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# Barbarians and civilizational rhetoric from the end of the Cold War to the present

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**Citation**
Boletsi, M. (2023). Barbarians and civilizational rhetoric from the end of the Cold War to the present. In M. Winkler (Ed.), *Schriften zur Weltliteratur / Studies on World Literature* (pp. 256-286). Berlin: J.B. Metzler. doi:10.1007/978-3-476-04611-6

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# 6.4. The Return of the Barbarian in Political and Public Rhetoric, Pop Culture, and Film Since the End of the Cold War

## 6.4.1. Barbarians and Civilizational Rhetoric from the End of the Cold War to the Present

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### 6.4.1.1. Introduction

On January 8, 2015, the day after the shooting by two French Muslim brothers at the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris that claimed twelve people's lives, British novelist Hari Kunzru wrote an article in *The Guardian* about the mix of emotions he experienced after the attack. Refusing to give in to what he called the "pile of hopeful platitudes, lofty sentiments about liberty, calls for solidarity and compassion and moderation, or [...] bloody, bloody revenge," he stated: "Above all I want to hear nothing about barbarism" (Kunzru 2015, n. pag.).

Why does Kunzru abhor the thought of hearing about barbarism? What is it about the use of this word in responses to terrorism that he cannot stand? For him, the word *barbarism* imposes a violent polarizing logic that reaffirms the narrative of enlightened Europe as synonymous with civilization and attaches *barbarism* to forces external to this image of Europe, particularly associated with the Muslim world. "The caricature of the jihadi as a medieval throwback, animated by ancient passions, may be comforting to those who would like to wrap themselves in the mantle of civilisation and pose as heirs of Voltaire, but as a way of actually understanding anything, it's feeble," Kunzru writes. Nevertheless, politicians, journalists, writers, bloggers, and scholars are still very much attached to this term.[1]

One of the most recent instances of a political mobilization of *barbarism* comes from public rhetoric on the Russia-Ukraine War that is unfolding as we finalize this chapter in the spring of 2022. From the very start of this war, the word "barbarism" popped up in responses to the Russian invasion by politicians and officials in

1 I also discuss Kunzru's response to the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings in Boletsi 2018, 33.

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Ukraine and the rest of Europe and the US. UK prime minister Boris Johnson, for example, condemned Russian President Vladimir Putin for engaging in "barbaric and indiscriminate tactics against innocent civilians" (qtd in Marini 2022, n. pag.). The evocation of *barbarism* in references to Russian acts of aggression in this war echoes the term's use for crimes against humanity.[2] At the same time, uses of the term to sweepingly refer to Russia and the Russian people in the context of the same war reiterates the Enlightenment-inspired civilizational narrative that separates Europe from the 'barbarian' forces that threaten European civilization, with Russia in this case included in the barbarian forces. What is more, uses of *barbarism* in this context often forge a link between Russian violence and the barbarism of Nazism, mobilizing another strong field of associations, which ties barbarism with the horror of the Holocaust. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba purposefully evoked this associative field when he tweeted on 1 March 2022 that Russia's move to launch a missile strike on a TV tower next to a Holocaust memorial is "evil and barbaric," adding: "On September 29–30, 1941, Nazis killed over 33 thousand Jews here. 80 years later, Russian Nazis strike this same land to exterminate Ukrainians" (Kuleba 2022, n. pag.). In another statement on Twitter on the same day, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry went even further by straightforwardly identifying Russia with barbarism in order to politically delegitimize and criminalize the Russian attacks: "Russian criminals do not stop at anything in their barbarism. Russia = barbarian" (MFA of Ukraine 2022).

This chapter traces the renewed mobilization of the *barbarian* in political and public rhetoric since the watershed year of 1989, which marked the end of the Cold War and the collapse of Eastern-bloc communism in Europe. By probing the functions and implications of the use of *barbarism* in recent and contemporary public rhetoric, we seek to de-legitimize the use of this concept without, however, denying or downplaying the very real and often devastating violence of practices that are termed 'barbarian' in some of these contexts—including the above-mentioned Russia-Ukraine war.

The chapter's temporal starting point, 1989, signals the inauguration of a new era, in which the universalization of neoliberal capitalism precipitated a redrawing of the global geopolitical landscape and generated a radical shift in the understanding of global dividing lines and conflicts. This shift, which has been dubbed the "culturalization of politics" (Žižek 2009, 119), went hand in hand, as the present chapter shows, with a reintroduction of civilizational rhetoric and a renewed mobilization of the *barbarian* in public rhetoric, which became intensified after the terrorist attacks in the US on September 11, 2001.

Speaking of a *reintroduction* of barbarians in public and political rhetoric does not mean that the term's use had disappeared from European rhetoric during the Cold War. There is a long tradition in Marxist and socialist thinking in which the signifiers "capitalism" and "barbarism" are conjoined. The popularity of the slogan "socialism or barbarism" that was put forward by Rosa Luxemburg (even though she ascribed it to Friedrich Engels) extended into the 1960s and 1970s, partly owing to the *Social-*

2 See Winkler's Introduction in vol. 1 of the present study, p. 1.

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*isme ou Barbarie* political group that Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort founded in 1948 and the well-known journal under the same title that they circulated well into the mid-1960s. The association of capitalism with barbarism, which follows a long tradition in Marxist thinking, thus held sway during the Cold War, and still does to the present day, most notably in critiques of the neoliberal phase of capitalism (Romé 2020). During the Cold War, the tag of *barbarism* was also attached to communism and Marxism from other sides of the political spectrum. To mention just one example, in 1977, Bernard-Henri Lévy's book-length essay *La barbarie à visage humain* (*Barbarism with a Human Face*) mobilized the term to issue an offensive against communism, Marxism, and what he identified as the "Sovietophilia" of left intellectuals.

Despite such occasional uses of barbarism in references to either capitalism or socialism during the Cold War, our hypothesis is that the "civilization versus barbarism" rhetoric in the West had somewhat waned after World War II and decolonization. The foregrounding of colonial violence by anti-colonial thinkers and the horror of the Holocaust were probably two factors that contributed to the discrediting of this rhetoric in the Western context: both were instances of extreme violence issued by intra-European forces rather than external enemies.[3] The association of colonialism and Nazism with barbarism brought barbarism into the heart of Europe itself, making the use of the *barbarian* for Europe's presumed external others much less credible (Boletsi 2013, 1; 2014, 75).

This chapter takes 1989 as a starting point to scrutinize the reinvigoration of civilizational rhetoric in Western public discourse. This reinvigoration was embedded in a new discursive paradigm that projected *culture* instead of *politics* at the core of conflicts on local and global levels. In this exploration, September 11, 2001 poses as the second most significant date. The attacks on 9/11 intensified the prominence of civilizational discourse and of the *barbarian*, as they provided the figure of the 'new barbarian' of the twenty-first century: the terrorist. As we move further into the twenty-first century and closer to the present, however, we can trace frequent mobilizations of barbarism not only in public rhetoric on heinous acts of violence (and particularly terrorism) but also in debates on different intersecting crises, such as the COVID–19 global health crisis and the environmental crisis.

This chapter proceeds to scrutinize the renewed valence and functions of *barbarism* and the *barbarian* in a number of areas that have been central to political and social debates since the 1990s in the West but also on a global scale, namely: the so-called "culturalization of politics" (Žižek 2009, 119) since the 1990s; public rhetoric around terrorism from 9/11 to the present; the murky terrain of what has been called "post-truth politics" and particularly recent populist and far-right rhetoric; and debates on the environmental crisis (in chapter 6.5). We also examine how dominant uses of the *barbarian* in public rhetoric since 1989 are taken up, destabilized or interrogated in popular culture and films from the same period. This kaleidoscopic presentation of manifestations and functions of the *barbarian* in contemporary public

3 See Winkler's remarks on Aimé Césaire's anticolonial essay "Discours sur le colonialisme" in chapter 6.3.1 of this volume.

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rhetoric, politics, and popular culture is by no means exhaustive, but it does, in our view, provide a forceful illustration of the renewed and ongoing valence of the 'civilization versus barbarism' rhetoric in the contemporary world, and of the ways this rhetoric contributes to the perpetuation of discriminatory, racist, neo-colonial practices as well as rigid dividing lines between cultural, social or political formations. It also attests to the remarkable entanglement of the *barbarian* with contemporary politics, even though, as we argue, the term's use often works to *de-politicize* politics. The omnipresence of the *barbarian* in contemporary politics and culture reinforces, in our view, the paramount importance of the historical exploration of the *barbarian* in European modernity that our project undertakes. This omnipresence makes the historical investigation of the *barbarian* more than just a scholarly or intellectual venture: it is rather a significant tool in understanding the persistent functions of this concept and countering the violent discourses in which the *barbarian* was and still is implicated today.

