelage. It received a Bavarian ruler, a Bavarian bureaucracy and a Bavarian ideology of improvement which suffered from the paradox that classical Hellas should be restored with the help of living Greeks whose total inadequacy to the lofty task was an article of faith. The Greeks later got rid of the Bavarian regency and, finally, of King Otto himself (who never understood why).<sup>23</sup> Ironically, they warmed to the idea of a civilizing mission of their own. They called it the 'Great Idea', directed it against the Turks – and suffered a shattering defeat after, in 1919, foolishly attacking Mustafa Pasha's Army. Among the numerous break-downs of civilizing missions, the collapse of Greek ambitions after the First World War was a particularly sudden and spectacular one.<sup>24</sup>

Another case of mixed success was the Napoleonic civilizing mission on horseback. Here, the final outcome was less clear-cut. The project was advertized as one enormous campaign of liberation (we are in the age of Beethoven's *Fidelio* with its delivering trumpet call). The citizens of Cairo, many Spaniards and the newly re-enslaved Blacks of the French Caribbean had their own opinions about this kind of liberation. In contrast, the French regime in the German *Rheinbundstaaten* had an overall civilizing and modernizing impact through the introduction of progressive laws and institutions. The indirect French influences in Prussia or, in an attenuated and belated form, in the Ottoman Empire went in the same direction. What is most interesting, is the Napoleonic style of civilizing. As Michael Broers has pointed out, the attitude of French officers and civil servants in the occupied areas of Europe was of a startling arrogance and *hauteur*.<sup>25</sup> Administration can, at the same time, be extremely rational and efficient and accompanied by a tremendous social distance from and lack of sympathy with the recipients of its measures. This was the case, for example, in occupied Italy.

On the whole, Napoleonic France was the first major manifestation of the civilizing authoritarian state (if we disregard the specific case of Petrine Russia). The state was considered the instrument of a planned transformation of degenerate *ancien régimes* at home and abroad. The purpose of reforms was no longer the redress of specific grievances, but the realization of an entirely new order. This French model of civilizing intervention did not remain a national peculiarity. Later in the century, French colonial policy (in Algeria, for example) did not always follow Napoleonic precedent, whereas British policy, unwittingly, sometimes did. Lord Cromer, as the near-almighty ruler of Egypt after 1882, can be

seen as some kind of Napoleonic figure: the embodiment of cold administrative rationality – with the important difference that any ambition to ‘liberate’ the indigenous population had by now disappeared. The ‘civilizing’ of Egypt served no other interests than those of the occupying power, and it was devoid of any revolutionary intentions.<sup>26</sup>

The British variant of a civilizing mission during the pre-Victorian *Sattelzeit* is particularly difficult to disentangle. In terms of intellectual history alone, the Evangelical Revival, the activist streak in utilitarian philosophy, the rationalizing arguments of the political economists and a newly assertive British nationalism combined in generating strong impulses to change the world. These impulses played themselves out mainly in India in the 1830s, if strongly contested during the famous struggle between Anglicists and Orientalists. The most important British arena for the civilizing mission, however, was anti-slavery.<sup>27</sup> This was a true British peculiarity. The Germans had no colonies and therefore no slaves. The French revolutionaries of the early 1790s were somewhat equivocal about slavery, Napoleon decided in its favour, and final abolition had to wait until 1848. The Russian ruling class had no compunction about keeping their peasantry in slave-like servitude until 1861. Cuba freed its last slaves in 1886. So, the British (and the Danes) went down a special path among the nations of Europe, a *Sonderweg*. The successful struggle against the slave trade and against the institution of slavery was the quintessential civilizing mission of the pre-Victorian age. It was experienced by its protagonists and by the great number of their female and male supporters as a singular moral purification. Having overcome the old sinful self and having destroyed one of the most stable social institutions of the

early modern world, the British seemed to be entitled to universal moral leadership. He who had raised the poor slave from the dust, was predestined for uplifting mankind as a whole. The campaign against slavery and the slave-trade also created all sorts of pretexts for interference and intervention across the globe. For the first time ever, humanitarianism became a tool of foreign policy.

