The Police of Civilization: The War on Terror as Civilizing Offensive

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This article deals with two contemporary issues: the return of “civilization” as a category of international power and the common refrain that war is now looking more and more like a police action. The article shows that these two issues are deeply connected. They have their roots in the historical connection between “civilization” and “police.” Through an exercise the history of ideas as an essay in international political sociology, the article unravels the connection between these issues. In so doing, it suggests that a greater sensitivity to the broader police concept in the original police science might help us understand the war on terror as a civilizing offensive: as the violent conjunction of war and police.

The “process of civilization” has been fetishized.

Max Horkheimer

Civilization is back. The “war on terror” is said be about many things: “freedom, democracy, and free enterprise,” as the US National Security Strategy of 2002, puts it. Or, as found in other quarters, “values,” “civil society,” “the rule of law,” and a “way of life.” A regular item on such lists is “civilization.” This view is found far and wide and in a variety of discursive forms. According to the National Security Strategy, “the war on terror is not a clash of civilizations,” but “the allies of terror are the enemies of civilization.” This attempt to distance the strategy from the more politically awkward “clash of civilizations” thesis merely underlines the claim that it is still “civilization” that is ultimately at stake. We are living, suggests the Strategy, “in an age when the enemies of civilization openly and actively seek the world’s most destructive technologies” (National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2002:vi, 31, 15). This is the view that was very quickly asserted by President Bush during the early stages of the war. In an Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People on September 20, 2001, Bush commented that the war was not America’s fight; rather, “this is civilization’s fight.” Hence, America was not fighting alone, because the “the civilized world is rallying to America’s side” (Bush 2001; also see Bush 2004). Likewise, Colin Powell described the purpose of the war as the defeat of those “attacking civilization” (Powell 2001). One finds similar comments made elsewhere by other Western leaders: German Chancellor Schröder, for example, called 9/11 a “declaration of war against all of civilization” (Schröder 2001). The idea also runs through a range of other documents, from former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani’s comment that “you’re either with civilization or the terrorists” (2001), through the publication by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni on how universities are undermining Western democracies, called Defending Civilization and published as part of their “Defense of Civilization Fund” (2002). The list of examples could go on and on.
Civilization, then, is back; and it is back in the context of global war. One way of grappling with this return is to point to the fact that, read in terms of international law, it appears to be a rather embarrassing anachronism. In his account of the emergence of civilization as the “standard” of international law in the nineteenth century, Gong (1984:69) suggests that “given the contemporary consensus that all countries are now to be considered ‘civilized,’ the distinction between ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized’ has declined in relevance.” It made sense in the nineteenth century when racial differences between “civilization” and its “others” were at the forefront of European thought, but makes no sense now, in these postcolonial days of universal human rights. Anti-colonial movements and postcolonial states argued long and hard through the second half of the twentieth century that states should not be discriminated against on the basis of some standard of “civilization” rooted in the heyday of imperialism, and succeeded in attempts to pass United Nations Resolutions and Declarations to such effect. This was accompanied by a developing body of “Third World Approaches to International Law” which, harnessing the insights of critical theory, Marxism, race theory and post-colonial studies, challenged some of the key categories of international law. The outcome was that textbooks and international organizations were no longer suggesting that the idea of civilization was the foundation stone for international law; Lauterpacht, for example, challenged the idea in his Recognition in International Law of 1947, and the International Law Commission gradually refrained from referring to “civilized countries” (1947:31; also Gong 1984:90). This was compounded by the fact that by the late-twentieth century the idea of “civilization” had been displaced by and in part subsumed under two other ideas: one was a new “standard” of human rights: “internationally recognized human rights have become very much like a new international ‘standard of civilization,’” notes Donnelly (1998:1, 16); the other was a logic of modernity and, latterly, globalization, incorporating assumptions about standards of living, health care and related expectations: rather than being “uncivilized,” countries are now considered “unglobalized,” notes Fidler (2000).

One way of dealing with the current return of civilization, then, is to show that it is indeed a rather embarrassing anachronism, harking back to a time when “civilization” was one of colonialism’s most powerful ideological tools, providing the rationale for war, conquest, and expropriation. It is, after all, a relatively easy task to situate and criticize “civilization” in terms of a long history and use of binary oppositions through which political thought has been articulated and political action carried out: good/evil, West/East, modern/primitive, and so on (Llorent 2002; Salter 2002; Bowden 2009).

Yet to dismiss the return of civilization as an ideological anachronism or a form of Western hypocrisy would be to close ourselves off from some of the interesting political issues at stake. The interesting issues arise when we note that although the return of civilization has occurred in the context of a new global war, many of the actions historically understood under the category “war” are now being discussed through alternative categories. “War no longer exists,” notes General Sir Rupert Smith in a book on the modern “art of war” (2001:1). Or as Anthony Cordesman puts it in a report for the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies: “it may be that one of the lessons of modern war is that war can no longer be called war” (2003:59). But if it is not “war,” then what is it?

