IN PURSUIT OF CIVILITY

MANNERS AND CIVILIZATION IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

> The epithets *barbarous* and *civilized* occur so frequently in conversation and in books, that whoever employs his thoughts in contemplation of the manners and history of mankind will have occasion to consider, with some attention, both what ideas these words are commonly meant to convey, and in what sense they ought to be employed by the historian and moral philosopher.
>
> James Dunbar, *Essays on the History of Mankind in Rude and Cultivated Ages* (1780)

In later seventeenth-century England it was common for contemporaries to refer casually to what they called 'the civil world', 'the civilized part of mankind', 'the civilized nations' or 'the civilized world'.[1] They did not always identify the countries concerned. 'How many do most of the civillest nations of the world amount to?' asked the philosopher John Locke in 1690, 'And who are they?' He did not provide an answer, though he rejected the notion that the 'civillest' nations were necessarily Christian ones, and he instanced the Chinese, 'a very

great and civil people'. For one of Charles II's bishops, 'the civil world' included Babylon, Aleppo and Japan.[2]

By the later eighteenth century, the orientalist William Marsden was able to divide humanity into a single hierarchy of five classes of more or less 'civilized' people, with the 'refined nations of Europe' at the top, closely followed by the Chinese, and at the bottom, the Caribs, Laplanders and Hottentots, who, he said, 'exhibited a picture of mankind in its rudest and most humiliating aspect'. His contemporary Edmund Burke observed that 'there is no state or gradation of barbarism, and no mode of refinement which we have not at the same instant under view: the very different civility of Europe and of China; the barbarism of Persia and Abyssinia; the erratic manners of Tartary, and of Arabia; the savage state of North America, and of New Zealand'.[3] It was a conceptual scheme that would have a long subsequent history. As E. B. Tylor observed in 1871: 'The educated world of Europe and America practically settles a standard by simply placing its own nations at one end of the social series and savage tribes at the other, arranging the rest of mankind between these limits according as they correspond more closely to savage or to cultured life.'[4] This was a view of the world that John Locke's contemporaries would have recognized. For them, 'civilized' people were those who lived in a 'civil' or 'polished' fashion, by contrast with the 'uncivilized', who were 'wild', 'barbarous' or even 'savage'.[5]

This way of dividing up humanity had an ancient pedigree. In the Athens of the fifth century BC, all foreigners who did not speak Greek were labelled 'barbarians' (*barbaroi*), persons whose speech was incomprehensible. Neutrally descriptive at first, the word became increasingly derogatory. Barbarians were seen not just as linguistically handicapped, but also as deficient politically, morally and culturally. There was no consensus about what these defects were, though intemperance, cruelty and submission to despotic rule were frequently cited. The Hellenic sense of identity depended on this contrast between the values of the Greeks and those of the barbarians. Yet

different writers stressed different attributes of the foreigner, and there was no single concept of barbarism as such.[6] Plato was one of those who thought it absurd to bracket all non-Greeks together in this way, regardless of whether they were ignorant Scythian nomads or highly cultivated Persians and Egyptians.

In the Hellenistic period (336–31 BC) the distinction between Greeks and barbarians dwindled in significance. Stoic philosophers emphasized the unity of the human race; and the scientific writer Eratosthenes (*c.* 285–194 BC) rejected the division of mankind into Greeks and barbarians, observing that many Greeks were worthless characters and many barbarians highly civilized.[7] In practice, the attitude of the Greeks to other peoples was often more nuanced than that implied by the simple opposition of Hellene/barbarian.[8]

For the Romans, the barbarians were the peoples outside the frontiers of the empire. They were often, though not invariably, seen as violent and lawless, notable for their brutal cruelty (*feritas*) and lack of *humanitas*, that is to say gentleness, culture, and intellectual refinement. These barbarian attributes, particularly *feritas*, were put together to constitute the notion of barbarism (*barbaria*), an amalgam of antisocial impulses to which even the civilized might succumb. In practice, the empire's boundaries were permeable, and 'barbarous' outsiders were easily absorbed within them. But the stereotype had been established. In the fourth to sixth centuries the recurring invasions of the Western Empire by Germanic peoples did nothing to dispel it, even though many of these so-called barbarians were in fact highly Romanized.[9]