Finally, the American version. The creators of the United States, among them the Englishman Tom Paine, were steeped deeply in European Enlightenment thought, and they had little doubt that no other country in the world had left the barbarism of *ancien régime* politics more thoroughly behind.<sup>28</sup> This made possible the supreme self-confidence that radiates from Jeffersonian rhetoric. At the same time, North America outside a few cities continued to be a place where even the most basic elements of civilized society were hard to acquire. The problem of slavery aside, the country was full of combative tribes and unruly frontiersmen. Hence a dual process was set in motion of what historian Richard Bushman has called 'the refinement of America' and also of the attempted 'civilizing' of the Indians.<sup>29</sup> Already with Jefferson and his generation we find the idea of a civilizing mission *vis-à-vis* the Native Americans. Its core idea was to transform hunters and nomadic shepherds into settled agriculturalists and then to appropriate the land left 'uncultivated' by them for the use of Euro-American settlers.<sup>30</sup> Such a programme never worked. Both the Indians and the land-hungry settlers refused to comply.

The tragedy of White-Indian contacts went through many acts. During one of them, the so-called Five Civilized Tribes in the Southeast assimilated themselves to an astonishing degree to their white environment and fulfilled almost all the conditions imposed upon them by

the Great White Father in Washington, DC. This did not protect them against deportation in the 1830s, and when they resumed self-reform in their new territory in present-day Oklahoma, giving themselves modern laws and establishing an exemplary system of education, this again was to no avail and did not secure them in the possession of their lands. Other tribes, of course, violently resisted white encroachment. The outcome was the same. The rhetoric of integrating the Indians into the nation persisted until the 1880s. From that time onwards, it was obvious to everyone that the civilizing mission had failed in practice and was discredited in theory.<sup>31</sup>

The self-refinement of the white population of the United States had more ambiguous results. New waves of lower-class immigrants appeared to retard the process time and again, whereas the richest capitalists, much richer than even the wealthiest English aristocrat, still felt insecure in matters of taste and cultural judgement. This was still the case when the United States embarked on its civilizing mission abroad, beginning (after the earlier prelude of the Mexican War of 1846-1848) with the conquest of the Philippines in 1898 to 1902. From a different perspective, Reconstruction after the Civil War can be seen as a huge attempt to civilize Southern society after the end of slavery.<sup>32</sup>

Let us return to the chronological benchmark of the 1830s. At around that time, a new understanding of the civilizing mission gained shape almost around the world. As a shorthand, one might call it the Victorian civilizing mission. It was characterized by a number of basic traits.

First of all, there was a revival and great upsurge of the Christian mission among the so-called heathens. Protestant churches and missionary societies took the

lead, operating with private financial resources and, as Andrew Porter has recently demonstrated, at some distance from the colonial state.<sup>33</sup> The Roman Catholic mission followed a little later and in more intimate conjunction with the political authorities, especially the Second French Empire. The Christian mission also intended to be 'civilizing' in an inner-worldly way. It propagated reading skills, soap and monogamy. But it was by no means co-terminous with the civilizing mission as such and quite often followed its own agenda.

Second, the civilizing mission became truly universal. It was no longer directed at specific peoples, societies and groups: at Egyptians oppressed by Mamluk tyranny, at widow-burning Indians or bison-hunting Cheyennes. Rather, the British, as the foremost self-appointed educators of mankind, pioneered two sets of normative practices with unlimited operational scope: international law and the free market. The old *ius gentium* was transformed into a legal 'standard of civilization' of general validity.<sup>34</sup> To this day, law is the most prestigious and probably the most potent agent of trans-cultural processes of civilizing. Its prestige derives from its dual nature as both a political instrument in the hands of individual governments and as the product of an autonomous or, as German romantic legal theory would have it, 'anonymous' evolution of social sensibilities and norms. The whole debate about the universal character of human rights takes place within this tension between the evolution and the purposeful construction of law. In a colonial context, legislation and its enforcement by courts and police very often was a sharp weapon of cultural aggression. To ban, for example, the use of native languages and to force the indigenous population to express themselves in the idiom of the colonizers (be it French or Japanese) were among the

most bitterly resented policies in the entire history of colonialism. Such policies invariably proved self-defeating and never had the intended 'civilizing' effect. It was one of the comparative strengths of the British Empire that the English legal tradition and its pragmatic implementation in many colonies left room for legal accommodation with indigenous traditions – some of which had to be revived or newly 'invented'.