In 2006, the US Army and Marine Corps updated their Counterinsurgency Field Manual for the first time in 25 years, partly as a response to the increasing importance of categories such as “insurgency” and “counter-insurgency,” “low-intensity conflict,” “operations other than war” and the “gray area phenomenon.” These are very much ways of describing forms of war but they are also very much a reference to “internal” mechanisms of social ordering; that is, to
mechanisms of police. Hence, the Manual comments that “warfighting and policing are dynamically linked” and that the “roles of the police and military forces... blur” (2006:Sects. 6–95, 7–26). The Manual was building on a growing consensus toward this point of view. For example, a 1994 document put out by the US Department of Justice and the Department of Defense had noted a new “understanding” between the fields of war and police and thus argued for “a growing convergence between the technology required for military operations and the technology required for law enforcement” (Department of Defense and Department of Justice 1994:Sect.I, Pt. B). This tendency has been reinforced with the reconfiguration of the “war on terror” as “counterinsurgency,” one of the features of which is the criminalization of the enemy (the “unlawful combatant” replacing the soldier in battle). At the same time, many have sought to rethink the political agenda surrounding war by pointing to the tendency in question. Whether in the use of rather loose concepts such as “world policeman,” “sheriff,” “global gendarme,” “globocop,” “soldiers as cops,” and so on, the assumption among commentators of very different political persuasions seems to be that war is increasingly as much a form of police as it is military engagement. For Badiou (2003:153–155), governments now oppose terrorism within the symbolic register of “policing.” For Agamben (1993:61) “a particularly destructive jus belli... cloak[s] itself in a seemingly modest ‘police operation,’” while for Hardt and Negri, “war is reduced to the status of police action,” with the United States acting as the “international police power” (2000:12–13, 39, 180, 181; also Hardt and Negri 2004:14). For Mladek (2007:231), the increasingly worldwide civil war leaves us “with a continuous police interventions aimed at producing security within a single global territory.” This is a view found across the political spectrum (for example: Boot 2002:xx, 350; Bronson 2002; Caygill 2003; Ignatieff 2003; Salt and Smith 2008; Gray 2009).

Yet despite this growing consensus connecting war and police, there has been a marked unwillingness to think through precisely what the connection means. Police is still rather narrowly defined in terms of law enforcement, and thus the focus has been really on the question of how, if at all, the “military model” and the “criminological model” can be brought together (Andreas and Price 2001; Simon 2007:280; Chesney and Goldsmith 2008). In this “peace-keeping as police-keeping” or “criminology meets international relations (IR)” approach, little is said about the idea of police beyond the question of crime and law-enforcement. The general assumption running through this literature is that “the role of police-keeping is to pre-empt and combat ethnic, religious and political violence, as well as economic crime and... also to police ‘regular’ crime, including that related to property and public order” (Day and Freeman 2003:300). In this article, I aim to connect the developing issues surrounding the coming together of war and police with the return of the idea of civilization. I suggest that we can make sense of the return of civilization by tracing it as an idea back to the original police science; that is, to police not as crime prevention and law-enforcement, but in terms of the more general process of administration and government. The idea of police as narrowly concerned with crime prevention and law-enforcement was a meaning imposed on the term by an increasingly hegemonic liberalism in the late-eighteenth century. Prior to this, “police” connoted order and thus held an incredibly broad compass, extending from crime and law enforcement through to the regulation of trade and commerce, disciplining labor, education, the minutia of social life and, of course, breaches of the peace (see Neocleous 2000). Police science was, in effect, the science of governing and a form of “pastoral power” (Foucault’s term) over the population; as an active intervention in and disciplining of the population it constituted nothing less than the fabrication of order. There is now a fairly substantial body
of work, stemming from Foucault, which has sought to mobilize this original concept of police for new insights in political and historical sociology (for example: Klemeyer 1980; Tribe 1984; Minson 1985; Gordon 1991; Dean 1999; Pasquino 1991; Dubber 2005). However, aside from a couple of limited attempts (see Walters 2002; Dean 2006), it has not been widely used to grapple with the international dimension of police powers or what it means to speak of war and police coming together. Symptomatically, the special section of a recent issue of International Political Sociology (the second issue of Volume 4, published in 2010), stemming from a roundtable discussion at the 2009 International Studies Association conference, asks about the relationship between Foucault and IR, and yet not one of the seven contributions raises the possibility of connecting the current question of war/police with the huge body of work on police inspired by Foucault’s insights into this concept. The same is true of the much wider literature aiming to connect Foucault to IR or international studies (such as Weber 1994; Bartelson 1995; Hutchings 1997; Selby 2007, who does mention police but only in citing Hardt and Negri; Evans 2010). This absence of discussion perhaps goes some way to explaining why the narrower, more commonsensical and liberal notion remains in place.