### 6.4.1.2. Barbarism and the Culturalization of Politics after the Cold War

The US response to the 9/11 attacks gave new impetus to the reemergence of the 'barbarism versus civilization' narrative as central to the understanding of global divisions and conflicts in the twenty-first century.[4] However, the conceptual groundwork for the reinvigoration of this narrative in political rhetoric had already been laid in the 1990s, owing to a discursive shift that followed the fall of Eastern-bloc communism in Europe after 1989 and was dubbed the "culturalization of politics": a turn away from political ideology (capitalism versus communism) and towards culture as the main factor that determines global conflicts in the purported 'post-political' era that the end of the Cold War inaugurated. Samuel Huntington's seminal book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996), in which global dividing lines were recast as a "clash of civilizations," was key to consolidating this discursive shift.[5] In Huntington's own words, "The velvet curtain of culture" has replaced the Cold War's "iron curtain of ideology" (1993, 31). In this new era, "global politics is shaped by cultural and civilizational tides" (Huntington 1996, 309): political and economic differences are revamped as cultural differences, and thus ascribed to a way of life and cultural origin. In his critical discussion of the "culturalization of politics," Slavoj Žižek describes this shift as follows:

> Why are so many problems today perceived as problems of intolerance, not as problems of inequality, exploitation, injustice? [...] The immediate answer is the liberal multiculturalist's basic ideological operation: the culturalization of politics. Political differences,

4 In the presentation of the "culturalization" of politics and of Huntington's contribution to it in this section, I draw significantly on previously published work (Boletsi 2013, 40–43; 2014, 62–63; 2018, 22–24; and Boletsi and Moser 2015, 16–17).

5 Huntington first presented his argument in an article in *Foreign Affairs* (1993) which he then developed into a book (1996).

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> differences conditioned by political inequality, economic exploitation, and so on, are naturalized and neutralized into cultural differences, different ways of life, which are something given, something that cannot be overcome, but must be merely tolerated. (2009, 119)

The role of *barbarism* in this new understanding of global relations becomes particularly pronounced after September 11, 2001, when culture, as Mahmood Mamdani argues, was projected as "the dividing line between those in favor of a peaceful, civic existence and those inclined to terror" (2004, 18).[6] In the discourse of culturalization, however, barbarism was already present in the 1990s, albeit more tacitly—even in Huntington's model. Of course, by dividing the world into independent civilizations in competition with each other, Huntington referred to these cultural formations with the term *civilization* rather than *barbarism*. Through its use in the plural, "civilization" posed as a purportedly neutral term for distinct cultural formations that Huntington simplistically presented as more or less homogeneous. Huntington's worldview was nevertheless marked by oppositional thinking. This becomes manifest, for example, in the growing clash he detected between the Western and the Islamic civilization, with the latter being cast as one of the West's great threats, as well as in his suspicious attitude towards multiculturalism, which he viewed as a potentially corrosive force that could threaten the identity of the United States and the West (1996, 305, 318).

In his book's final pages, however, barbarism enters the stage of civilizational conflicts in full gear. The "clash of civilizations" in the 1990s, Huntington argued, threatens to regress into "the greater clash, the global '*real* clash,' between Civilization and barbarism" (1996, 321). Huntington located this global barbarism, for example, in "transnational criminal mafias, drug cartels, and terrorist gangs violently assaulting Civilization." To build his final argument, he veered away from civilization as a quasi-neutral term in the plural and took recourse to the age-old dichotomy between "Barbarism" and "Civilization." In this context, he used the latter as a moral category (with a capital C): a "universal civilization" based on values, practices, and institutions that the world's civilizations share (320). The threat that these loosely defined barbarian forces posed on a global scale, in Huntington's words, amounted to "an unprecedented phenomenon, a global Dark Ages, possibly descending on humanity" (321). In the post-Cold War order that Huntington sketched, in which civilizations co-exist, compete or fight with each other, he did not give up on the idea that barbarians are still out there. On the contrary, in apocalyptic tones and by evoking the figure of *barbarian invasions*, he claimed that this new global order is at grave risk from these elusive barbarians.[7]

Huntington's narrative would not be complete without proposing an antidote to this barbarian threat: he found this in a set of universal values shared by "the world's major civilizations" which could help fortify a Civilization (in the singular) able to

6 Mamdani refers to the "culturalization" discourse as "culture talk" (2004, 17).
7 For the way Huntington evokes Edward Gibbon's narrative of *barbarian invasions*, see Boletsi 2018, 22 and Winkler 2015, 46–47.

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counter Barbarism (321). Even though 'civilization' was not straightforwardly identified with 'the West' in Huntington's narrative, the West implicitly posed as the main source of values for this "universal civilization." All civilizations were called to fight barbarism together, but for Huntington, as political theorist Wendy Brown argues, "only the values of the West can lead this fight: what will hold barbarism at bay is precisely what re-centers the West as the defining essence of civilization and what legitimates its efforts at controlling the globe" (2006, 181). Huntington's metaphorical language of light versus darkness (e.g., in his reference to a "global Dark Ages") rhetorically casts the purported fight between Civilization and Barbarism as a continuation or repetition of the age-old narrative of the Enlightened West fighting obscurantist barbarians.

Huntington's reverting to the narrative of 'Civilization versus Barbarism' typified the search for a new type of 'barbarian' enemy after the dissolution of the USSR and the fall of communism, which left the West without a big Other. Initially, liberal thinkers hailed this new global hegemony of Western neoliberalism as the "end of history" (Fukuyama 1992), welcoming the prospect of global consensus and political stability in a "post-political" era without a *they* (Mouffe 2005, 31): in other words, an era without barbarians. Even though Huntington's model detected civilizational conflicts, he still posed the ideal of a consensual 'universal civilization,' implicitly informed by Western liberal values. However, an Empire cannot legitimize or flaunt its power without assuming a barbarian enemy: an external other that justifies exercise of power and military violence (McClintock 2009, 51). Interrogating the "paranoia" that triggered US imperial violence in the war on terror, Anne McClintock writes that "an imperial state claims legitimacy only by evoking the threat of the barbarians" (2009, 55).[8] Using C. P. Cavafy's poem "Waiting for the Barbarians" to develop her argument,[9] McClintock asks: "To what dilemma are the 'barbarians' a kind of solution?" (54–55). According to her, the "enemy deficit" after the Cold War—that is, the ostensible absence of 'barbarians' in this new post-political era—generated anxious attempts by the U. S. to make the barbarians visible again or re-invent new barbarians. A new "plausible external threat" (55) thus had to be located to make up for the receding antagonism between the U. S. and the USSR. These new barbarians, which Huntington in the 1990s found in elusive forces, not (yet) clearly identified with a specific nation-state or civilization—"transnational criminal mafias, drug cartels, and terrorist gangs"—took more concrete shape in Western rhetoric after the attacks on September 11, 2001. The terrorists involved in 9/11 thus provided a 'solution' of sorts to the post-Cold War "enemy deficit" and the "crisis of imperial legitimacy" (McClintock 2009, 54). "In the absence of the (old) barbarians and the 'red menace,'" Richard Jackson notes, terrorism came to serve "these functions, by being constructed as the threat of an (alien/foreign) invasion" (2005a, 155).