The Victorian 'standard of civilization' developed the universal and evolutionary aspect of law: universal, because it defined – not yet in the language of 'human rights'! – a basic set of norms which, in sum, described what it meant to be a member of the 'civilized world'. These norms cut across the various branches of law. They ranged from the prohibition of 'cruel' punishments through the sanctity of property and civil contracts to decent behaviour in international relations: that a state should exchange diplomats and respect the symbolic equality of nations (hence no more *kowtows* in China or removals of ambassadorial shoes in front of the king of Burma). The evolutionary side of such a notion of general law lay in the idea that the 'standard of civilization' was the outcome of a long process of civilization in Europe and that the so-called 'leading nations' – in a very narrow definition, just Britain and France – were guardians of this state of legal perfection.<sup>35</sup> As in the case of anti-slavery, Europe's claim to moral authority rested on successful self-education. Wasn't it a remarkable progress from breaking people publicly on the wheel to having them swiftly dispatched by Dr Guillotin's ingenious mechanism?

Until the 1870s European legal theorists saw the standard of civilization as a yardstick for criticizing 'barbarian' practices in non-European countries rather than as a recipe for immediate action. Even the 'open-

ing' of China, Japan and Siam through war or gunboat-supported threats was justified more in terms of basic requirements of international circulation than as part of a wholesale civilizing mission directed at those countries. In this light, the early treaty port system in China was a compromise. China had to accept 'extra-territoriality' (basically an early-modern legal convention, first used in the Ottoman Empire), but it was not obliged to remould its entire legal system. The westernization of Chinese law was a long drawn-out process, beginning after the turn of the century and still not completed.

The 'standard of civilization' is by no means a thing of the past. Anyone who has the slightest acquaintance with the Victorian rhetoric of civilizing, must have been struck by the recent approach of the European Union towards the Turkish Republic. Turkey, a country with a long experience of self-reform, has been presented with a detailed catalogue of entrance requirements uncannily reminiscent of the nineteenth century. At that time, it was common British practice to demand of countries like Brazil and, later, even Morocco that they make their marriage and inheritance laws conform to 'civilized' standards.<sup>36</sup> The concept of a 'civilized world' is anything but dead, and a crucial yardstick of admission continues to be the kind and quality of law and its execution.

Law was closely related to the market, the other great 'gentle civilizer of nations'.<sup>37</sup> International free trade, after all, was simply being called into being through the abolition of tariffs and trade controls. Law creates markets, and the market demands its own special kind of legal regulation. The liberal utopia of the domesticating effects of the market forms a key element in the enduring Victorian concept of the civilizing mission. Markets, this is the orthodox assumption, make nations peaceful,

warrior classes obsolete and individuals industrious and acquisitive. Some of these assertions, for instance the 'democratic peace' thesis, remain hotly contested even today. The new idea in the nineteenth century was that the market should be seen as a 'natural' mechanism for the generation of wealth and the distribution of benefits. Free the natural play of supply and demand from foolish meddling – and you will witness human nature blossom to the maximum of its capacities. Everybody, regardless of his or her cultural background, would respond eagerly to novel opportunities. Thanks to steam transport and telegraphic communication, markets everywhere were integrated into ever-larger spheres of activity. Therefore, the impact of the mid-Victorian trade revolution was expected to be on a planetary scale. Market growth created a world market. The keener observers of social reality, of course, soon came to understand that the market did not necessarily raise the general level of morality. It civilized some, brutalized others and left a third group untouched.<sup>38</sup>

This third group was particularly irksome to orthodox economic liberals. People who were given the helping hand of improvement, but did not respond to market 'incentives' marked one of the fuzzy boundaries of the civilizing mission: freed slaves in Jamaica, for example, who fled from the plantations and reverted to subsistence agriculture, or the Chinese who stuck to their old-fashioned silver currency until 1935 and did not even possess a proper coinage, carrying their money about in unminted ingots.