The reach of this article is thus broad and its conclusions fairly speculative, as it connects an issue in contemporary international political sociology with a problematic in the history of ideas. Essentially, I want to connect the concept of civilization to the logic of police by pointing to the role of “civilization-as-police” in the fabrication of international order. I do so by making a historical return to the question of police in a conceptual history designed on the one hand to make sense of the original emergence of “civilization” as a political category and, on the other hand, to help identify what might be at stake when people are talking about the elision of war and police in the global war on terror. In his account of civilization as an imperial idea, Brett Bowden comments that civilization “is a concept that is used to both describe and shape reality” (2009:8). I argue that this power to shape reality stems from civilization’s historical roots in the police idea; furthermore, I suggest that this helps explain why these terms have once more come to the fore. In the context of a new liberal dream of global capitalism and world order organized through military power, the logic of “civilization” and the growing importance of “police” turn out to be supremely apt.

**Civilization/International Law**

The use of “civilization” in the war on terror hints at a long history of the term in international law, but also proposes a rather obvious and crude political distancing from the major enemy in this war. This combination can be seen in a brief outline of the importance of civilization in international law as it emerged in the nineteenth century. Gong (1984:25) suggests that the roots of “civilization” as a standard in international law are documented by two historical records: on the one hand, the nineteenth-century treaties signed between European and non-European countries, and, on the other hand, the legal texts written by the leading international lawyers of the era. In fact, there was a third dimension, namely liberal political thought more generally.

In an essay in the *London and Westminster Review* in 1836, John Stuart Mill comments that “civilization” has a “double meaning”:

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1It is also worth noting that the second edition of Dean’s *Governmentality* (2010) tries to develop the idea of police beyond the question of “pastoral power” in the first edition and onto the international organization of population. However, the discussion is somewhat limited (pp. 244–245).
It sometimes stands for human improvement in general, and sometimes for cer-
tain kinds of improvement in particular. We are accustomed to call a country
more civilized if we think it more improved; more eminent in the best character-
istics of Man and Society; farther advanced in the road to perfection; happier,
nobler, wiser. But in another sense it stands for that kind of improvement only,
which distinguishes a wealthy and powerful nation from savages and barbarians.
(1977:119)

The concept thus concerns a level of productive life and a degree of cultural
sophistication, and it is these features that generate the possibility of interna-
tional comparison. Hence, in a later essay on international disputes in 1859, Mill
comes back to the idea:

There is a great difference... between the case in which the nations concerned
are of the same, or something like the same, degree of civilization, and that in
which one of the parties to the situation is of a high, and the other of a very
low, grade of social improvement. To suppose that the same international cus-
toms, and the same rules of international morality, can obtain between one civi-
lized nation and another, and between civilized nations and barbarians, is a
grave error. (1984:118)

This was part and parcel of the liberal distinction between civilized and
barbarian forms of society, and fed into the wider narrative of liberal internation-
alism that became the foundation of international law (Schwarzenberger 1955;
Koskenniemi 2001:176). The connection lies in the links made within the liberal
mind between peace and security, law and order, and civilization: law, as the
“gentle civilizer of nations,” brings peace, security and order. The wider back-
drop to this is the danger of “uncivilized” (“primitive,” “savage,” “barbaric”) communities, to be policed through the introduction of Western law and
administration. “Civilization” thereby connected international law not just with
assumptions about peace and security, but also with the political economy of
human labor and free trade, liberal political institutions, and certain bourgeois
standards of material conduct. In so doing, it became the main criterion by which
the place and status of different human groups would be judged. The standard of
“civilization” could be conceived only by reference to a diverse group of others,
understood as enemies, and was used to distinguish those that belong to interna-
tional society from those that do not (Stocking 1987:30–36; Federici 1995:65;
Young 1995:32). Those who fulfill the requirements of the standard are brought
inside a circle of “members,” while those who do not conform are left “outside.”

By the end of the nineteenth century, the standard of “civilization” was being
articulated in major Peace Conferences and key texts on international law. The
Hague conference of 1899 was called for and attended by those who regarded
themselves as “recognizing the solidarity which unites the members of the soci-
ey of civilized nations,” while the 1907 conference was said to be based on “the
solidarity uniting the members of the society of civilized nations” (Scott 1908:23,
203–204). Major texts of international law confirmed this process: Oppenheim’s
major 1905 text, for example, defined international law as “the body of custom-
ary and conventional rules which are considered legally binding by civilized
States in their intercourse with each other,” and went on to suggest that to be
admitted into the “Family of Nations” a state “must, first, be a civilized State
which is in contestant intercourse with member so of the Family of Nations”
(Oppenheim 1905:3, 31).