With the spread of Christianity and the disintegration of the old Roman world, the concept of the barbarian became increasingly irrelevant. The threat posed from the mid-seventh century onwards by the Arab conquests in North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula made it even more so, for Islamic culture was intellectually more sophisticated than that of Western Europe and could not plausibly be regarded as 'barbarous'. This was not the case with the Vikings,

whose repeated raids on the British Isles and Northern Europe between the ninth and eleventh centuries led to their sometimes being denounced as barbarians.[10] The crucial division until the seventeenth century, however, was that between Christians and non-Christians, between 'christendom and hethennesse', as the fourteenth-century poet Geoffrey Chaucer put it. The idea of Christendom as a geographical area had been in circulation since the late ninth century and was consolidated by the Crusades of 1095–1270 against Muslim control of the Holy Places in Jerusalem.[11] In Chaucer's time the conflict with Islam was intensified by the rise of the Ottoman Turks, who would go on to conquer the Balkans, capture Constantinople, destroy the Byzantine Empire, and threaten to overrun Central Europe and the Mediterranean.

Yet alongside this enduring opposition of Christian and pagan, the old polarity of 'civil' and 'barbarous' had not been totally forgotten. The two ways of dividing mankind were sometimes conflated, with Christians seen as civilizers and paganism equated with barbarism (the Latin word *paganus* meant both pagan and rustic). In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries urbanization and economic progress in Western Europe made it possible to contrast its material prosperity with that of less developed societies. The simultaneous rediscovery of classical learning, especially the works of Aristotle, which had long been studied by Arab scholars, meant the resurrection of Greek and Roman concepts of barbarism and civility. Marked out by their alien languages, barbarians were once again associated with irrationality, lawlessness, ferocity and a low level of mental and material culture. The quintessential barbarians now were the nomadic peoples of the Eurasian Steppes, but the label was also attached to some Christian peoples: in the twelfth century, the Celtic regions of the British Isles were regarded by the English as fundamentally barbarous.[12]

The military conflict between Christians and Muslims had always been regarded as a Holy War between competing religions, but in the fifteenth century Renaissance humanists drew on classical stereotypes

to represent it in more secular terms, portraying it as a contest between a civilized Western Europe and a barbarous (*immanis*) Islam, despotically governed and merciless in warfare. Civility slowly began to supersede religion as the crucial index of a country's diplomatic acceptability.[13]

In the sixteenth century, most Europeans still regarded the distinction between Christian and non-Christian as crucial. Yet although the travellers and proto-ethnographers who encountered the newly discovered worlds of America and Asia were highly conscious of the paganism of their inhabitants, their accounts of them were mostly written in the secular terms of barbarism and civility.[14] Confronted by a wide diversity of Native American cultures, the Spanish writers Bartolomé de Las Casas and José de Acosta created a typology of barbarism with which to construct a hierarchical classification of non-European peoples, ranging from those at the top who, like the Chinese, possessed laws, rulers, cities and the use of letters, to nomadic 'savages' at the bottom, such as the Caribs, who, it was thought, had no form of civil organization and lacked any means of communication with other peoples.[15] The criteria by which barbarism was identified changed over the centuries, and so did the terminology employed.[16] Scholars, travellers and those with experience of other continents regarded barbarism not as an absolute condition, but as a matter of degree. They thought in terms of a graduated hierarchy of cultures rather than a single, binary distinction between the 'civil' and the 'barbarous'. But for many people, the basic polarity remained. It was applied loosely and without reference to the finer distinctions offered by ethnographers and philosophers.