Acording to Joanne Esch, the use of the myth of "Civilization v. Barbarism" in US anti-terrorism rhetoric can be traced back to Cold War rhetoric. Particularly Ronald

8 For this argument, see also Boletsi 2014, 62–63 and 2018, 22–24.

9 For a detailed discussion of the poem, see Boletsi's chapter 4 in vol. 1 of the present study, p. 285–334.

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Reagan's rhetoric made ample use of "the language of 'good versus evil'" (2010, 371). In this context, she writes:

> As the practice of the Cold War reveals, the significance of the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union went far beyond politics and economics; it was understood that a Godless "evil empire" was threatening our way of life. Implicit in the Nixon-Khrushchev Kitchen Debate was the idea that the encroachment of the Soviet Union would threaten the commodity-rich lifestyles of average Americans. The discourse around the threat of Communism was largely an exercise in axiological proximization, whereby the evil ideology of the enemy was conveyed as encroaching on everything we know to be good and right. Because of the ideological nature of the Cold War, We and They could not be reliably defined by geopolitical borders; so the myth of Civilization v. Barbarism served as a discursive compensation for blurred boundaries." (2010, 371)

There is no doubt that the political opposition between capitalism and communism was also framed in moral terms by both sides. Yet Esch unjustly conflates the distinction of "good versus evil" with that of "civilization versus barbarism." Although the latter opposition also carries strong moral overtones, historically, as our project has shown, *barbarism*'s range of connotations and extension are different from those of the religious-moral concept of *evil*. Esch goes on to trace a parallel process of enemy-construction during the Cold War (the communist) and after 9/11 (the terrorist), taking *barbarism* as a common denominator in this process. Just as with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, she argues, "Today, 'terrorism' (vaguely defined) is the antagonist in the way of America's ideal world." There are indeed parallels between, on the one hand, the othering of the 'communist' (and the 'Russian' specifically) as the enemy during the Cold War, and, on the other hand, the construction of the terrorist as the "new barbarian" after 9/11. Nevertheless, the "civilization versus barbarism" opposition was considerably more pronounced in the process of enemy-construction after 9/11 than during the Cold War. The terrorist as a barbarian enemy was different from the "red menace," which could be geopolitically localized and to a large extent identified with a specific state, the USSR. By contrast, the terrorists as 'new barbarians' were marked by an "invisible" and "shadowy" character that intensified the climate of fear of others in the West after 9/11 and facilitated the declaration of a total war on terror from the US and its allies (McClintock 2009, 57). The subsequent US invasions in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) could be seen as part of an attempt to make this new barbarian enemy more visible, geopolitically identifiable, and thus masterable and punishable (McClintock 2009, 57). The tag of the *barbarian*, as I show in the following sections, worked to de-legitimize the new enemy-figure of the terrorist but also rekindled neo-Orientalist discourses that helped place terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, and ultimately the Muslim world as a whole in the same semantic complex as *barbarism* and on the opposite side of Civilization, identified with the US and its allies.

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### 6.4.1.3. The 'Civilization versus Barbarism' Narrative after 9/11

"A new age of barbarism is upon us." These were the opening words of an editorial in the 20 September 2004 issue of *BusinessWeek* on the occasion of the third anniversary of September 11, 2001. The editorial continued by enumerating several terrorist attacks by "Islamic extremists" around the world, in order to conclude that "America, Europe, Israel, Egypt, Pakistan, and governments everywhere are under attack by Islamic extremists. These terrorists have but one demand—the destruction of modern secular society" (2004, n. pag.).[10] The dichotomous division between "modern secular society" (civilization) and Islamic fundamentalism (barbarism) that this article valorizes was not new: it had been established as a widely accepted worldview, owing to the centrality of the "barbarism versus civilization" narrative in Western political rhetoric around the 'war on terror' after 9/11 attacks. US rhetoric of the 'war on terror,' which will be scrutinized in the next section, had prepared the ground for such grand statements about the world's division into barbaric and civilized forces. The figure of *barbarian invasions* also proliferated in public discourse in the first years after the 9/11 attacks, constructing (pseudo-)historical analogies between the present state of the world and the history of the Roman Empire.[11] Such an analogy featured, for example, in the title of a 2002 *Economist* article by Joseph Nye, "The New Rome Meets the New Barbarians," that examined American power at the dawn of the new millennium in relation to the 'barbarian threat' of terrorists and other enemies of the US.

Several scholarly analyses of the rhetoric of counter-terrorism after 9/11, mainly in the US but also in Europe, underscore the centrality of 'civilization and barbarism' as one of the "foundational meta-narratives" that structured US rhetoric on the 'war on terror,' following an "over-arching Manichean frame (good versus evil, 'either you are with us or you are with the terrorists')" (Jackson 2005a, 149). US President George W. Bush immediately declared on 15 September 2001 that "a group of barbarians have declared war" on America, casting Islamic terrorism as the 'new barbarism' of the twenty-first century (qtd in Jackson 2005b, 38). In the months and years following 9/11, "barbarism" and "civilization," just as "good" and "evil," became common accompaniments of official US political rhetoric. Beyond the US, European leaders also mobilized civilizational vocabulary in their responses to 9/11. A case in point is German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's comment that the 9/11 attacks were "a declaration of war against all of civilization" (Schröder qtd in Vinocur 2001a, n. pag.).

The war on terror, Richard Jackson aptly notes, was a "discursive project" with its "symbolic systems, rhetorical modes and tropes, metaphors, narratives and meanings" (2005a, 147) that worked to "normalize the institutional practices of coun-

10 Foster and Clark also critically comment on this article published in *BusinessWeek*, by drawing attention to the barbarism not of religious fundamentalism but, following a Marxist perspective, of the predatory role of the US and European imperialism (2004, n. pag.).

11 See also Winkler's chapter 6.4.2 in the present volume on the political rhetoric on barbarism in recent cinema, and Boletsi 2018, 18, 20–24. As for Aimé Césaire's adaptation of these analogies, see Winkler's chapter 6.3.1.

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ter-terrorism" (148). As Esch also argues, in US anti-terrorism rhetoric after 9/11 "historically grounded and intuitively appealing political myths," and particularly the "longstanding myth of Civilization v. Barbarism," turned into "valuable rhetorical tools for policy legitimization" (2010, 386). The mobilization of the "barbarian" and "barbarism" by the Bush administration generally worked, on the one hand, to de-legitimize the enemy as a worthy or rational adversary, and on the other hand, to legitimize the declaration of a state of emergency that would warrant military interventions in the name of the 'war on terror' (Boletsi 2013, 41). The popularity of civilizational rhetoric and the discourse of *culturalization* that was gaining traction in the 1990s facilitated this discursive project:[12] by providing the cultural, religious, and moral framework within which people were called to perceive global conflicts in the post-Cold War era, civilizational rhetoric helped turn the 'war on terror' into a war about moral and cultural values rather than politics and the exercise of power.

Several major media outlets, as Esch writes, tackled the oft-repeated question "why do they hate us?" "in terms of values and culture rather than politics and economics" and by mobilizing the 'civilization versus barbarism' opposition (2010, 381). Already two days after the attacks, a *New York Times* article by John Vinocur characteristically titled "The New World Order is a Clash of Civilizations" saw the attacks as a confirmation of Huntington's worldview, arguing that one has to accept "the premise that a clash of civilizations had been opened and that the allies must share its risks and obligations in responding alongside the Americans" (2001b, n. pag.). The renewed valence of the 'civilization versus barbarism' rhetoric after the attacks was widely seen as confirmation that "Huntington's (1993) prediction of a clash between Islam and the West had come to fruition" (Esch 2010, 381). Two early scholarly studies (Abrahamian 2003; Seib 2004) that conducted news media analyses recorded the revival of civilizational discourse in US media rhetoric after 9/11, referencing "an onslaught of articles in prominent American newspapers that framed world affairs in terms of civilization-based conflict" (Esch 2010, 381). These studies showed that US rhetoric of the 'war on terror'—multiply reproduced by the media—was a continuation of Huntington's worldview of civilizational clashes and thus of the culturalization of conflict that emerged in the 1990s (381). The following *New York Times* headlines in the section "A Nation Challenged" that was established shortly after 9/11 showcase how anti-terrorism rhetoric was framed in terms of a religious-cultural clash between West and the Islam, with the latter being positioned on the side of barbarism: "Yes, this is about Islam," "This is a Religious War," "Diffusing the Holy Bomb," "Barbarians at the Gate," and "A Head-on Collision of Alien Cultures" (qtd in Abrahamian, 2003; see also Esch 2010, 381).

If terrorists were shadowy enemies that were hard to locate geopolitically and to pin down conceptually, *barbarism* provided a conceptual framework for elevating those elusive enemies to the new other of the Western (and global) civilizational order. Counter-terrorism rhetoric became so widely acceptable because it rested on recognizable narratives. Thus, the 9/11 attacks were "re-made as symbolic of the

12 Jackson also notes that the "meta-narrative" of civilization "has a long genealogy in international relations, which can be seen most recently in the so-called 'clash of civilizations' discourse" (2005a, 151).

