

United Nations



Nations Unies

Headquarters • Siege

New York, NY 10017

Initiative for an “Alliance of Civilizations”

Workshop on “What is ‘Civilization’”

J. G. A. Pocock

Western historiography and the problem of “Western” history

In 1781 the historian Edward Gibbon faced some difficult choices. At the end of the third volume of his History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, he had reached a moment in historical narrative beyond which his readers might not want him to proceed, and he was not sure whether or how to proceed. That moment, conventionally located in the year 476 CE, marked the end of the succession of Roman emperors in the western provinces of what had been their empire, and the substitution of a series of barbarian kingdoms in Italy, Spain, Gaul, and dimly perceived Britain. Gibbon paused at this moment to reflect on the causes of the Roman decline and fall as a whole; but he knew very well that the narrative of Roman empire was far from over. The empire based in Constantinople was in control of the provinces entrusted to it, and would not disappear from history for another 977 years. Gibbon's problem, for which he did not publish his solution until 1788, was whether he should continue his narrative through the history of the Eastern Empire.

In the end he did. But the points to which we should pay attention are (1) that he did not really know how to do it, (2) that this was because his readers and his fellow historians did not particularly want him to do it, and (3) that we ourselves, 225 years later, are not very far from sharing his and their outlook. Gibbon was English, educated partly in francophone Switzerland; his fellow historians were French, Scottish, and Italian (there is little German presence in his cultural universe). The history in which they and their readers lived, or saw themselves living, had been shaped entirely in those western provinces in which Roman empire had failed in 476. The reasons why he was writing the history of Roman decline were themselves shaped by the history of these provinces – now kingdoms – since that date. The reflective intelligence of that culture needed to know why the great pre-Christian civilization of Rome and Greece had come to an end, how it had been replaced by a Christian culture in which the authority of churches was at least as great as that of states and civil societies, and what the answers to these questions might have to say to a civilization - calling itself "Europe" - in which the latter mode of authority was still emancipating itself from the control of the first. Gibbon had therefore

written one volume on the decay of the ancient world, and two on the birth of the Christian. To pursue this third question he must pursue the history of the Latin middle ages: the history of those provinces designated as beginning with “the end of the empire in the west”.

But he chose neither to do so, nor to break off his history in 476. The latter choice may be explained simply as the result of his knowing that emperors calling themselves Roman continued to reign in Constantinople; to understand the former we must recognize that this was a history that had been written already, by Voltaire, Giannone, Robertson and Hume. But it is a third problem to explain why he chose to pursue East Roman or Byzantine history, for the reason that none of the questions I have isolated as explaining the West European need to write history could be answered by writing history of the Eastern empire. They were western questions, arising within the structures and tensions that had emerged in western history: problems of ancient and modern, papacy and empire, Catholic and Protestant, Christian and Enlightened, virtue and commerce. These were not problems in the history of Orthodox Eastern Europe, and consequently they could not be narrated as the problems that rendered its history capable of being narrated. Gibbon lacked a grand problematic, and therefore a grand narrative, for the concluding volumes of his history. He once remarked, in words he certainly knew to be paradoxical, that the Eastern empire existed in “a condition of premature and perpetual decay”, lasting a thousand years; at another time he wrote that, since it had provided no history of its own, the only cause was to write the history of the far more vital peoples who had from time to time broken in on it: Arabs and Latins, Bulgars and Russians, Mongols and Turks. In what sense these peoples - Latins excepted - had had histories remained to be seen.

Gibbon was by no means unable to construct historical narratives of the actions of peoples other than those of Western Europe; if his thinking was Eurocentric, it was so at a deep level. He could recount the actions of Persians in antiquity, Arabs in modernity, and nomad peoples originating as far away as China, in both periods. The first of the three volumes (his fourth) he published in 1788 recounts Justinian’s attempt to recover the western provinces for the empire. The fifth opens with a direct confrontation

(recalling Henri Pirenne's) between Charlemagne and Mohamed. The alliance between the Roman Papacy and the Frankish Kingdom marks, he argues, the true beginning of modern history, meaning the history of Western Europe; but he instantly follows it with an account of the Muslim Arab conquests which destroy the Greco-Roman East, split the Mediterranean by the conquest of Africa, and drive Christianity back into Europe. In the sixth volume we return to the Eurasian steppe the Huns came from, and hear how first the Mongols, and afterwards the Turks, originally a shepherd people, became capable of building an empire and capturing Constantinople in 1453. Gibbon has reached the end of the Decline and Fall, but, instead of looking ahead into history after that moment, he returns as he always said he would to the starting point of his history, and writes three chapters, the last in his book, on the city of Rome during the Latin middle ages. He ends where he began, in a Europe shaped during and after the history of which he wrote.