A realistic answer to problems of this kind was that the market needed anthropological underpinnings. The establishment of free market conditions, as John Stuart Mill and a few others already suspected, does not automatically call forth the natural instincts of a univer-

sal *homo oeconomicus*. Human beings have to be educated to master new challenges. Someone has to teach them to make use of commercial opportunities. In practice, such benevolent tutelage had to wait for the end of empire. Then it gained support under the label of 'developmental aid' / *Entwicklungshilfe* – an influential variant of the civilizing mission in the post-World War II era.<sup>39</sup> While the empires existed, their educative efforts as far as economic behaviour is concerned were quite limited. The notorious *Erziehung des Negers zur Arbeit* (training, or rather, compelling Africans to do European-style work) in the German colonies meant very much work and very little education. Things were similar elsewhere.

Of the remaining distinctive features of the Victorian civilizing mission, one can be dealt with briefly, while the other requires a somewhat longer explanation. An obvious peculiarity is the narrow urban and bourgeois bias of the civilizing ideology and its related programmes. Rarely before in history had there been such a sharp juxtaposition of city and countryside as in the nineteenth century – apart from England with its lack of a peasantry proper. Social and economic modernization in many parts of the world took place in the cities. It was largely coterminous with urbanization, and it often occurred at the expense of the rural districts. The civilizing mission universalized the values of modern urban middle classes. Its principal spokesmen saw themselves engulfed by barbarian majorities everywhere. This had already been the Napoleonic view of things. It now became less *étatiste* and acquired a slightly broader social basis. One did not have to go as far as Africa or Asia to encounter blatant non-civility. Peasants had to be turned into Frenchmen (to recall the title of Eugen Weber's famous book).<sup>40</sup> The growing metropolitan cit-

ies themselves were invaded by poor rustics who called forth an ambivalent mixture of rejection and philanthropy. Observers like Friedrich Engels or Henry Mayhew saw little difference between English slum-dwellers and the labouring poor in the colonies. Mayhew drew a close analogy between the propertyless 'urban nomads' at home and the true nomads far away in the desert.<sup>41</sup> The 'inner barbarians' were just as strange – and sometimes as frightening – as exotic savages.

In Mexico, the liberal *científicos*, a ruling elite who modelled themselves on European urban oligarchies, waged a war on rural Indians with their allegedly backward communal property of land. Urban intellectuals and bureaucrats in Tokyo, Istanbul and Cairo regarded their own countryside as an ignoble savage Other. The most spectacular eruption of *la sauvagerie* within the self-proclaimed 'civilized world' occurred during the Paris Commune of 1871. After its ferocious suppression – the degree of violence used on this occasion equalled that in India after the Mutiny of 1857 – about four thousand surviving *communards* were deported to New Caledonia, a recently acquired French colony in the South Pacific. There, the defeated rebels underwent a harsh programme of 'civilization' that did not differ significantly from the simultaneous treatment of the indigenous Kanaks.<sup>42</sup> Barbarity was ubiquitous and demanded counter-measures in all corners of the globe.

Fourth and finally: In spite of much local (and ill-documented) resentment and resistance against civilizing projects on the spot, one fundamental truth cannot be denied: European 'civilization' became immensely and genuinely popular and prestigious all over the world during the High Victorian age. Europe's cosmopolitan discourse of modernity found an echo around

the world. In the early 1870s, more than half of Japan's political leadership left their country in the famous 'Iwakura Mission' and travelled to Europe and North America in order to study the secrets of the West. Visitors from many other Asian and African countries made the 'voyage in' and reported what they saw and heard.<sup>43</sup> The works of leading European authors were translated into 'exotic' languages: Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill, François Guizot and Herbert Spencer. Non-European elites adopted, even mimicked, European life-styles and patterns of consumption: from the architecture of railway stations to the global popularity of top hat and woollen frock coat – sometimes becoming *de rigueur* even in the tropics. Consumer Westernization is a highly visible, if somewhat unreliable symbolic indicator of self-imposed modernity. There were degrees: around 1880 the Europeanization of elite life-styles had proceeded further in Japan than in China, further in Cairo than in Istanbul. Nowhere was it more advanced than in Latin America. The famous sociologist Gilberto Freyre maliciously suggests that many members of the Brazilian upper class had their teeth pulled and artificial dentures made to measure in order to demonstrate their cultural sophistication.<sup>44</sup> At the presidential state dinner on the centenary of Mexican independence not a single dish of Mexican origin was served.