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eternal struggle between the forces of 'barbarism' and 'civilization'" (Jackson 2005a, 151). The 'civilization versus barbarism' rhetoric also evoked other historical narratives in European and American history, from "images of menacing nomadic armies attempting to conquer Christian Europe" (Jackson 2005a, 152) to the understanding of American history as a war "in which white Christian civilization is opposed by a 'savage' racial enemy" (Slotkin qtd in Sardar and Davies 2002, 190–91 and in Jackson 2005a, 152). Moreover, this rhetoric drew on an orientalist framework in which "the civilized Western world is contrasted with the violent and barbaric Eastern world" (Jackson 2005a, 152). This framework, as I will also show in the next section, enabled the association, and (to an extent) the identification, of terrorism with Islamic fundamentalism and, by extension, with the Muslim world. Thus, "civilization versus barbarism" provided a framework through which historically disparate narratives (e.g., the so-called 'barbarian invasions' of the Roman Empire, orientalist constructions of non-European others, European colonialism's 'civilizing mission,' World War II etc.) appeared as seamlessly and naturally intertwined: a "textual symphony," as Jackson calls it, "that legitimizes and normalizes the practice of American domestic and foreign policy" (2005a, 164–65). All in all, the 'barbarism versus civilization' narrative, and the historical registers it activated, contributed to the production of a set of 'truths' in domestic and international politics. As Jackson puts it, "America had been attacked in an act of war by barbarians who were set on destroying America, globalization, and civilization itself; it was the start of a new, but familiar kind of war, in which America would fight new, but proverbial enemies" (2005a, 153).

The mobilization of *barbarism* in this context de-politicized the war on terror by framing it as a conflict not between legitimate adversaries but between a legitimate power (US and its allies) and an illegitimate enemy that needs to be obliterated (Boletsi 2013, 41). As Esch also notes, the rhetoric of barbarism "depoliticizes the conflict by attributing terrorism to the barbaric nature of certain individuals" (2010, 384). This essentialist discourse ascribed differences between political, social or cultural formations to fixed *identities*; that is, what people purportedly *are* (and have always been) rather than what they *do*. Thus, as Esch puts it, "Like the battle of good and evil, a confrontation between civilization and barbarism carries an inbuilt logic about what must be done" (2010, 384). As a result, any critical voices that would interfere with this rigid binary scheme by asking questions, for example, about the implication of US foreign policy in what happened on 9/11 or would seek other frameworks of understanding the attacks, were automatically rendered invalid (Esch 2010, 384; Jackson 2005a). What is more, the use of *barbarism* in rhetoric on the war on terror contributed to the enemy's criminalization (Bhatia 2009, 283) and thus also to the justification of practices (e.g., torture) that would not be condoned in a "just war." As Jackson writes,

> a Just War, properly constituted and conducted, requires adherence to the laws of war—the proper treatment of captured enemy soldiers, defensible grounds for attacking weaker nations, and proper sanction by the governing institutions of international society. In this, it also requires recognition of the enemy as legitimate purveyors of violence—as warriors rather than as demons or barbarians. (2005a, 163)

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The torture, extreme humiliation, and abuse of prisoners in the Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo prisons during the US 'war on terror,' and the indefinite arrest and imprisonment of people who were deprived of any legal rights, are telling examples of the very real consequences that the enemy's casting as *barbarian* can have. Bodies tagged 'barbarian' are dehumanized, animalized, and thus considered as not deserving of humane or just treatment.

### 6.4.1.4. Critiques of Western Civilizational Rhetoric after 9/11

The mobilization of civilizational rhetoric by US political rhetoric and by the media in the context of the war on terror did not go unchallenged. Despite the wide appeal of this framework, there were several scholars, philosophers, intellectuals, journalists, literary authors, and artists who resisted, interrogated, and deconstructed this rhetoric from different perspectives.[13]

One of the most powerful critiques of US civilizational discourse was undertaken by political theorist Wendy Brown in her study *Regulating Aversion* (2006). Brown undertook a critical analysis of contemporary Western civilizational discourse, especially in the US, identifying *tolerance* as the crux of this discourse. Brown showed how tolerance-talk in the liberal West—which had been popular since the mid-1980s and especially since the start of the twenty-first century—cloaks power and cultural imperialism. In this civilizational discourse, she argued, the liberal subject's assumed capacity for tolerance is identified with civilization, while non-liberal societies—especially those designated as fundamentalist—are deemed "inherently intolerant" (2006, 166), that is, incapable of tolerance and thus barbaric (166). For Brown, tolerance-discourse rests on binary oppositions: "When the heterosexual tolerates the homosexual, when Christians tolerate Muslims in the West, not only do the first terms not require tolerance but their standing as that which confers tolerance establishes their superiority over that which is said to require tolerance" (186). The "object" of tolerance is thereby produced as inferior. Thus the concept of tolerance in the modern West partakes in a civilizational discourse of power that produces "the universal and the particular, the tolerant and the tolerated, the West and the East [...] the civilized and the barbaric" (187).

A few months after 9/11, on February 1, 2002, George W. Bush stated that the United States has "a historic opportunity to fight a war that will not only liberate people from the clutches of barbaric behavior but a war that can leave the world more peaceful in the years to come."[14] This statement exemplifies for Brown how the "opposition between civilization and barbarism, in which the cherished tolerance of the former meets the limits of the latter [...] provides the mantle of civilization, progress, and peace as cover for imperial militaristic adventures" (2006, 179). Contemporary civilizational discourse, which is "colonially inflected," establishes norms of what is

13 In Boletsi 2013, I present some of these critiques in more detail (45–55). Here, I draw from this study to provide a shorter overview of critical voices.

14 From "President's Remarks at 'Congress of Tomorrow' Lunch," February 1, 2002; qtd in Brown 2006, 179.

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tolerable or civilized, through which it provides legitimacy to imperial state action against intolerant, barbaric, non-liberal subjects and societies (191). This discourse arranges the assumed differences between Western and non-Western societies on a binary scheme: on the positive side we find liberalism, tolerance, freedom, individualism, civilization, and the West, while on the other side we find fundamentalism, oppression, intolerance, collectivization, barbarism, and the non-West (190).

Alongside deconstructive critiques like Brown's, we find other anti-foundationalist critiques of civilizational discourse that responded to the hardening of essentialist distinctions and moral judgments after 9/11 by defending relativist perspectives. From a relativist viewpoint, truth-claims and propositions about what is civilized and barbaric cannot be absolute: they stem from the vantage point and context in which they are articulated (Bérubé 2005, 305). Such perspectives were faced with vehement attacks in the charged US public sphere after 9/11 (Rothstein 2001; Rosenblatt 2001). As Roger Rosenblatt wrote in an article in *Time* magazine, if in the postmodern "age of irony, even the most serious things were not to be taken seriously" and "[n]othing was real," after the 9/11 attacks, intellectuals would have to acknowledge what is "real" and "serious." "Are you looking for something to take seriously?" Rosenblatt asks; "Begin with evil" (2001, 79). A relativist, by contrast, would argue that those viewed by the West as "barbarians" or "terrorists" could be "freedom fighters" from another perspective, leaving no grounds on which to condemn the 9/11 attacks as barbaric. In his essay "Don't Blame Relativism," Stanley Fish defended relativism against the "scapegoating" directed at anyone who after 9/11 dared to claim things like "there are no universal standards of judgment" (2002, 27).[15] Countering the assertion that relativism does not allow us to denounce actions as barbaric, Fish argued that we can condemn actions without resorting to an "abstract vocabulary of justice, truth and virtue" or to universal absolutes, which every party defines differently (2001, 28). Condemnation can be issued on the basis of "the historical reality" of "our way of life" (28). Reducing the other to the "abstraction of 'Evil'," a "shape-shifting demon," or a barbaric enemy is a dangerous political strategy, as it underestimates our enemies and prevents us from understanding their motives and finding an effective way to counter their threat (29–30).

Another critique of the moral judgments and absolute oppositions in US political rhetoric after 9/11 came from American pragmatist philosopher Richard Bernstein in his book *The Abuse of Evil* (2005). Scrutinizing the rhetoric of "good versus evil" in post-9/11 America, Bernstein interrogated the mentality "drawn to absolutes" and moral certainties, contrasting it with the mentality he called "pragmatic fallibilism": a mentality that questions rigid oppositional thinking and absolutes in politics. Just like Fish, Bernstein argued that renouncing absolute judgments and oppositions does not prevent us from acting "decisively in fighting our real enemies" (2005, viii).

Other critical responses to dominant Western rhetoric after 9/11 engaged with *civilization*, *culture*, and *barbarism* as key terms in this rhetoric by reversing the oppositions in which they are involved. Philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek, for example, reversed Huntington's thesis of a "clash of civilizations" by arguing, in

15 Fish's essay was included in an issue of the journal *The Responsive Community* dedicated to the question "Can Postmodernists Condemn Terrorism?"