The history in which he lived was that of the Western provinces of the Roman Empire and the kingdoms and commonwealths they had become. These provinces lay west and north of the Alps, and Italy north of and including Rome was part of the "Europe" they defined. As Gibbons third volume recounts Lombard, Gothic, Frankish and Anglo-Saxon occupation of them in the fifth century, he often mentions the "Europe" which Spain, France, the Netherlands and Britain will constitute. This is the history he does not write, but lives in and takes for granted; and I am suggesting that this is largely true of ourselves. In these provinces there occurred a complex interaction between Roman and various "barbaric" cultures - the situation being complicated by the Arab presence in much of Spain and the British interaction with the maritime Gaelic culture beyond the Roman frontier. But it seemed to Gibbon, and may reasonably seem to us, that the crucial presence in this history was that of the Christian church in the west, which used Latin and was increasingly obedient to the bishops of Rome. The Popes had encouraged the formation of western claimants to Roman Empire but had then found them threatening and competed with them. The beneficiaries of these medieval conflicts had been first, the trading cities of Italy, and then the territorial monarchies of the Atlantic coastlands. Papacy and empire had joined to subjugate Italy in the early 16th century, but this alliance had confronted the great schism of the Protestant Reformation. The history of Latin

Christianity had continued through the Wars of Religion, and was continuing as Gibbon wrote in the processes we know as Enlightenment, involving an assertion of the autonomy of secular society and, centrally important to the argument I am putting forward, a capacity to write history as the narrative of a secular process and even to include the phenomena of religion in this secular history. In consequence, history itself became very largely the record of the achievement of secularity, a process narrated in the contests formed by the history of this western and Latin Europe. The word “Europe” was used to denote the states and cultures of the western kingdoms and commonwealths and the culture they shared among themselves.

This was a transalpine more than a Mediterranean Europe, half exiled from the latter region since Islam had half conquered the Mediterranean part. Nonetheless, in the crucial episode known as “the Renaissance”, Italian and transalpine literati and artists had reorganized the graphic inheritance of ancient Mediterranean culture and given it the form of a history, with which Latin Europe claimed a unique, if complex, relationship. When we speak of “western civilization,” therefore, we mean an ancient Greece and Rome re-imagined and re-created by a modern “Europe” originally transalpine and barbaro-Roman. The culture shaped in the provinces featured at the end of Gibbon’s third volume had from an early point been dynamic and expansive. This is one reason why he could not think of east Roman culture as having a history in the way of the Medieval Latin culture. Such a culture had expanded beyond the old Roman frontiers, eastward through the German lands into those settled by western Slavic peoples, northward beyond the Baltic into a Scandinavia that came to be considered European, and westward into the Gaelic speaking regions of the archipelago associated with the continent. Once the word “Europe” came to be peculiarly associated with the transalpine formations of Latin Christianity, it became a cultural term as well as a geographic one; its association with the interior spaces of the peninsula between the Mediterranean and the Baltic seas meant that its culture was carried into regions lacking any natural frontiers on their eastward side. Geographically speaking, “Europe” is not a continent, though “Europeans” have mapped the world as consisting of continents, and this indeterminacy complicates discourse on a great many occasions where post Latin culture comes into contact with

post-Byzantine, post-Ottoman and post-Romanov societies and has to consider whether these are “European” or not. Since this debate deals entirely with indeterminacies, it can reach only conventional decisions; we are not well supplied at present with means of reaching these decisions peacefully. The debate, notoriously, becomes painful once the word “Europe” is used in ways that privilege its users and cause others to want to use it to describe themselves.