Much more anecdotal evidence could be adduced to illustrate the enormous attraction European civilization exercised on all continents. All our examples were taken from non-colonial contexts. No Western government forced Asians or Latin Americans to practice ballroom dancing, to eat French food or to fancy Italian opera. Acquiring European tastes and objects was considered part of a comprehensive process of self-civilization.

This process had serious political implications and consequences. So far, no study has been undertaken to compare the various movements of nineteenth-century self-reform outside Europe's direct orbit of influence: Egypt under Muhammad Ali between 1805 and 1848 and later under the extravagant Khedive Ismail (who steered the country into bankruptcy), Madagascar after 1810 under King Radama I and his female and male successors, the Ottoman Empire in the so-called Tanzimat Era from 1839 onwards, Japan during the Meiji Restoration after 1868, Siam under the truly remarkable reforming monarchs Mongkut and Chulalongkorn. China and Persia moved into this phase shortly after 1900. It could even be argued that Russia with its Great Reforms after 1861 fits well into this overall picture.

A comparison would reveal vast differences between the individual cases, but also a number of similarities: All these movements, invariably initiated 'from above', got started in the shadow of Europe's looming hegemony and were motivated by a desire for preventive modernization.<sup>45</sup> They all were framed in a language of self-civilization – an important contrast to the period from about 1880 onwards when the dominant mood in Asia and Africa became that of survival and defiance in a world of Darwinist struggle. They all aimed at strengthening the central state, its military potential and its fiscal capacity. Corruption was generally seen as a debilitating evil. The importance of some kind of state-sponsored education and of basic legal guarantees for private property was appreciated. The state was called upon to support modest forms of export-led growth without surrendering the commanding heights of the economy to foreign interests. None of these self-strengthening policies was intended to introduce representative de-

mocracy, only a few of them reflected sympathy towards Western ideas of citizenship.

Everywhere (except in Japan, where the Meiji Restoration amounted to a veritable revolution) the chief objective of such cautious self-civilization in selective imitation of Europe was to reform and stabilize *anciens régimes*. The usual outcome was failure. By 1914, Egypt and Madagascar were colonies, and in Turkey, Persia, China, Mexico and Russia the old order had gone through severe revolutionary crises. Even so, it is important not to overlook the fact that self-civilization was one of the major themes in non-Western politics throughout much of the nineteenth century.

A final shared feature of the various reform movements mentioned (and a couple of others) was that their promoters saw themselves as harbingers of civilization. Reacting in a preventive way to Europe's admired civility and its dreaded civilizing mission, they all pursued civilizing missions of their own towards internal peripheries and their peoples. This was part of the very logic of civilizing. Being a 'civilized' state and society seemed to demand a transformative thrust against barbarism. Thus, the Ottomans felt a duty to settle their tribal nomads, the Egyptians in Cairo and Alexandria saw the Sudan as an internal frontier, and even insular Japan used the native Ainu as objects of civilizing activities.<sup>46</sup> The most spectacular case of such a secondary civilizing mission was the Tsarist empire.<sup>47</sup> Ever since the days of Peter the Great, the Russian monarchs had been sensitive about their country's inferiority in comparison to Western Europe. At the same time, scholarly expeditions had been sent to study the numerous non-Russian peoples within the empire. In the 1830s, this intermediate position between East and West crystallized into an elaborate doctrine of a unique Russian

mission in world history. That mission was no longer restricted to the tribespeoples inside the realm, but was supposed to be directed at Asia as a whole. Asia, by and large still respected in the days of Catherine the Great, now came to be seen as a backward part of mankind, destined to be rescued and rehabilitated by Russia as the Easternmost representative of Western civilization. In practice, this led to an unusually militant expansion in Islamic Inner Asia and Transcaucasia. The resonances of Russian intransigence and Islamic hostility, both somewhat tempered during the Soviet period, are still to be felt in the Chechen tragedy – the latest graveyard of Russia’s civilizing ambitions.