As much as it was about law, however, “civilization” was also very much about
war, not least in the various attempts to codify the rules of “civilized warfare”
and imperial power. Article 6 of the Berlin Conference of February 1885, in
which the imperial powers decided how they would carve up Africa, held that
each of the powers should “aim at instructing the natives and bringing home to them the blessings of civilization.” As Charles Alexandrowicz points out:

A review of documents in the principal collections of African treaties... would reveal that the transfer of sovereign rights or titles by the African rulers to the protecting European Powers was either expressly or implicitly connected to the duty of civilization, i.e., the task of the transferee to assist African communities in achieving a higher level of civilization before they re-entered the family of nations as equal sovereign entities. (1971:154)

This inner imperial and bellicose truth meant that by the end of the nineteenth century the logic of “civilization” had lost its European and Christian dimensions. The entry of the United States into “international society” broke the European stranglehold and the inclusion of non-Christian but nonetheless imperial powers such as Japan meant that what had been understood in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as the “law of Christian nations” or the “public law of Europe” had by the end of the nineteenth century become redefined as the international law of civilized nations, revealing that what was of ultimate importance for “civilization” was not European Christianity but imperial warfare and military intervention (Tucker 1977:9; Gong 1984:5, 15, 23, 54, 164). This was again reflected in the legal textbooks of the time. Hence, Elias is right to note that “it is not a little characteristic of the structure of Western society that the watchword of its colonizing movement is ‘civilization’” (Elias 1978b:313).

The idea of civilization in international law, then, is widely accepted to be a product of nineteenth-century developments in the concept of civilization and the widening of the net of international law. There was widespread agreement that “the general principles of law” were those “recognized by civilized nations,” with implicit or explicit assumptions about the rule of law, respect for fundamental liberties including the right to property, and the possibility of diplomatic exchange and communication. Within this, the distinction between “civilized” and “ uncivilized” was simply assumed to be acceptable (Schwarzenberger 1976:84; Gong 1984:73). The standard of civilization thus never really required articulating per se, as its function was clear: to establish a taxonomy through which states could be granted legal personality in international society. It is easy to see how and why such taxonomy would come to be criticized: by being easily connected with race and racial classification it was part and parcel of a global race war—witness, as just one example, Darwin’s comment (2004:183) that “at some period... the civilized races of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the savage races throughout the world.” There is, however, more to be said about the term than the focus on nineteenth-century international law allows.

Civilization/Police

“Civilization” seems to us like such an old word. This impression is in part achieved by its root in civil, from civilis, connected to the Latin “citizen.” “Civil” was thus used from the fourteenth century onward, connected to “civility” and “ civilize,” and morphing into “civil society” in the seventeenth century. But “civilization” in fact came into the language only very recently, in the second half of the eighteenth century (Febvre 1973:220; Williams 1976:48). The reason why it came into the language at this time is important for the argument here.

In France, the first recorded use of the term would appear to be in the Marquis de Mirabeau’s L’Ami des hommes ou Traité de la population, first published in 1757. From then on, writers increasingly came to use the term in the sense used by Mirabeau: first, to refer to the process through which humanity emerged from
barbarity and, second, as a state of society, of which various examples might then be found (Benveniste 1971:290–291). In so doing, it built on much older terms such as the participle civilisé (civilized), and the verb civiliser (to civilize), together taking us back to the idea of refinement and its cultivation. Febvre (1973:222–223) suggests that from 1765, the term becomes increasingly naturalized and forces its way into the Dictionnaire de l’Académie française in 1798.

One of its main themes seems to have been modes of behavior. Prior to the emergence of “civilization,” concepts such as politesse or civilité were used to express the self-image of the European aristocracy. Civilisé was, like cultivé, poli, or police, one of the terms by which the courtly elite designated the specific quality of their behavior, refinement, and social manners in contrast to the lower orders (Elias 1978a:39). In its emergence in the second half of the eighteenth century, however, “civilization” was very closely associated with rising social movements challenging the power of this aristocracy. Elias (1978a:49) comments that “the French bourgeoisie—politically active, at least partly eager for reform, and even, for a short period, revolutionary—remained strongly bound to the courtly tradition in its behavior and its affect-molding even after the edifice of the old regime had been demolished.” In terms of social origins then, the concept of civilization developed in France within the opposition movement in the second half of the eighteenth century; the “civilizing process” became a project of the bourgeois class. The French concept of civilisation reflects the rising importance of the bourgeoisie in that country, becoming a key instrument in dealing with internal conflict and for articulating a vision of a new world. For this, terms such as civilité were a little too static (Benveniste 1971:289–292; Elias 1978a:38, 49, 103). At the same time, however, in the work of Quesnay and the physiocrats, the idea emerged that society and the economy have their own laws which are never fully manageable by rulers, and thus that “enlightened” administration should govern in accordance with the laws of political economy. As Cheyfitz notes (1993:116), the distinction between civilization and its “other,” the savage/barbarian, is one of the fundamental fictions of the history of private property.