At this point we turn from a continental expansion to an oceanic one. During the 15th century West European seafarers discovered navigational skills that made them capable, first, of circumnavigating Africa --- thus encountering Indo-Arab and Chinese seafarers of whom they already knew something --- and second, of crossing the Atlantic and encountering the two American continents, unknown as far as we can tell to any other literate civilization on the planet. The planetary ocean thus became a medium communicating “European” curiosity and power to all other human societies, as well as initiating the encounter between “civilizations”, and the concomitant need of these groups to define both themselves and others, was greatly intensified and accelerated. The two American continents, however, were so rapidly and nearly, genocidally colonized, particularly by users of the Spanish and English languages that no major encounter between self-reflective and self-expressive “civilizations” occurred. “European” culture here encountered no frontiers and no others comparable with itself. There were no treats, no prophets, no philosophers; but the shock of the New World was so enormous that it could not simply be incorporated into “Europe”. As the settler peoples became autonomous and powerful, therefore, and shared in encounters between their parent cultures and a succession of enemies, the word “European” merged with the word “Western” and there was a supposed “Western civilization” occupying the Atlantic region, colonizing the two continents and making contact with the Pacific.

Early in the eighteenth century there emerged a discourse which spoke of “Europe” as a consortium of states and cultures – it was not yet termed “a civilization” – engaged in eliminating what remained of the Wars of Religion and the threat of Franco-Spanish “universal monarchy”. This was largely, though by no means exclusively, an Anglo-

French discourse – it might not be wrong to speak of an Anglo-French “Enlightenment” – and the history it recounted was centered in the Atlantic provinces of “Europe” as we might use that word. The Hapsburg monarchy with which it dealt was perceived as Spanish far more than Austrian and its resources for dealing with the German-speaking lands were limited to the medieval and imperial. That is, it could speak of the medieval emperors and their contests with the Papacy, but once the former ceased to descend upon Rome, the history of this “Europe” followed an Italian path, narrating the post-Guelphic histories of the Venetian, Lombard and Tuscan city states, to their subjugation by the French and Spanish monarchies, and going on from there to the contests of the French and English monarchies and the comparison of their constitutional and cultural structures. These themes could not be pursued without becoming subject to the great division of western Christian culture into Catholic and Protestant, and this extended itself into the history of the Netherlands, Germany and Scandinavia. No eighteenth-century historian doubted this, but few in the Anglo-French cultural universe possessed the means of recounting these histories. The explosion of historical thought and writing in the Enlightened world became divided into Anglo-French and German-speaking cultures, of which the former understood itself but knew little of what was going on in the latter.

Thus while Germans were writing their own history, Anglo-French and Italian historiography operated largely within the ancient Roman frontiers and did not yet take account of the eastward expansion of medieval Latin culture. If the Anglo-French and Italian historians knew little of the formation of the German world, they knew even less of its encounter with the Slavic and other peoples from Lithuania to Croatia, who had become members of Latin, as opposed to Orthodox Christendom; and for a long time – it would be easy to add “and still today” – they found it difficult to consider this “Europe” as other than marginal to their own. As for the other great expansion of “Western” Europe, the colonization of the two American continents and the oceanic encounter with all other peoples on the planet, enlightened historiography had difficulty in dealing with it in terms other than those, we inaccurately term “colonial.” It relegated the pre-Columbian Americans to the universe which it termed “savage” and we term “indigenous”, and in which it is still not easy to see peoples as authors of their own history – at least as the

word “history” is used in our culture. And as for the European settlers in the two Americas, no philosophic history of them had taken shape by the end of the eighteenth century. It was possible for an English journal (The Annual Register) to deal with the events of the American Revolution in a section headed “History of Europe”, but there was difficulty and even disinclination when it came to regarding the history of European settlers as part of “history” as that word was coming to be used. And, by the way, this disinclination persists to the present.

By the time Gibbon faced the choices with which this essay began, a series of Enlightened historians, including himself, had developed a scheme for writing the history of the Euro-Atlantic civilization to which they belonged. It may help if we characterize this scheme as consisting of three phases: an ancient history centered in the Mediterranean and its European, Asian and African associates, whose dominant theme may be summarized as imperium et libertas, the interactions between ancient republics, barbarians and empires, including their own; what we should call a medieval, and they called a modern history, whose theme was imperium et sacerdotium, the interactions between organized religious and secular authority structures; and a history, modern in our sense whose dominant theme, just beginning to be written, was the interactions between imperium et commercium. This scheme in its turn interacted with another, that of the self-formation of distinct states and civil societies around systems of law and structures of government, the latter overwhelmingly monarchical. It was becoming possible to look back in time to former systems of society, culture and economy, and there was declaring itself a recognizable history of the emergence from the religious into the secular.