At this point, we may be allowed to conclude the chronological narrative. All the central elements of the ideology and practice of the civilizing mission were assembled during the Victorian period. Later additions mainly included extravagancies and exaggerations. Around the turn of the century, Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed ‘the great work of uplifting mankind’. And President William McKinley, looking back at his recent decision to subdue the Philippine movement of liberation from Spain in a really nasty colonial war, found an unsurpassed formula for the tension between necessity and salvation in the idea of the civilizing mission:

There was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God’s grace do the very best we could for them, as our fellow-men for whom Christ also died.<sup>48</sup>

Imperial exuberance of this pitch seldom passed British lips. The French, however, developed their own hyperbolic imagery of overflowing imperial benevolence. It

flourished intensely in the mandated territories entrusted to France after the First World War by the League of Nations. The Syrians and the Lebanese were propagandistically depicted as the newly adopted children, traumatized by Ottoman violence and neglect, of a caring and nurturing 'Mother France'. The nourishing maternal principle was to be represented by the – invariably male! – civil bureaucrats, while the military stood for stern paternal authority. It soon turned out that the Near East was a most unlikely place for such familial harmony.<sup>49</sup>

What about the general relationship between the civilizing mission and colonialism?<sup>50</sup> It is a central argument of this lecture that the civilizing mission far transcends the boundaries of direct colonial rule. Upon closer inspection, colonial history shows a wide variety of paths and possibilities. They are not necessarily distinguishable along national lines. Just as interesting as to look for differences between, for example, British, French and German styles of 'civilizing', is to sketch a rough taxonomy of basic attitudes. At one extreme, we find much rhetoric plus also a considerable transformative effect, as in the American Philippines after the war of conquest. At the other extreme, colonial rulers dispense with that barest minimum of sympathy with the colonized that is necessary for any transformative relationship to develop. Thus, fascist Italy and imperial Japan cultivated a self-image as *Herrenmenschen*, born members of an unaccountable master race.<sup>51</sup> The most radical version of such a colonialism without a civilizing mission came with the German *Ostreich* during the Second World War. Not civilization, but enslavement and extermination was to be the ultimate fate of the subjugated Slavic and Jewish population of Eastern Europe.

In between these extreme options, many different intensities of the civilizing mission in theory and practice can be discerned. French contexts are often conspicuous by a particularly wide gap between programmes and their implementation, less so in West Africa than in Algeria and in Indochina, where *la mission civilisatrice*, loudly trumpeted, accomplished little but to equip Hanoi with a *lycée*, a huge and ugly cathedral and a replica of the Paris opera house.<sup>52</sup> Quite another style is that of administrative reform without any civilizing intentions. Lord Cromer's ascendancy over Egypt between 1882 and 1907 (already mentioned above) is a case in point. Cromer saw the modern Egyptian state, virtually his own creation, as a mere machine for the attainment of administrative goals: law and order, a constant flow of tax revenue, a minimal level of public health, sustained export production, and so on. The Egyptians were almost a nuisance in this vision of well-oiled colonial efficiency. Cromer lacked the slightest intention of 'uplifting' anyone within his sphere of control (although in later years he taught himself classical Greek and worked hard to perfect his own *Bildung*). He kept such a distance from his subjects that he could even afford an unusually relaxed attitude towards Islam. It simply did not matter much in his Olympian scheme of things.<sup>53</sup>

A more frequent figure is the disappointed civilizer. Major examples include the attitude of many Euro-Americans towards the Native Americans since about the 1830s, as well as dominant British views of India after the Great Revolt of 1857. Going beyond individual cases, civilizing missions are always liable to disappointment. The civilizer, as a general rule, expects little reward for carrying 'the white man's burden'. He or she, as Kipling himself says in his famous poem, goes through 'thankless years'. *The lightly proffered laurels / the easy*

*ungrudged praise*: not for the toiling civilizer risking health and life in near anonymity. The only gain he really strives for is the gratitude of the objects of his attention – thankful glances and obedient bows from Kipling’s *silent, sullen peoples*.<sup>54</sup> The civilizer deeply believes that he – as an individual and as the representative of his own country and culture – is generous. He or she is a provider of gifts: of religious truths, of cultural skills, of military security, of employment, of medical welfare. The built-in crisis in any civilizing programme comes with the refusal of the alleged barbarian to be civilized. Not that the civilizer tolerates no resistance: he does not expect it.