In seventeenth-century England, 'civil' people were increasingly referred to as 'civilized'. This was a more complex term because it implied both a condition, that of being civil, and a process, that of having been brought to that state by casting off barbarism. To 'civilize' was to effect the transition from the one condition to the other. This could happen to a people, as with the ancient Britons, who were

said to have been made civil by the Romans, or to wild plants, which, when cultivated and improved, were described by seventeenth-century gardeners as 'civilized'.[17] By the later seventeenth century the process of civilizing was beginning to be called 'civilization'. In 1698, for example, a writer remarked that 'Europe was first beholding to Graecia for their literature and civilization'; and in 1706, Andrew Snape, Fellow and later Provost of King's College, Cambridge, described the gathering of human beings into 'societies and bodies politic' as 'the civilization of mankind'.[18] The lawyers also used the term to denote the process of turning a criminal case into a civil one.[19] Initially employed to characterize the process or action of civilizing, the term 'civilization' also came to be used to mean the end product of that process, a civilized condition. It is hard to say when exactly the word acquired this new sense. The first meaning gradually slid into the other. In his sermons of the 1740s, for instance, Henry Piers, vicar of Bexley in Kent, came very close to the idea of civilization as a condition rather than a process, when he spoke of 'civilization and polite behaviour' and 'outward decorum, or decent civilization'.[20] But only from the 1760s onwards did English writers unambiguously describe the state of those who had been civilized as one of 'civilization'.[21] As late as 1772, Samuel Johnson famously refused to admit the new word into his *Dictionary*. To convey the condition of the civilized, i.e., 'freedom from barbarity', he stuck to the older term, 'civility'.[22]

Civility was (and is) a slippery and unstable word. Yet although it was employed in the early modern period in a variety of senses, they all related in one way or another to the existence of a well-ordered political community and the appropriate qualities and conduct expected of its citizens. In the early sixteenth century, civility, like its Italian and French predecessors *civiltà* and *civilité*, also took on the larger connotation of a nonbarbarous way of living, what would eventually be known as 'civilization'.[23] 'Civility' implied a static condition, however, and lacked any suggestion of civilizing as a process.

During the sixteenth century, it also came to denote the narrower concept of good manners, courtesy and polite behaviour – treating people with 'common civility', as the expression had it.[24] It was this ambiguity that led James Boswell to make his unsuccessful attempt to persuade Johnson to restrict his dictionary's definition of 'civility' to 'politeness' or 'decency', and to express the state of being civilized with the new term 'civilization'.[25]

Despite Johnson's recalcitrance, 'civility' in the later eighteenth century fell back to its more restricted meaning of good manners and good citizenship, whereas 'civilization' came into general English usage, both as the word for the civilizing process and also as a description of the cultural, moral and material condition of those who had been civilized. The word was widely employed with unembarrassed ethnocentricity to suggest that the 'civilized' nations exemplified the most perfected state of human society, in comparison with which other modes of living were more or less inferior, the products of poverty, ignorance, misgovernment or sheer incapacity. This assumption would prove to be of crucial importance in shaping relations between Western Europeans and other peoples.

When, in the nineteenth century, the European states sought to define the conditions on which they would admit other countries to membership of international society, they invoked a 'standard of civilization' to which Asian and African governments were required to conform if they wished to be recognized as sovereign bodies. This was an updated version of the *ius gentium*, or law of nations, which had been invoked by jurists in the early modern period. Naturally, it was a standard that embodied the legal and political norms of Western Europe. It made no allowance for alternative cultural traditions. If other peoples failed to meet its formal criteria, international law denied them recognition as sovereign states and permitted foreign intervention in their domestic affairs.[26]

In the eyes of the European powers this was not so much a question of asserting their superiority as of achieving a necessary degree of

reciprocity between nations. A 'civilized' government was expected to be capable of making binding contracts, conducting honest administration, protecting foreign nationals and adhering to the rules of international law. The Europeans were right in thinking that these were requirements that 'uncivilized' peoples were usually unable to meet. Yet international law itself was a European creation and it reflected the interests of advanced commercial states. Countries lacking representative government, private property, free trade and formal legal rules were seen not as possessing their own distinctive form of civility, but as 'backward', waiting to be cast into a Western mould. The Eurocentric idea of a single standard of civilization reflected contempt for the norms of conduct in other cultures; and the notion of Western superiority was invoked to justify the forcible colonization or commercial exploitation of supposedly barbarous peoples in the name of a 'civilizing mission' to export European standards of legality and proper administration to benighted parts of the globe.