This was the narrative – or rather complex of narratives – to which Gibbon could find no equivalent or alternative in East Roman history and therefore concluded that this segment of the Roman Empire had no history of its own. Even the history of its decline and fall was not worth telling; there was nothing in it to add to the account of decline he had already given, while as for its fall, there was no equivalent for the complex interactions between Roman church and barbarian monarchy, barbarian liberty and Roman law that had shaped the history of the post-Roman west. The Slavs were not equivalent to the

Goths and Franks, the Eastern patriarchs had weakened empire without challenging it as the Popes had done. And East Roman history had ended, not in the independence of sovereignty and liberty of property which – as Gibbon once said – had made the northern barbarians masters of the world, but in its subjugation to Islam in its Ottoman form. There were histories of empire still to be written. It is possible to imagine Gibbon or another going on from 1453 to narrate the histories of the Ottoman, Habsburg and Romanov empires in interaction, for which some foundations had been laid in the later volumes of the Decline and Fall; but this did not happen in Western European historiography. Gibbon himself turned back to the medieval west; and the only history of world empire after Rome written in pre-Revolutionary Europe is that put together by the collaborators of the Abbe Raynal – a history of oceanic European-American empire, not of continental and Eurasian. It was not easy to look eastward from the Atlantic coastlands.

What historians of the Western culture possessed on the eve of the Revolutionary period – which Gibbon’s last volume anticipated by one year – and could not find in, or apply to, any other civilizations they knew, was a narrative of deep-seated contestation between components of their own culture, in particular that between spiritual and secular authority, for which they were seeking to emerge by means that included the construction of a historical narrative in which sacred history – the narrative of God’s actions – and ecclesiastical history, narrating the action of God’s ministers, should themselves be included and explained. If we think, as we do, of history as the narrative of human actions in a theoretically infinite diversity of temporal and partly man-made contexts and circumstances, we will think of history as the kingdom of the secular, and historiography as the triumph of secularity. What becomes of belief in God’s agency under these conditions is a problem which the historian leaves to others. The point of immediate concern is that historians of Gibbon’s generation saw “western” history, but could not see any other, as dialectic between spiritual and secular, culminating in the emergence of history itself, defined as the universality of the secular and – as we say though they did not – the modern. If they could not duplicate “western” history in that of east Roman or any other civilization, it was open to them to say that while other civilizations might possess histories that could be narrated, none had emerged into history in the sense of

acquiring the capacity to narrate it in the full sense of the term. By the end of the Napoleonic wars, it had become possible to say that history was the story of liberty, that liberty was the capacity to reduce everything to history and act in it, and that only Western Europeans and Euro-Americans possessed either history or liberty – terms approaching inseparability.

This enlargement of the Western historical narrative became, of course, a means of justifying western rule and domination over other cultures and civilizations. It seems important to note, however, that this was not necessarily the reason why that narrative took shape. The problem of European rule over other literate cultures was being debated for the first time – in the case of British-ruled India – as Gibbon was completing the Decline and Fall. What he could not find in east Roman histories and others could not find in West or East Asian histories, was an equivalent for the inner dialectics they were formulating. The prior function of this historiography was to enable them to understand themselves and so to distribute power – often debatably and disastrously – among themselves; the justification of power over others came after, if very soon after, that. As it arose, they began to declare that theirs was the only kind of history there was, and that they possessed a monopoly of history and liberty which entitled them to rule over others. It is one thing to perceive that this was an unjust statement, another to find an alternative to it. To find such an alternative we must do one of two things. Either we must find – or, greatly to be preferred, find that historians in other cultures have already found – ways of narrating the histories of other civilizations in terms of inner dialectics not identical with those shaping Euro-American history; or we must find, or find others have found, ways of narrating their histories in terms that do not depend on the workings of a secular dialectic internal to them. To make the latter choice will entail facing the further question whether the word “history” can be used and found appropriate where there is not an inner dialectic leading to the construction of a comprehensive narrative of secular change. To reply in the narrative will be to reiterate - but in the negative – the statement that “history” is something which cultures possessing it impose upon cultures they rule; a claim not uncommonly made in the literature of post-colonialism.