This is the reason why civilizing missions are so often undermined by a racism which is essentially alien to them. The only possible explanation for missionary failure (in the eyes of the civilizer) is the given and unalterable inability of people in need of civilizing to open their hearts and minds to the benefits of a supposedly higher form of human existence. Bonaparte in Egypt provides an archetypical experience: When their dramatic and high-handed ‘liberation’ of the Egyptians from Mamluk despotism (and, by implication, from the more ‘superstitious’ aspects of Islam) met with the totally unforeseen resistance of the citizens of Cairo, the French military leadership reacted with uncontrolled ferocity. Up to 3,000 Egyptians were massacred, and French soldiers entered the Al-Azhar Mosque on horseback.<sup>55</sup> The freedom-bringing and civilizing project of enlightened Europe suddenly changed into a violent nightmare. The civilizer himself turned barbarian.

A preliminary conclusion would be that colonial rule furnishes an important arena for civilizing missions, whereas it does not contain them. Colonialism can be accompanied by civilizing projects of varying kinds and

degrees of intensity, and sometimes it can do totally without them. At the same time, civilizing missions have been pursued within a multitude of non-colonial contexts. Some of the most momentous instances of a civilizing encounter have been of this particular type. There is a danger of overstretching the concept, but a danger worth taking – for political as well as for scholarly reasons.

The great crises of modern times, whatever in individual cases (such as the French Revolution) their positive achievements may have been, were invariably connected with a loss of civility (the one exception was the peaceful dismantling of the Soviet Union and its satellite empire.) In the aftermath of wars, civil wars, and revolutions there has always been an objective need for the reconstruction of civility. Such a need was fulfilled along varying time-scales. It took years for Spanish society to recover from the Napoleonic trauma and decades after the Civil War to overcome the effects and memories of the 1930s, while in South Africa reconciliation after the end of apartheid succeeded with surprising speed. In both cases, one could speak of re-civilizing as a way to national integration. It is difficult to tell who did the civilizing and who responded to it.

However, there are a few more obvious cases with a stronger missionary content. In his book *Die Umkehr* (published in 2004), the eminent historian Konrad Jarausch has interpreted German history after 1945 as a three-stage process of *Rezivilisierung*.<sup>56</sup> The first re-civilization, obviously, was the liberation of Germany and the enforced reorientation of an occupied society after the military defeat of the Nazi system. Second, in Jarausch's view, the 1960s were the crucial period when Germans shed their deeply ingrained authoritarian mentality. The third phase came with re-unification.

Rather than atonement for the crimes of a rogue nation, it involved a reversal of the deeply rooted social and mental legacies of the German Democratic Republic. After 1945, a deep break with all possible norms of civility had to be submitted to intensive therapeutic care. After 1989, the legacies of a social revolution 'from above' posed unprecedented challenges to the incorporating half of the nation. Especially the recasting of Germany after the twelve years of Nazi 'barbarity' (a term, of course, from the glossary of the civilizing mission!) was a civilizing project of the greatest magnitude, and the same is true of Japan at exactly the same time.<sup>57</sup> Intervention from without and self-civilization went hand in hand. The victorious Western powers, returned emigrants (of little importance in Japan) and many democratically-minded people within the two countries joined forces. The dramatic vision of self-inflicted fall and assisted revival may be a better metaphor for the German (and the Japanese) experience since 1945 than the more placid image of a 'long march toward the West'.<sup>58</sup>

Civilizing missions – this will be my concluding remark – possess preconditions and limits. The most important precondition is a basic trust in the malleability of the Other. He or she who is undergoing civilizing treatment must be considered capable of being educated. For this reason, biologically motivated racism and fantasies of a master race cancel any civilizing mission. There was no room for a civilizing mission in Italian Libya, Japanese Korea and in the *General-Gouvernement Polen* under German rule, not in King Leopold's Congo Free State and not in South Africa under Apartheid – though in the last case for civilizing in reverse: Nelson Mandela has arguably been one of the greatest political civilizers of our age.

A second precondition is the insight that others may think differently. The less objectionable civilizing missions in history have always been based on a mixture of imposition and compromise, of cultural export and import. The Anglicization of Indian education or the proliferation of Christian churches in Africa are good examples. By contrast, the (largely peaceful) spreading of the American dream has, time and again, suffered setbacks and caused disappointment, because not everyone on earth was born with a natural instinct for individualist profit-seeking – witness the abortive efforts by rash ‘reformers’ to Americanize Boris Yelzin’s Russia.<sup>59</sup> A third condition, therefore, is a certain interest on the part of the recipients in letting themselves be civilized. In the cases of conscious and strategically planned ‘self-civilizing’ from Muhammad Ali in Egypt through Meiji Japan to post-totalitarian China since 1979 the terms have even been fixed by the ‘buyers’ of civilization themselves who shop around for foreign knowledge and foreign capital and who use foreign advisers according to their own purposes.