This had an exact parallel in England, where “civilization” also proved to be a crucial ideological tool of a rising industrial class and its key thinkers. Like the French, the English civilize and civilized are much older than civilization, which again appears for the first time in the same period as in France. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) lists as one of the earliest written usages an entry by Boswell in his Life of Johnson. There, Boswell reports a visit to Johnson in 1772, in which the latter is found preparing a new edition of his Dictionary: “On Monday, March 23, I found him busy, preparing a fourth edition of his folio Dictionary... He would not admit civilization, but only civility. With great deference to him, I thought civilization, from to civilize, better in the sense opposed to barbarity, than civility” (Boswell 1999:331). Boswell was picking up on the new word that was then coming to the fore. The fact that Boswell thought “civilization” worth entering as distinct from “civility” suggests a reasonably well-established difference between “civility,” in the sense of manners and politeness, and “civilization,” as the opposite of barbarity. Resisting the modern, Johnson preferred the older “civility” but Boswell, as a Scotsman with legal training, was perhaps trying to identify a term which captured the French concern for manners (civility) with the Scottish commitment to Civil Law (the OED notes one meaning of the term as being the assimilation of common law to civil law), and the transformation of the Scottish people from clansmen and cattle ranchers to merchants and bankers (Benveniste 1971:293; Caffentzis 1995:32). That it is unlikely that Boswell was doing little more than picking up a term that was already in use is suggested by the use of the term in, for example, Adam Ferguson’s Essay on the History of Civil Society (1767), where on the first page Ferguson comments that
where the “individual advances from infancy to manhood” so the species advances “from rudeness to civilization,” and which is then used to construct the history of civil society through the rest of the book (Ferguson 1966:1; also 232). “Civilization” also appears in Ash’s English Dictionary in 1775 and Adam Smith felt comfortable making use of the term in the Wealth of Nations, published in 1776 (Smith 1979:706–708). 

It is therefore clear that the term is a product of the second half of the eighteenth century and has a variety of senses. First, the sense that it is somehow equivalent to “civility,” drawing together various dimensions of the ideas of civilized and civilizing, including politeness in manners; second, it refers to a condition of civilization, a stage in history beyond barbarism and savagery; and, third, it refers to a process (Collingwood 1942:286). This idea of process is important here, for it marks civilization not merely as a state or a set of manners, but as an action to be actively carried out; indeed, to be carried out politically. Webster’s American Dictionary of the English Language, published in 1828, has as its first entry for “civilization”: “the act of civilizing.” Thus, the term enters the rhetoric of power as a political mission (eventually, of course, becoming “the civilizing mission”) or declaration of political intent. This was a period in which in both France and England a large number of nouns ending in -ation were formed from verbs ending in -iser: centralization, democratization, francization, fraternization, utilization, and, of course, industrialization. Taking on board the fact that words ending in “-ation” also suggest the presence of an agent, it is clear that the agency behind the process transcended the individual, especially the idea of the individual implicit in the older aristocratic notion of civilisé (Elias 1978a:44, 47, 104; Bauman 1987:89–90; Starobinski 1993:2). In other words, we can see behind the idea of “civilization” a new historically emerging collective agency carrying out a historical process. In its origins, then, civilization’s central connotation might be thought of as a nineteenth century “standard” (legal, cultural or otherwise), but the term in fact connoted a distinctly political project borne out of the bourgeois reform movements of the second half of the eighteenth century. Herein lay the term’s essentially new—essentially modern—dimension, referring to the process of generating a specific stage of social development characterized by private property, money, commerce and trade. “Civilization” thereby became associated with a certain vision of humanity and order, useful as a criterion in political judgment, not least in defending the civilized order from its monstrous other, the savage/barbarian, but useful more than anything else as the basis of bourgeois rule. As a key concept of the ruling ideology, the “process of civilization” becomes fetishized, as Horkheimer puts it (Horkheimer, in Adorno and Horkheimer 2010:33).

Yet there is a further dimension to the term about which little is said but which is far more revealing: police. “Throughout the whole of the seventeenth century,” Febvre notes (1973:225), “French authors classified people according to a hierarchy which was both vague and very specific.”