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a Benjaminian vein, that "every clash of civilizations really is a clash of underlying barbarisms" (2009, 150). The clash between the Arab and the American civilizations is not between "barbarism" versus "respect for human dignity," but "a clash between anonymous brutal torture and torture as a media spectacle" (150). In *Le choc des barbaries: terrorismes et désordre mondial* (2002) (*The Clash of Barbarisms: The Making of the New World Disorder*, 2006), Lebanese-French political theorist Gilbert Achcar also reversed Huntington's thesis by replacing "civilization" and "order" in Huntington's title with their opposites. This reversal supported the argument that conflicts and terrorism today, including the 9/11 attacks, do not reflect a clash between civilizations with different value systems, but rather a clash of the dark, barbaric sides of these civilizations. As every civilization goes through a "civilizing process" historically, Achcar argued, it generates its own forms of barbarism (2006, 84). Rather than aberrations in the civilizing process, these forms of barbarism, which often surface in crisis times, are "an expression of one of its potentialities, one of its faces, one of its possible offshoots" (Traverso 2003, 153; qtd in Achcar 2006, 84). For Achcar, both the Bush administration and al-Qa'ida represent this barbaric side of the Western and Islamic civilization, respectively.

The claim that the West does not embody the essence of civilization but a form of barbarism can already be traced in Marxist, anti-colonial and postcolonial thinkers long before the 9/11 attacks.[16] Walter Benjamin's succinct articulation of the inextricability of barbarism from civilization in "Über den Begriff der Geschichte" ("Theses on the Philosophy of History")—"There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (1999b, 248)[17]—resonates in many critiques from the Left that interrogated US civilizational discourse or condemned excessive violence by the US in the 'war on terror.' Studies published after 9/11 not only drew attention to twenty-first century 'barbarism' by the US in the war on terror, but also looked back at the entwinement of barbarism and civilization in twentieth-century Europe. An example is historian Bernard Wasserstein's *Barbarism and Civilization: A History of Europe in Our Time* (2007), which casts the history of twentieth-century Europe as a narrative in which barbarism and civilization march side by side.

Some of the above-discussed critical responses approach barbarism and civilization as moral categories endemic to all civilizations, while others swap the common referents of barbarism and civilization in Western rhetoric by projecting the West as barbaric instead of the beacon of civilization. Of course, the act of swapping the common referents of "barbarism" and "civilization" does not interrogate the hierarchical and violent logic inherent in these asymmetrical counter-concepts, nor does it question the validity and legitimacy of their use in politics. In most critiques of US political and public rhetoric, the terms *civilization* and *barbarism* usually retain their traditional meanings and valuation even as their referents shift. "Civilization" remains the superior part of the opposition, while the "barbarian" continues to be

16 See Winkler's chapter 6.3.1 for the way Aimé Césaire reversed the opposition in his "Discours sur le colonialisme" (1950) and Boletsi's chapter 6.5 in this volume for a discussion of Marxist mobilizations of barbarism.

17 For a discussion of this sentence in Benjamin, see Winkler's chapter 5.3.3.6 in this volume.

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a negative signifier for violent, irrational or brutal behavior or identities, whether these are attributed to the US, to terrorists, to Muslim fundamentalists or to every civilization.

Another remarkable mobilization of *barbarism* in the same period, but this time from the other side of the Atlantic and with the Left as its target, can be traced in the book *Ce grand cadavre à la renverse* (2007) (*Left in Dark Times: A Stand Against the New Barbarism*, 2008) by French intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy. Lévy detected barbarism not only in the threat posed to Western societies by terrorists and "evil others," but also in the way the Left had come to position itself in cultural debates. In his sweeping and rather simplistic account of Left intellectual thought in the twenty-first century, the Left came to represent a "new barbarism." Diagnosing a "crisis" in the European (and American) Left—in which Lévy positions himself too—he accused Left intellectuals of "flirting with evil" and of having betrayed the Left's anti-totalitarian and antifascist ideals by endorsing antisemitism and treating Islamism with "the indulgence that tradition demands for the humble and the ill-fated" (2008, 167). In this account, the Left, in other words, seems to have gone 'barbaric' because it sympathizes with Islamism, thereby moving away from liberal European values.

The French context, in which Lévy's work was situated, generated several defenses of liberalism. Some of these employed humanist approaches to criticize US violence in the war on terror. French-Bulgarian philosopher Tzvetan Todorov's *La peur des barbares* (2008) (*The Fear of Barbarians*, 2010) developed such a critique from a liberal humanist position. Todorov presented this position as an alternative both to a kind of relativism that refuses to engage in any judgment of other cultures, and to a dogmatic essentialist approach, often based on ethnocentrism, according to which a society or culture sees itself as the broker of the true and the just (2010, 13–14). Western countries in the first decade of the twenty-first century were dominated by the fear of barbarians. The US response to 9/11 and the subsequent interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere in the name of the 'war on terror' exemplify the dangers of giving in to this fear (2010, 7). Todorov's main thesis is simple: our fear of barbarians threatens to turn us into barbarians. The torture and excesses in Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib illustrate the barbarism this fear can generate. While "we" (by which Todorov refers to the West) set out to defend democratic and humanist values, we end up betraying them (7, 106).

Todorov rejects relativist approaches to *barbarism*: "barbarity exists in itself and not merely in the gaze of the naive observer" (2010, 20–21) and treats barbarism as a universal moral category, defined in rather absolute terms: "barbarians are those who do not acknowledge that others are human beings like themselves" (16). This locates barbarism not in the purportedly subhuman other, but in the act of perceiving others as non-human. His thesis strongly echoes Claude Lévi-Strauss' well-known definition of the barbarian: "the barbarian is, first and foremost, the man who believes in barbarism" (1952).[18] For Todorov, the terms "barbarism" and "barbarian" should not be used for individuals or entire civilizations but for the actions and be-

18 For Lévi-Strauss' definition, see also Winkler's Introduction in vol. 1 of the present study, p. 25, and chapter 5.3.4.2 in the present volume.

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havior of those who ostracize others from humanity by treating them as inhuman, monsters or savages (2010, 18, 22). For Todorov, only the use of *barbarism* in the above sense is legitimate. From his liberal humanist perspective, it is the unity of humanity that allows us to distinguish, always and across all cultures, which acts are barbaric and which are civilized (51).

Todorov's humanist perspective does not invalidate *barbarism*, but advocates its judicious application to certain kinds of behavior and actions. Following Todorov's argument, the only way to avoid abuses of the word in politics and public rhetoric is to delimit the concept's definition, meanings, and extension. In his proposal, barbarism and civilization are absolutely distinguished from each other: according to him, such a strict distinction is necessary as it allows us to identify barbarism whenever we witness or experience it.

However, the set of conditions and features that Todorov associates with *barbarism* (e.g., discriminatory laws; authoritarian states; belief in magic and superstition; espousing ideas "on an act of faith") and *civilization* (equality before the law; liberal states; science; accepting a proposition based on reason etc.) (2010, 23–24) are neither universal nor culturally neutral. They largely represent Western liberal and humanist values, with an emphasis on Enlightenment ideals and the belief in reason. Todorov may deny that there are inherently barbaric or civilized cultures, but the 'universal' values that inform his understanding of civilization and barbarism are in fact culturally specific: they are the legacy of European Enlightenment and reflect the way the liberal democratic West sees itself. Of course, following Todorov's definition, Western deviations from these values—for example, in cases of torture—are also "barbaric." But such phenomena in the West tend to be seen as exceptions and not as the rule. According to this perspective, the West can therefore theoretically remain the broker of these values, and thus the defining essence of civilization.[19]

### 6.4.1.5. Barbarism in Debates on Terrorism and Migration in the Second Decade of the Twenty-First Century

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, even as the memory of 9/11 became somewhat more distant, figurations of barbarism and barbarians in political and public rhetoric did not wane. The civilizational rhetoric that was reinvigorated in the aftermath of 9/11 still holds sway up to the moment of writing this chapter (spring 2022). In this section, I scrutinize uses of barbarism and civilizational rhetoric in the second decade of the twenty-first century with an emphasis on mobilizations of these terms in debates on terrorism on European ground. Specifically, I delve into public rhetoric in response to recent acts of terror, in order to draw attention to the tacit conditions that need to be met in public rhetoric for an act of (terrorist) violence to qualify as "barbarian." By scrutinizing these conditions, I illustrate how uses of *barbarism* in European rhetoric in the past decade continue

19 Todorov characteristically views the European Union as "an attempt to make the way the world works a little more civilized" (2010, 195).