But where are the limits – other than the racist colonizer and the incorrigible monster (already in the eighteenth century there were disturbing debates about if and how to socialize cannibals)?<sup>60</sup> One limit is success. Any civilizing mission is essentially mortal. Successful missions render themselves obsolete by eliminating the problem they set out to solve. According to Konrad Jarausch, West Germany had reached such a threshold in the 1960s. Or, to take a colonial example: By the mid-1930s, Indian political culture had matured to a point where the chief retarding factor was not Indian backwardness, but the continuing presence of the British Raj.

A second limit has often been settlement colonialism. Whether or not they are avowed racists, settlers – not only European ones, but also, for instance, Han-Chinese in Mongolia – usually feel only a limited responsibility for the material and spiritual welfare of the so-called natives. The indigenous population is either displaced or pushed back behind a moving frontier (this happened in North America and Australia) or else incorporated as marginal and migrant labour at the bottom of a farming or plantation economy. In both cases, cultural assimilation is irrelevant for the proper functioning of the colonial system. A civilizing involvement with the ‘natives’ looks like a sentimental waste of money and effort. Settlers have, therefore, often been particularly vehement adversaries of the Christian mission.<sup>61</sup>

Third and finally, let me recall an earlier remark about the bourgeois bias of civilizing ideologies. This is yet another limiting factor. Aristocrats usually do not see a need to civilize each other. They share a Burkean respect for established nobility across cultural boundaries – ‘ornamentalism’ as we have learned to say.<sup>62</sup> The most striking example, after some colourful cases of a romantic solidarity between British noblemen and Asian princes, is the stance of a celebrated proconsul of Republican France. General (later Marshal) Jules-Hubert Lyautey, the masterful Resident-General in Morocco (and France’s answer to Lord Cromer), was a great admirer of the Moroccan royal house, the Moroccan aristocracy and traditional popular culture. A convinced monarchist and sworn enemy of the bourgeois Third Republic (which paid his salary), he did everything he could to restrict and subvert the corrupting influence of French *colons* in his Protectorate. While he promoted the infrastructural development of the country and thus had a considerable modernizing record,

Lyautey judged *la mission civilisatrice* to be a great evil and missed no opportunity to protect or restore the glories of ancient Morocco as he envisaged them. When he left office in 1925, he could proudly claim that no gallicized intelligentsia had been allowed to emerge and to disturb the social peace in an oriental paradise.<sup>63</sup>

So we end with a final irony of the civilizing mission. It is a central feature of the modern world, prominent from the eighteenth century to the present day. Apart from fascism, militant anarchism (not the Kropotkin brand) and certain forms of conservatism, all the major belief systems of modernity defined and defended standards of civility and perceived a need to promote them in practice. Wars were waged, and wars were prevented in the name of civility. Concepts of civility ranged from the desperate minimum of prevented genocide to the complete package of an ideal 'civil society'. And yet, the most successful examples have been those of self-civilization: British abolitionism, the Jewish Enlightenment,<sup>64</sup> South Africa's national reconciliation and many others. As for civilizing others, the record is much bleaker. It is difficult enough to educate one's own children, and sometimes hopeless, as every teacher knows, to handle those of other people. In theory – see the tantalizing problem of 'humanitarian intervention' or the just slightly less vexing one of assisted economic development – civilizing missions are not always and not principally illegitimate. They are not necessarily overruled by cultural relativism and the doctrine of unimpeded self-determination.

But historical experience shows how often civilizing missions in practice have led to unintended consequences, how frequently they have been a cynical pretext for depriving people of their possessions, their self-esteem or even their lives, how tightly circumscribed

their chances of success (whatever that may be) have been and how much depends on a pragmatic quest for compromise and shared interests. So, the only possible advice of the historian to those who never ask him for it, can be one loosely based on the philosopher Hans Jonas's famous 'principle of responsibility':<sup>65</sup> Avoid civilizing missions, unless you can safely expect not to make matters worse. And never allow them to degenerate into crusades.

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