As “civilization” comes to take its place within the political lexicon, one of the key words from which it develops, and which functions more or less as its

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2Benveniste (1971:294) talks of “the free use of the word” by Smith, but this is too strong a claim: Smith uses the term “civilization” just three times, compared to a much wider use of “civilized.” For wider background to the Scottish context see Pagden (1988).
midwife, is “police.”” Febvre notes that “in his essay De la félicité publique and in his work on Considérations sur le sort des hommes dans les différentes époques de l’histoire, the first volume of which appeared in Amsterdam in 1772, Father Jean de Chastellux uses the word police a great deal but never, so it appears, civilisation” (Febvre 1973:223). Indeed, Febvre’s attempt to identify the first use of the term in France shows that many of the assumed first usages of civilization turn out to have been references to police; this finding is confirmed by Elias. For example, although Turgot is widely assumed to have been the first to use “civilization,” the appearance of the term in his work was the responsibility of later editors. Turgot does not use the word “civilization,” says Febvre. “He does not even use the verb civiliser, or the participle civilisé, which was then in current use.” Rather: “he always keeps to police and to policié.” Likewise, Febvre continues, people often think that the word first appears in Boulanger’s Antiquité dévoilée par ses usages (1766). Yet the appearance of the word “civilization” in that text was placed there by Holbach, who edited the work after Boulanger’s death in 1759 (the Antiquité dévoilée being a posthumous work). Of the Recherches sur l’origine du despotisme oriental (1761), also sometimes suggested as containing the first use, “civilié” does appear in it, but fairly infrequently; civilisation never does; police and policié are the usual terms” (Febvre 1973:221–222; Elias 1978a:39). In some writers, “civilization” really does replace “police.” Writing of Mirabeau’s use of the term, Benveniste (1971:291) says that “for Mirabeau ‘civilisation’ is the process of what had been up until his time called ‘police’ in French.” That is, it refers to “an act tending to make man and society more policié [orderly].” In others, however, there is an oscillation between the two terms: Voltaire, in The Philosophy of History (1766), shifts from policié to civilisé and back again, and at one point writes of peoples becoming “united into a civilized [civilisé], polished [policié], industrious body” (1965:31, 40, 89). As Febvre notes, Voltaire still requires the two words.

The historical picture is thus a little complicated. Although in both France and England the verb civiliser/civilize and the participle civilisé/civilized take us back to the idea of refinement and its cultivation, whereas police is derived from the Greek polis, politeia and gives us polite and police, there is no doubt that what was at stake in “civilization” as it emerges was very much connected to what was at stake in “police.” And so, as much as police gives rise to civilization, the former term continues to permeate the latter term, circulating around it and through it. On the one hand, the tendency was such that by the end of the century, two words were no longer necessary for some people. Volney in Éclaircissements sur les États-Unis, in 1803, could write that:

By civilisation we should understand an assembly of men in a town, that is to say an enclosure of dwellings equipped with a common defence system to protect themselves from pillage from outside and disorder within.... The assembly implied the assembly implied the concepts of voluntary consent by the members, maintenance of their natural right to security, personal freedom and property: ...thus civilisation is nothing other than a social condition for the preservation and protection of persons and property, etc. (cited Febvre 1973:252n1)

This is civilization as police, yet no longer articulated as police. The substance of “civilization” has assimilated all the substance of the word “police.” Likewise, in a text such as Adam Ferguson’s Principles of Moral and Political Science, civilization connotes the basic ideas associated with police: “peace and good order,” “security of the person and property,” “good order and justice” (1792:207, 252, 304). But words rarely shake off their histories completely. Just as civilization could never fully lose its connections with politesse or civilité, so it could never lose its links to police. Thus, “in spite of all, policié resisted,” notes Febvre,
adding that “then there was police lying behind it which was a considerable nuisance to the innovators.”

What about civilisé? They were tempted in fact to extend its meaning; but police put up a struggle and showed itself to be still very robust. In order to overcome its resistance and express the new concept which was at that time taking shape in people’s minds, in order to give to civilisé a new force and new areas of meaning, in order to make of it a new word and not just something that was a successor to civil, poli and even, partly, police, it was necessary to create behind the participle and behind the verb the word “civilisation.” (Febvre 1973:229)

And so, on the other hand, the connections between the two terms could never quite be fully broken. Just as civilisé was often used synonymously with words like cultivé, poli, or police to designate certain social manners, so civilization and police were often used synonymously in the same way to designate a certain kind of order. For example, just as one of the lists in Guizot’s Dictionary of Synonyms runs Poli, Police, Civilisé, so he also continues to include “police” as one of the fundamental elements of civilization (1863:566–567).