The League of Nations, set up after the First World War, purported to consist of only 'civilized' states and upheld the notion that it was their responsibility to spread civilization to the rest of the world.* Only with the creation in 1945 of the League's successor, the United Nations, was this formal distinction between 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' states finally abandoned. In the words of a leading jurist at the time, 'Modern international law knows of no distinction, for the purposes of recognition, between civilized and uncivilized States, or between States within and outside the international community of civilized states.'[27]

In early modern England, the ancient and long-enduring opposition between the 'civil' and the 'barbarous' was frequently invoked as a way of expressing some of the essential values of the time. Contemporary expositions of the ideal of civility were exercises in the rhetoric of self-

* This did not prevent the League from recognizing Soviet Russia, Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.

description. When explorers and colonists deplored the 'savagery' and 'barbarism' they encountered in the non-European world, they were implicitly articulating what it was that they valued about their own way of life. They defined themselves by elaborating on what they were not. Like the other great bogeys of post-Reformation England, 'popery' and 'witchcraft', the idea of 'barbarism' embodied what many contemporaries found repugnant and, by implication, revealed what it was they admired. Just as theologians explored the meaning of sin in order to show what was good,[28] so 'civilized' people needed the concept, and preferably the actual existence, of 'barbarians' in order to clarify what was distinctive about themselves. The notion of civilization is essentially relative: it has to have an opposite to be intelligible. As the philosopher and historian R. G. Collingwood wrote in the 1930s, 'We create the mythical figure of the savage, no actual historical person but an allegorical symbol of everything which we fear and dislike, attributing to him all the desires in ourselves which we condemn as beastly and all the thoughts which we despise as irrational.' Or in today's academic jargon, 'Identity is constituted by the creation of alterities.'[29] To ask what early modern English people thought was civil and what was 'barbarous' is to probe their fundamental assumptions about how society should be organized and how life should be lived. It also provides a perspective from which to reconsider our own ideas on the subject.

This book seeks to demonstrate the importance of the ideals of civility and civilization in England during the years between the Reformation of the early sixteenth century and the French Revolution of the late eighteenth. It shows the extent to which they coloured the thinking of the time and describes the uses to which they were put. It also explores some of the ways in which they were challenged and even rejected. So far as possible, it takes into account the views of the population at large, but it cannot avoid being heavily dependent on the opinions expressed by the more articulate people of the time. As a result, the text is thickly studded with direct quotations. Some may

find this practice ungainly. As the natural philosopher Robert Boyle remarked in 1665, 'I know it would be more acceptable to most readers, if I were less punctual and scrupulous in my quotations; it being by many accounted a more genteel and masterly way of writing, to cite others but seldom, and then to name only the authors, or mention what they say in the words of him that cites, not theirs that are cited.'[30] This warning notwithstanding, I side with Boyle in thinking it better to quote contemporaries in their own words rather than resorting to the inevitable distortions of paraphrase.

It is important, of course, to remember that all observations on civility and barbarism, as on any other topic, were made in some specific context, and usually with a particular agenda in mind. Many early modern pronouncements on the subject arose in the course of an intercultural encounter and frequently had a polemical purpose. Ever since the Roman historian Tacitus wrote his *Germania* in order to expose the vices of the civilized by describing the virtues of the barbarous, discussions of alien ways of life have usually had an ulterior motive. In early modern England, many of those who elaborated on the barbarism of the Irish or the Native Americans were seeking to profit by expropriating them from their lands, whereas those who stressed the civility of these peoples wanted to impose restraints on their conquerors. In either case, the implicit definitions of what constituted civility or barbarism, good or bad manners, were constructed so as to serve a particular interest. The meaning of these terms varied according to the context, the person employing them, and the literary form of the document in which they occurred. Allowance also has to be made for the constraints imposed by the particular 'language' or 'discourse' in which the argument was cast.[31] Puritan theologians, natural lawyers, classical republicans, conjectural historians and political economists each wrote within a particular intellectual tradition and approached their subject in a different way. Juxtaposing quotations taken from widely differing sources can mislead if insufficient attention is paid to the context and form of

their source; as one academic critic puts it, it is necessary to avoid the dangers implicit in treating the propositions contained in a text as integers to be assessed in their own right and compared with similar items elsewhere.[32]