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to partake in a civilizational framework that reaffirms Europe's (civilized) identity vis-à-vis its (barbaric) others.[20]

A rudimentary search I conducted in global English-language media outlets from 1989 to 2020 using the global news search engine *Factiva*, indicated that appearances of the words "barbarism" and "barbarians" were remarkably high in and around 2014 and 2015 (*Figures 6.1 & 6.2*). The gradual rise in uses of "barbarism" and "barbarians" in media outlets from 1989 to 2015, as indicated in Figures 6.1 & 6.2, may partly also be related to the fact that more and more digitized media outlets became available through search engines as we move into the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, the spike we observe in the years 2014–2017, with 2015 being the year in which the frequency of the words' use is by far the highest, is remarkable and warrants scholarly (and public) attention. Throughout the period under examination (1989–2020), "barbarism" figures in news outlets across a wide range of subjects, with "political/general news," "domestic politics," and "terrorism" holding the highest number of the word's mentions. If we zoom in on uses of "barbarism" and "barbarians" in 2015, the year in which uses of these words show the highest rise between 1989 and 2020, we see that "terrorism" is the subject that attracts most appearances of both words (*Figures 6.4 & 6.5*).

This surge in 2015 and in the years around it, combined with the observation that most appearances of these words fall under the topic of "terrorism," allows us to formulate some hypotheses regarding the intensification of the rhetoric of barbarism in (and around) 2015. The year 2015 started with the shootings at the offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris on January 7 by two French Muslim

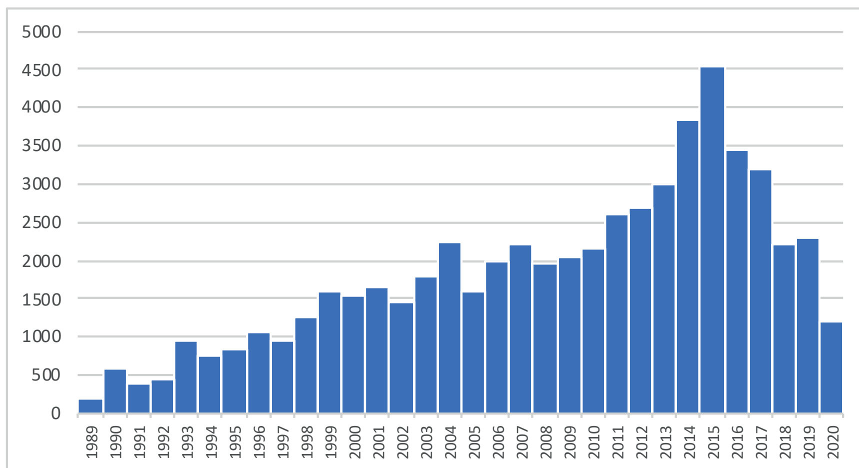


Fig. 6.1: Chart showing the yearly distribution of appearances of the word "barbarians" in major media outlets in English from 1989 to 2020. The search included all subjects besides 'sports.' Source: Factiva (chart reconstructed by author based on a Factiva-generated chart).

20 The arguments and analysis presented in this and the following sections include condensed, modified, and updated parts of my analysis of figures of the other in recent debates on terrorism and on the 'barbarian' in post-truth politics in Boletsi 2018 (24–44).

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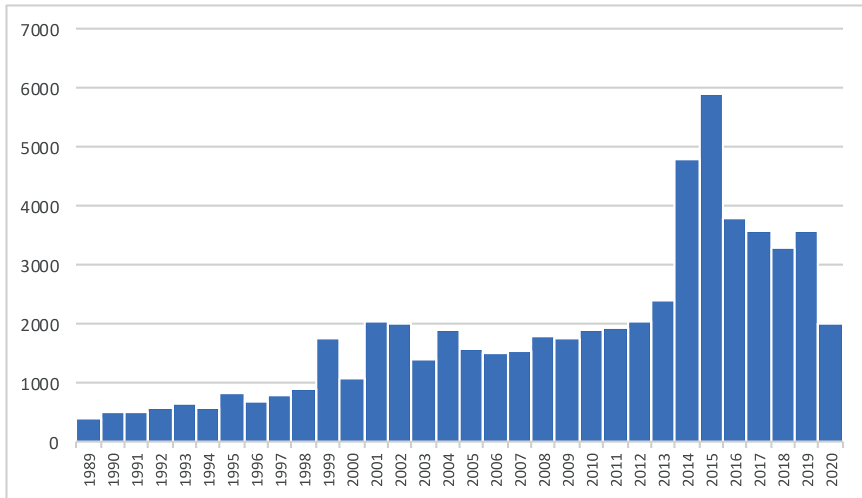


Fig. 6.2: Chart showing the yearly distribution of appearances of the word "barbarism" in major media outlets in English from 1989 to 2020. The search included all subjects besides 'sports.' Source: Factiva (chart reconstructed by author based on a Factiva-generated chart).

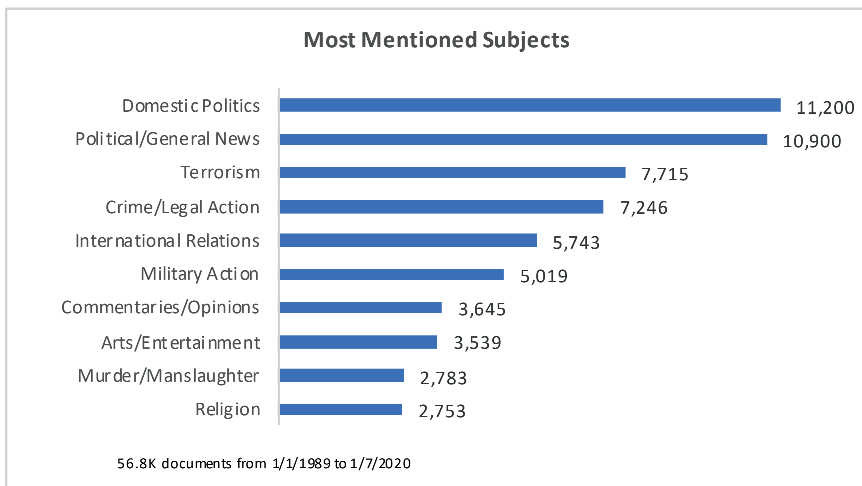


Fig. 6.3: Chart showing the distribution of appearances of the word "barbarism" by subject in major media outlets in English from 1989 to 2020. The search included all subjects besides sports. Source: Factiva (chart reconstructed by author based on a Factiva-generated chart).

brothers. In the same year, Paris was shaken by the mass shootings on November 13, claimed by members of the Islamic State, that left 130 people dead. 2015 also marks the start of the so-called 'migrant crisis' in Europe, resulting mainly from the Syrian civil war, during which millions of Syrians had to flee their homes. In 2015 only, 1.3 million people entered European borders requesting asylum, primarily from Syria but also from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Sub-Saharan Africa ("2015 European Migrant

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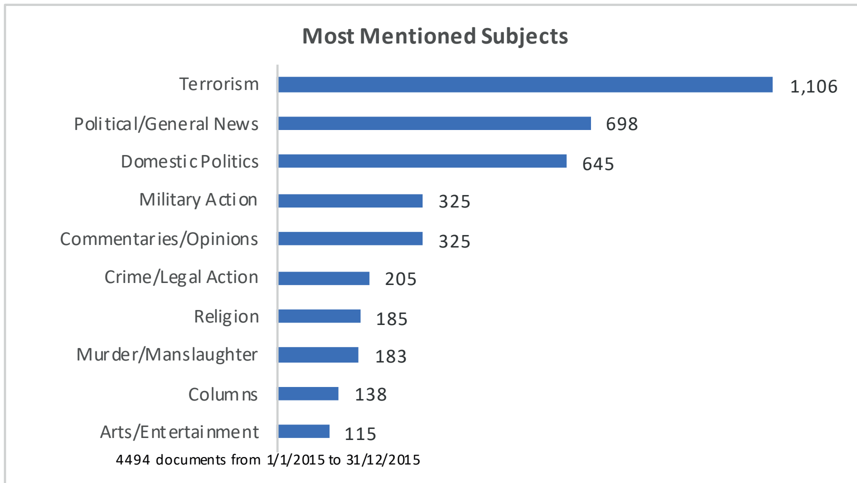


Fig. 6.4: Chart showing the distribution of appearances of the word "barbarians" by subject in major media outlets in English in 2015, excluding the subject 'sports'. Source: Factiva (chart reconstructed by author based on a Factiva-generated chart).