Behind this affinity lie a number of assumptions. First is the belief that there are always people in need of “polishing,” who lack the necessary “polish.” Necessary, that is, for an orderly—that is, well-policéd—society. Second is the idea that left to himself man is a mere savage or barbarian; left to themselves some people will fall (back) into this state. And third is the assumption that this is a group process—that polishing, avoiding barbarism or savagery, is a task of the group (Bauman 1985:8). This set of assumptions applies to the barbarians outside the domestic frame, of course, but it applies also to the members of the population who lack the necessary “polish,” who are close to or might fall into a state of barbarism, and who thus require working on by a civilized group. Those who require polishing, those who are disorderly, who are liable to become barbarians or savages, are those who require police. Starobinski writes that “to polish was to civilize individuals, to polish their manners and language,” but both the literal and the figurative senses of “polish” evoke ideas of order and thus the discipline and law necessary for an orderly society. “The intermediate link in this chain of associations was provided by the verb policer, which applied to groups of individuals or to nations: ‘Policer’: to make laws and regulations (règlements de police) for preserving the public tranquility” (Starobinski 1993:15). Thus, the word Police worked alongside civility and politeness in the development of “civilization.” As the new term develops, “police” will not disappear; rather, it will come to play a role in the idea of civilization as a process and a political project. Those who require policing come to form the threat to civilization—they are the ones which the whole history of liberalism from hereon will come to describe as most in need of the discipline of civilization (see Mill 1977:122; Hayek 1979:163). For all its novelty around civilization vis-à-vis civilize and civility, the rising social movements could not forego some notion of police. To the extent that “civilization” was configured as a battle waged between groups concerning manners, order, property, and culture, this battle could never quite relinquish the idea of police.

Thus, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, “civilization” possessed a range of meanings, including, not least, a reference to habits and practices regarded as “cultural.” Ideas were evolving in such a way as to confer superiority not merely on peoples equipped with good police, but on peoples said to be more generally rich in bourgeois art, philosophy, and literature (Febvre 1973:228). Culture and civilization would become joined together in the minds of those thinkers and publicists for whom good order went hand-in-hand with manners and refinement, art and literature, philosophy, and science. But cultural practices are merely one dimension of social ordering, and thus Febvre is right to
argue that “at the top of the great ladder whose bottom rungs were occupied by savagery and whose middle rungs were occupied by barbarity, ‘civilisation’ took its place quite naturally at the same point where ‘police’ had reigned supreme before it” (Febvre 1973:232). Civilization thereby captured the meaning at the very heart of the police idea: the fabrication of social order (Neocleous 2000).

The Civilizing Offensive

If we accept the original meaning of police and the emergence of civilization from this concept, then the function of civilization as a standard in nineteenth-century international law becomes much clearer: the fabrication of international order. We might say that whereas police had been the principle of social order, so civilization extended this globally. Or, to put it another way, civilization implicitly held on to its original police remit and extended it to the international realm, becoming the ordering category of international power. The oft-repeated criticisms of the standard of “civilization”—that it was never easy to define, that it was difficult to apply in practice, and that it often worked as a rather blunt instrument (Gong 1984:21–22)—miss two points. First, that these features are consistent with its origins in the police idea; the crusade for civilization, like the project of police, generates and uses a range of mechanisms of political administration to shape human subjectivity and order civil society. And, second, that it has always been a means of ordering international society around a certain project. The precise nature of this project was identified by Marx and Engels in the heyday of European colonization and the rise of international law:

The bourgeoisie... compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image. (1984:488)

As Marx and Engels sought to show, the project of introducing “civilization” to all nations was a fundamental part of international capital. The fabrication of an international bourgeois order was a project of global scope.

As a process this required, and continues to require, the exercise of organized violence. Now, one of the implications of the work of Elias and others on the “civilizing process” is that civilization implies the elimination of violence from the social order, or at least the monopolization and political administration of this violence by the state (Bauman 1987:91). For those invested in this word, civilization connotes peace rather than war; the savagery of the savage and barbarity of the barbarian replaced by the pacific world of civilization. Pacification and civilization came to be treated as part and parcel of the same process. Elias comments:

The civilizing of the state, the constitution, education, and therefore of broader sections of the population, the liberation from all that was still barbaric or irrational in existing conditions, whether it be the legal penalties of the class restrictions on the bourgeoisie or the barriers impeding a freer development of trade—this civilizing must follow the refinement of manners and the internal pacification of the country. (1978a:48)

Plenty of examples of this can be found in the liberal tradition: Condorcet, for example, in his Vie de Voltaire (1789) comments that “the more civilization spreads across the earth, the more we shall see war and conquest disappear in the same way as slavery and want” (cited in Febvre 1973:233). Each of Smith’s uses of “civilization” in the Wealth of Nations refers to the peace and security
involved in its production, and the same link with peace can be seen in Ferguson’s *Principles of Moral and Political Science*, as noted earlier, or, a little later, in Mill’s suggestion that a people is civilized when “the arrangements of society, for protecting the persons and property of its members, are sufficiently perfect to maintain peace among them; i.e. to induce the bulk of the community to rely for their security mainly upon social arrangements” (Mill 1977:120).