Nevertheless, I believe that in the early modern period there was a common stock of ideas and assumptions about what was civil and what was barbarous and that it can be reconstructed by attending to what people said and wrote, however varied the context. It was, of course, a period of very considerable change – economic, political, religious and cultural. But there was also a great deal of continuity so far as ideas about manners and civility were concerned. I have tried to be sensitive to chronological change, but I have not hesitated to 'bunch' evidence drawn from different centuries when that seemed justifiable.

Many of the received notions about what constituted good manners and civilized life were common to other Western European countries. English notions of civility were particularly indebted to the literature and practice of Italy and France, which became increasingly familiar, partly through translations of printed books and partly through the experience of continental travel. English attempts to 'civilize' other parts of the world were made in the wake of the Spanish experience in Central and South America; and English ideas about what we now call international law were shaped by continental thinkers such as the Spanish theologian Francisco de Vitoria (*c.* 1483–1546), the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) and the German natural lawyer Samuel, Baron Pufendorf (1632–94).

Nevertheless, my focus is on England until the union with Scotland in 1707, and thereafter on Britain. Although Wales had been united politically to England in the early sixteenth century, it long remained, like Scotland after 1707, in many ways culturally distinct, and I have largely neglected it here. I do, however, take into account the highly self-conscious reflections on civility and civilization offered by the Scottish philosophers and historians of the eighteenth century.

To concentrate on one particular country in this way is deeply unfashionable at a time when 'transnational' and 'global' history are all the rage. In the United States, early modern English history used to be widely studied because it was from Britain that the first waves of immigration came. English cultural influences, notably Protestantism, the common law and representative government, did much to shape the early development of that nation. Today's multicultural America, however, no longer has a special relationship with the United Kingdom, and at a time when Britain, like the United States, seems to be attempting to detach itself from the rest of the world, English history is understandably regarded as a narrow specialism rather than an essential part of the historical curriculum.

Yet the study of early modern England continues to be instructive because it offers an example, unique in early modern Europe, of a highly integrated society, whose people spoke a single language, were arranged in a hierarchical but relatively fluid social structure, and had long been unified by strong political and legal institutions. It was a time of economic transformation, intellectual innovation and exceptional literary accomplishment. In the eighteenth century, Britain developed the most advanced economy in the world and extended its empire into other parts of the globe.

These are all good reasons for continuing to study English history in the early modern period. But my main justification for concentrating on the centuries between 1530 and 1789 is that this enquiry into manners and civility is part of an attempt to construct an historical ethnography of early modern England which has occupied me on and off for many years. As a Welshman, and therefore something of an outsider, I have tried to study the English people in the way an anthropologist approaches the inhabitants of an unfamiliar society, seeking to establish their categories of thought and behaviour and the principles that governed their lives. My aim is to bring out the distinctive texture and complexity of past experience in one particular milieu.

My first two chapters are devoted to early modern notions of good manners: they examine their place in the self-definition of the ruling elites, their role in the lives of the rest of the population and the extent to which they reinforced the prevailing social structure. The third chapter explores the changing ideas of contemporaries on what it meant to be 'civilized'; and the fourth discusses their views on how it was that England had come to be a civilized country. The fifth examines the ways in which the belief of the English in their superior civility affected their relations with 'uncivilized' peoples, particularly by legitimizing international trade, colonial conquest and slavery. In the last two chapters, I show how early modern ideals of civility and civilization, far from being universally accepted, were subjected to a sustained barrage of contemporary criticism. Finally, I consider how far those ideals remain relevant in modern times and ask whether social cohesion and human happiness are possible without them.

INDEX

Places in England are listed under their respective counties as they were before 1974. Scottish place names appear under 'Scotland' and African countries under 'Africa'.