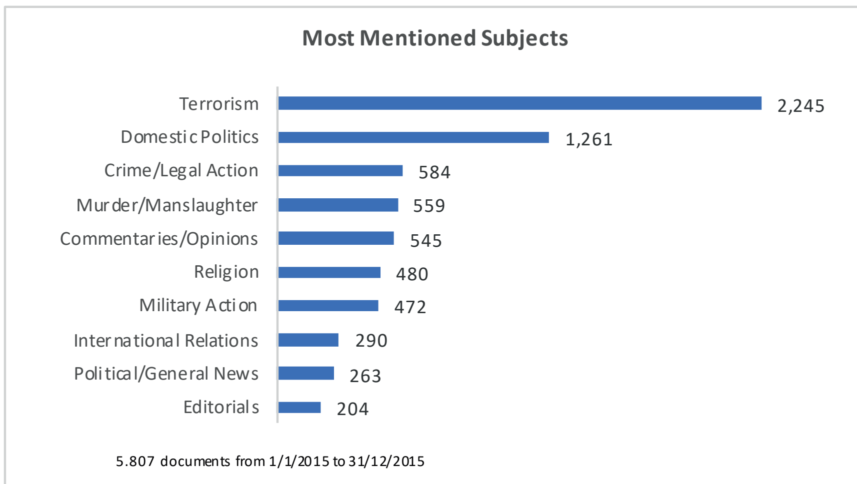


Fig. 6.5: Chart showing the distribution of appearances of the word "barbarism" by subject in major media outlets in English in 2015, excluding the subject 'sports.' Source: Factiva (chart reconstructed by author based on a Factiva-generated chart).

Crisis"; n. pag.).[21] In public rhetoric, these events often appeared under a common or related framing. In fact, as the New Keywords Collective aptly notes, the two acts

21 It was also, as the New Keywords Collective notes, the deadliest "year on record for illegalized migrants and refugees seeking to cross these borders, especially across the Mediterranean Sea" (New Keywords Collective 2016, 4).

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of terror in January and November in France "awkwardly seem to frame what otherwise, during the intervening several months, has been represented as 'the migrant crisis,' or 'the refugee crisis'" like an "uncanny pair of book-ends" (2016, 2). The dominant framing of these events as proofs of an 'external' threat posed to Europe by its (Muslim) others, the intensification of Islamophobia, and the intense processes of securitization that these events set in motion in Europe, sparked a re-intensification of civilizational discourse. It is here, one may safely assume, that we can find the main source for the spike in the mobilization of "barbarism" and "barbarians" in media outlets in 2015.

In 2015, the internet was teeming with articles foregrounding the figure of 'barbarian invasions' in responses to the above events. Opinion pieces such as Olav Dirkmaat's "Remarks on the European Refugee Crisis and the Fall of the Roman Empire" functioned as cautionary tales, warning that the "'European Empire' could come crashing down as hard as the great ancient civilization of the Roman Empire did" (Dirkmaat 2015, n. pag.). Nouriel Roubini's opinion piece "Europe's Barbarians Inside the Gate" in *Project Syndicate* is also a case in point. Written shortly after the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, Roubini's piece sketched a somber European landscape of multiple intersecting crises, ranging from terrorism, economic instability, and the rise of populism to the 'migration crisis.' Roubini finds the latter crisis potentially "existential" for Europe. Even though he also identifies internal barbarians in Europe—"the populists and nationalist barbarians within"—his suggestion that Europe's greatest threat comes from the problems and conflicts that take place elsewhere ("problems of the greater Middle East [...] and Africa"; Roubini 2015, n. pag.) reaffirms the narrative of European innocence in the face of *external* barbarian threats, thus locating the main source of barbarism beyond European borders. The popular figure of 'barbarian invasions' facilitated this "externalization of 'the migration crisis'" in public rhetoric: that is, the framing of this declared crisis as "strictly 'external' to the presumed safety and stability of 'Europe'" (New Keywords Collective 2016, 3) and one in which Europe is not implicated but which it has been forced to tackle and resolve (8).

Analogies with the Roman Empire and its 'barbarian invasions' in relation to the declared migration crisis did not only figure in opinion pieces, blogs or internet commentaries but also in statements by prominent political figures. Marine Le Pen, president of the French National Front (FN) party, referred to the migration crisis as a threatening "migrant invasion" like that of the fourth century (Sept. 2015), and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte pled in November 2015 for a strict protection of European borders to avoid a downfall similar to Rome's: both forged a comparison between Rome's invaders and unarmed Syrian refugees fleeing a catastrophic war (Boni 2015; Spiegel 2015, n. pag.).[22]

Meanwhile, the 'Brexit' campaign in the UK that was in full swing from the final months of 2015 up to the referendum on 23 June 2016, also amply mobilized the fear of external others threatening British borders. The populist and xenophobic rheto-

22 These examples are also presented in Boletsi 2018, 18. The discussion of barbarism in the framing of terrorism in Europe in the remainder of this section is an abridged version of the argument in Boletsi 2018, 24–34.

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ric of this campaign can also be counted among the factors for the surge in uses of "barbarism" in 2015 and 2016. The figure of 'barbarian invasions' in this context was not only mobilized through language but also visually. The anti-immigration poster disseminated by the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) as part of their Brexit campaign amounted to a strong visual enactment of this figure. The poster showed a mass of Syrian refugees marching on their dangerous journey towards Western Europe. The phrase "Breaking point" was printed with red letters on the image, which was captioned with the sentence "We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders." Through the visual evocation of barbarian invasions, the refugees were presented as a barbarian horde invading Europe (and the UK) and putting the security and way of life of British citizens at risk.

When we turn to figurations of *barbarism* in responses to the highly mediatized terrorist attacks in France at the start and towards the end of 2015, the use of this signifier for such acts of terror may almost appear self-evident. Questioning this supposed self-evidence, however, it is worth drawing attention to the criteria that make these (and other) acts of terror qualify as 'barbaric' for the Western public, as well as the implications of the use of "barbarism" in rhetorically framing these events.

Civilizational rhetoric accompanied numerous responses to the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings in January and the mass shootings in Paris in November 2015. This rhetoric was of course not new: as we saw, it had been dominant after 9/11 in the context of the 'war on terror.' As a result, these attacks on European ground were understood as an extension of the same battle between the 'free civilized West' and the (external) forces of barbarism. In a speech that, as many noticed, was strongly reminiscent of George W. Bush's speech after 9/11, French president François Hollande framed the November 2015 attacks as "an act of war," stating that "We will be merciless toward the barbarians of Islamic State group" (qtd in Henley and Chrisafis 2015, n. pag.).

In official responses by governments and international organizations to the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting, the November 2015 Paris attacks, and the bombings in Brussels in March 2016, the word "barbaric" poses as the most popular qualifier for these events.[23] In a *Wikipedia* article that lists statements issued by international leaders in response to the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting, thirteen statements use the word "barbarism" and its derivatives (barbarian, barbarous, barbaric, barbarianism etc.) to condemn the shooting, making it the most frequent signifier attached to the event and the perpetrators. The same holds for official statements in response to the November 2015 Paris attacks and the Brussels bombings, where barbarism and its derivatives appear fourteen and six times respectively.[24]

In these responses, the word "barbarism" reinforces a rhetoric that aims at presenting the enemy both as evil *and* as capable of sophisticated organization and ac-

23 The word figures in a little over 15% of the international government statements in response to this event collected on *Wikipedia*. Most appearances come from responses from Western nations ("International Reactions to the Charlie Hebdo Shooting" n. pag.).

24 The word appears in a little over 10% of official international statements about the November 2015 Paris attacks and in 5% of statements on the Brussels bombings collected on *Wikipedia* ("Reactions to the November 2015 Paris Attacks" n. pag.; "Reactions to the 2016 Brussels Bombings" n. pag.).

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tion that threatens (civilized) society as a whole. With 'barbarism versus civilization' as a master narrative for terror, public outcry can be more easily steered towards whole groups of people of a certain religious and cultural background rather than towards specific (e.g., disturbed, mentally ill) individuals. In other words, mobilizations of *barbarism* facilitate the association of terrorist acts with Islamic fundamentalism and, by extension, with the Muslim world as an undifferentiated whole, constructing the latter as the antipode of the civilized free West.

How can one question the legitimacy of attaching "barbarism" to acts of terror without simultaneously appearing to doubt the heinous character of such attacks? To answer this question, it is worth looking closer at the semantic complex and discursive framing in which "barbarism" partakes when used in these contexts. To take the responses to the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting as an example. Whenever barbarism and its derivatives appear in the above-mentioned official statements, they are part of a binary scheme: on the one side, we find terms such as "terror," "horror," "crime against humanity," and "barbarism," and on the other side we find "France," "Europe," "the free nations" of the world, "civilization," "humanity." "Barbarism" is implicated in a series of metonymical associations that produce Europe and its values (freedom of expression, democracy, peace) as the pinnacle of civilization.