It seems to be the case, as this essay is being written, that even highly educated “westerners” possess very little knowledge of the history of other major civilizations, and that this is so partly because they do not possess macro-narratives of these civilizations like those narratives they possess of their own. (That they may be highly critical of this narrative is beside the point; it was set up in order to be debated.) They lack such narratives of other civilizations for either or both of two reasons: one, that western historians have not constructed narratives of other civilizations; two, that these civilizations have not generated historians who construct narratives of their own cultures comparable with those existing narratives of western history. But we have found reason to believe that the western narrative was generated out of an inner dialectic peculiar to west European civilization and its tensions; and if it’s unreasonable to expect that other civilizations would exhibit the same tensions and dialectic, a further choice of alternatives arises. Either they will have exhibited other dialectics, which remain to be discerned, or they will not have exhibited dialectics at all. In Gibbon’s generation historians supposed that Arab-Turkish Islam remained entrapped within the unending cycles of oriental despotism (had they known the work of Ibn-Khaldoun, he would not have persuaded them otherwise) whereas Confucian China remained stationary within a structure of ritual, custom and manners which had never changed and predictably never would. If we no longer believe these theses, it is not clear what we believe instead; there is no middle on school-level account of Islamic or Chinese history distributed in our culture.

There must remain an obstinate suspicion that history perhaps, and the perception of “history” certainly, are specific to western culture. We see it as arising from a series of “western” conflicts which we have dealt with by reducing them to history, thus emerging into a “modernity” in which everything can be narrated as history. At the same time as that at which Euro-American culture acquired the capacity to historise itself, it acquired the power to impose itself on every other culture on the planet. A consequence has been that the “modernity” of every other culture has come to mean either something imposed upon it by the dominant West, or something acquired by revolt against that domination; these two meanings of “modernity” are not very far apart. Cultures self-defined by their

perceived response to the western impact do not acquire the capacity to narrate how they achieved “modernity” themselves or gave it meaning appropriate to their own experience. Perhaps this should be the next achievement of historiography in the great civilizations of Eastern Asia. They should narrate their own pre-modernity – if that term remains appropriate to Qing history or Tokugawa – and how their pursuit of such deeply western goals as military-industrial Empire in the Japanese case, or revolution in the Chinese, is characterized by what preceded it, not derived or not simply, what came from abroad. This might furnish us all with a conversation between historians, separately conducted and interpreted, even if leading us all into a globalization so “modern” that everything is “history”, and “history” tends to disappear. Our Muslim fellow humans will continue to prefer prophecy to history if that be their will. We cannot predict whether it will be or not.

What have I been saying in this essay about civilization and their existence in plurality? If we see ourselves as belonging to one of them and concerned for their future existence, we maintain them in plurality better if we can write their histories. Historiography is an attribute of sovereignty; we can better manage what we are and what we may become if we can determine and debate what we have been and how we become what we now are. But the ability to think, speak and write historically is culture-specific; it arises in response to needs more local than universal, and is distributed among the peoples by the turbulent and confused injustices of human history. We need, in a plurality of civilizations, not only a plurality of histories, but a history of histories and of the absence or lack of histories. If we are to have such a history, the more histories we can find, and the more ways we can develop to understand them, the better; but we will not always find the history we want, or want those we can find.

Endnote

Allusions in this paper are nearly all to Edward Gibbon’s History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (London, 1776, 1781, 1788) - I use the edition by David Womersley (London: the Penguin Press, 1994) – or to J. GA. Pocock, Barbarism and Religion (Cambridge, 1999, 2003, 2005). Gibbon’s explanations of how his work is

planned and developed are to be found in (1) his prefaces to the several groups of volumes (Womersley, I, pp 1-4, II, pp. 507, 519-22); (2) his “General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West”, affixed to his third volume (Womersley, II, pp. 508-18); (3) “Plan of the Fifth and Sixth Volumes”, including chapter 48 (Womersley, III, pp.23-27).

For “a condition of premature and perpetual decay”, see Decline and Fall, III, ch.32 (Womersley, II, p.237). For the papal-Frankish alliance as beginning modern history, Decline and Fall, V, ch.49 ((Womersley, III, p.109). For “the northern barbarians masters of the world”, Decline and Fall, I, ch.8 (Womersley, I, p.228).

For European historiography in the 18th century and its understanding of the history of Europe, see generally Barbarism and Religion, vol. II, Narratives of Civil Government. For Renaissance Italian historiography as post-Guelf., III, The First Decline and Fall, chs. 7-10; as post-republican, chs. 12, 14-16. For Enlightened historiography on Asian, American and indigenous peoples, vol. IV, Barbarians, Savages and Empires. There is a treatment (chs., 13-17) of Raynal’s Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Europeens dans es deux Indes, based on the Geneva edition of 1780. I am further indebted to Robert Bartlett, The Making of Europe: conquest, colonization and social change, 950 -1350 (Princeton, 1993).