In contrast to the standard liberal claim, we might cite a rather astute observation about the foundations of government in India, made in 1883 by James Fitzjames Stephens, that liberal who “made a career of bringing out the implicit and uneasy assumptions of his brethren” (Mehta 1999:29). “The English in India, he said, are the representatives of a belligerent civilization” (1883:557). The phrase, he added “is epigrammatic,” yet strictly true. After all, “the English in India are the representatives of peace compelled by force.” Stephens here grasps the point not only of English power in India, but of all imperial power carried out under the banner of civilization: these are acts of peace, compelled by force. The peace of civilization involves the transformation rather than elimination of violence. Stephens knew that “peace” needs to be read as a coded war, as Foucault would later put it (2003). Which is a way of saying: as much as civilization is a police process, it is also a war zone. The “pacific” side of civilization might point to the “liberal peace” but it also connotes the violence of liberal pacification (Neocleous 2010).

This is why rather than speak of the civilizing process, we might be better off speaking of the civilizing offensive, an idea which points to the fact that “civilization” presupposes violence and aggression against those considered “uncivilized” (Mitzman 1987; Verrips 1987; Krieken 1990, 1999). As Rojas (2002:xiii) puts it, the very process that made “civilization” such a key element of the Western self-consciousness was the very same process that authorized violence in the name of civilization. Violence simultaneously meted out against the savage and barbarian lesser breeds in the colonies and the savage and barbarian lower orders at home: both to be fought and pacified in the name of bourgeois security. From this it became clear that violence would never be fully eliminated from the social order, but would instead be monopolized by the state and used as part of its crusade to shape order, frame civil society, eliminate enemies and, ultimately, to “keep the peace.”

The monopoly over the means of violence that is fundamental to the fabrication of social order is the core of the police power. Although such a formal monopoly over the means of violence does not exist in the international realm—which is the very reason why so many people have found it difficult to develop the concept of “international police”—the violence through which this realm has been structured is obvious. It has traditionally been cast under the label “war.” But the exercise of this violence is nonetheless frequently thought of as carrying out the project of civilization and has more than anything sought to order the international world. Thus, whatever might be new about the “new wars,” the insistence that the “war on terror” is a war of/for civilization comes straight out of the age of Clausewitz: in 1798 as Napoleon sends his troops off for the pacification of Egypt, he shouts to them “Soldiers, you are undertaking a conquest with incalculable consequences for civilization” (cited in Elias 1978a:49–50). To say that police and war conjointly form the key activity of the project of civilization is to say nothing other than violence has remained intrinsic to the process in question. Thus, central to the idea of civilization is military-police terror (albeit, as “civilization,” a terror draped in law and delivered with good manners).

What then of the problematic of war/police? Dean (2006) has argued that in the terms of the original police science, we can see some important differences between police and war: police confronts a situation of disorder rather than an
enemy; when police does concern an enemy, it is as a source of disorder rather than as an enemy per se. In this light, the main concern of police is the constitution of order rather than defeating the enemy. True as this is, it obscures the unifying connection between police and war: the exercise of violence. As Dean observes, “peace” is a much more developmental concept than victory, requiring the establishment and maintenance of order within a territory. This is the police project par excellence. “Keeping the peace” is precisely the kind of vague agenda that, historically speaking, has been understood as within the remit of the police power.

The attempt to hold on to categorical distinctions between “police” or “military” for analytical, legal, and operational reasons (Hills 2004:91–94) runs the risk of losing what is at stake in the fabrication of international order: the way war imbricates itself into the fabric of social relations as a form of ordering the world, diffracting into a series of micro-operations and regulatory practices to ensure that nebulous target “security,” in such a way that makes war and police resemble one another (Jabri 2007:116; Meyer 2008; The Invisible Committee 2009). From a critical perspective, the war-police distinction is irrelevant, pandering as it does to a key liberal myth. Holding on to the idea of war as a form of conflict in which enemies face each other in clearly defined militarized ways, and the idea of police as dealing neatly with crime, distracts us from the fact that it is far more the case that the war power has long been a rationale for the imposition of international order and the police power has long been a wide-ranging exercise in pacification. The war on terror is thus the violent fabrication of world order in exactly the way that the original police power was the violent fabrication of social order. The war on terror, as international politics, is a form of police; civilization’s return, writ large.

References


The War on Terror as Civilizing Offensive