The production of this binary scheme becomes palpable, for example, in a statement by the Albanian Prime Minister, who saw the *Charlie Hebdo* attack as "a wound opened barbarically to terrorize France, Europe, the free nations of the democratic world and to impose us [*sic*] the abandonment of the values of this world that France embodies solemnly" (Edi Rama qtd in "International Reactions to the C. H. Shooting," n. pag.). In this synecdochic chain, France becomes a *pars pro toto* for Europe, for all democratic nations, and ultimately for universal values ("the values of this world"). As the "we" in his statement comes to encompass the whole (civilized) humanity, the opposed side of the barbarian enemy is reduced to just "a handful of people" who "do not share these values."[10] It is no coincidence that the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting was primarily framed as a direct attack on "these values" rather than on actual individuals.[11] These values that are cast as the universal standards of civilization are nevertheless culturally specific: they are the liberal humanist values inherited by European Enlightenment.

In the rhetoric of the 'war on terror' as well as in the framing of terrorist attacks in Europe and in right-wing populist rhetoric on the declared migration crisis since 2015, the narrative of 'civilization versus barbarism' produces certain realities as self-evident and tries to narrativize them in a recognizable yet highly problematic way. In this narrativization, the source of a declared crisis—be it terrorism or the 'migration crisis'—is understood to lie with an external threatening other that illegitimately tries to infiltrate, invade, and disrupt European or Western space. Thus, interrogating civilizational rhetoric as a narrative frame does not mean that one relativizes or condones acts of extreme violence and terror, but invites their understanding in different terms.

The figuration of barbarism in responses to terror conjures up various historical uses of this concept. The binary divisions of orientalist discourses as well as the narrative of Enlightened Europe warding off barbarians resonate in these responses. These associations grant historical validity to simplistic interpretations of contem-

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porary challenges and strengthen the self-evidence of uses of *barbarism*: obviously, one may be inclined to say, Islamic terrorists and their practices are "barbaric." This apparent self-evidence, however, starts crumbling when one asks, for example, how often the word "barbarism" and its derivatives come up in official responses to attacks in the West that are unrelated to Muslim fundamentalism, such as the 2011 mass shooting in Norway by Anders Breivik, who wanted to draw attention to his view that Muslim immigration should stop: the answer is zero.[25] The reluctance to attach "barbarism" to white perpetrators of terrorist acts betrays a tendency to keep the semantic complex to which barbarism belongs away from white European violent agents. This reluctance is further reflected in the selective application of the term "terrorism" itself. As I have shown elsewhere, in Europe and the US, the terrorism-tag tends to be attached to recent violent acts that involve Muslims, even when the perpetrators' ties to an organized group like ISIS are loose or non-existent and even when they prove to have histories of mental disorder (Mazzetti and Schmitt 2016) .[26] By contrast, white perpetrators of such acts are often framed as loners, alienated and isolated figures, often mentally and psychologically disturbed, 'troubled kids,' or 'monsters.' This starkly distinct framing of white terrorism constructs white perpetrators as *exceptional* cases: as such, these cases appear unrelated to systemic problems and inequalities, and become decoupled from a specific culture. This framing de-*culturalizes* their acts: the narrative of civilized Europe defending itself against external barbarian invaders is less apt to capture such purportedly 'isolated' cases. This striking discrepancy in the framing of white and Muslim terrorism testifies to a reluctance to semantically and conceptually connect *barbarism* to the cultural and political space of Europe and to European identity.

### 6.4.1.6. Barbarians in the Era of Post-Truth Populism: The Case of Donald Trump

This section takes a closer look at some of the *barbarian*'s functions in right-wing populist rhetoric during the so-called era of 'post-truth politics.' Populist rhetoric in the post-truth era, I argue, represents a more aggressive strand of the discourse of culturalization, specifically in the form it took in the 'Brexit' campaign for the referendum in the UK in June 2016 and in Donald Trump's campaign for the US presidential election.[27]

On the one hand, right-wing populism promotes notions of 'common sense' as a means of normalizing its ideologies (Valdivia & Jansma; Akkerman, de Lange &

25 This is based on the collection of reactions in the *Wikipedia* article "International Reactions to the 2011 Norway Attacks" n. pag. (last updated 17 July 2016). I consulted this article in 2018 but it was no longer available on *Wikipedia* when I tried to access it again in March 2022.

26 For a more detailed exposition of the argument in this paragraph on the divergent framing of 'white' and 'Muslim' perpetrators of acts of terror in Western public rhetoric, see Boletsi 2018, 24–27.

27 Part of this section on uses of the barbarian in post-truth politics and in relation to Donald Trump's persona comes from revised and abridged material in Boletsi 2018, 34–44.

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Rooduijn). On the other hand, it cultivates a climate of crisis, imminent disaster, and fear of invasions that threaten to unsettle the presumed 'normality' of people's lives (Biesecker; Watts). Populist politicians capitalize on the fantasies and fears of the public by fostering identifications based on sweeping enemy constructions. Thus, the dystopian, apocalyptic scenarios that "post-truth populism" often manufactures (Harsin; Speed & Mannion) appropriate the 'civilization versus barbarism' rhetoric in order to tag (foreign) others as barbarians. Consequently, the crisis narratives and fear of barbarians that dominate populist rhetoric help present extraordinary security measures as 'commonsensical' responses to states of emergency and danger (Butler & Athanasiou 2013; De Cauwer 2018).

This mobilization of the *barbarian* in contemporary xenophobic populist and nativist rhetoric is neither new nor surprising. What is, however, noteworthy, is that in the era of post-truth politics, populist politicians and their supporters have also started employing the figure of the barbarian *positively*. They do so in order to profile themselves as outsiders to the 'civilized' political establishment—in other words, as brave and fearless barbarians that dare to shake the status quo in order to reclaim politics from the 'civilized' elites that have distanced themselves from the needs of the common people. As right-wing populist politicians present themselves as authentic, outspoken personas who say things 'as they are' and refrain from sugar-coated representations of the 'ugly' truth about, e.g., migration, Islam, and threats to national security, the *barbarian* comes to the fore as a self-descriptive term for precisely such personas. In this section, I address this seemingly contradictory mobilization of the barbarian figure in post-truth populism by centering on uses of this figure in relation to the persona of Donald J. Trump during the US presidential campaign and his term as US president (2017–2021).

Before delving into mobilizations of the *barbarian* in relation to Trump, a brief explication of the term 'post-truth politics' is required. "Post-truth" was declared "word of the year" in 2016 by Oxford Dictionaries, and defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" ("Word of the Year is..." 2017, n. pag.). Although the term had already been in circulation before 2016, the surge in its usage in 2016, according to the dictionary editors, can be linked to the charged political climate "in the context of the EU referendum in the United Kingdom and the presidential election in the United States" (n. pag.). This context gave shape to the collocation "post-truth politics." The term "post-truth" gained ground against the backdrop of "the rise of social media as a news source" and the "growing distrust of facts offered up by the establishment" (n. pag.). The regime of 'post-truth politics' renders facts irrelevant and produces its truth as *affect*: it can thus accommodate contradictions or lies as long as these produce a 'felt truth.'

Donald Trump is perhaps the prototypical figure of post-truth populist politics. During his 2016 presidential campaign, the media often presented him as a barbarian leading an invasion against the political establishment. In references to Trump, the *barbarian* was employed both *pejoratively*—in critiques or satires by democrats and other opponents—and *affirmatively*, as an approving description by commentators and journalists who supported him or acknowledged his public appeal. In order to probe this double, ambivalent mobilization of the *barbarian*,

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I proceed to look at examples from media outlets that cast Trump as a barbarian based on his personality, rhetoric, and political stance, and revolve around the following aspects:

1. His 'barbarian' language on the level of syntax, grammar, and rhetoric.
2. His profiling as an 'alpha male' and a confident, hypermasculine man of action.
3. His (self-)presentation as an outsider invading the political establishment and promising to overturn purportedly corrupt, political structures.

To probe Trump's language as 'barbarian,' one may turn to the *barbarian*'s etymology, in which the word's relation to language is inscribed: *βάρβαρος* in ancient Greek performed the supposedly inarticulate sounds of the languages of foreigners from a Greek viewpoint.[28] In ancient Greek, the word also connoted difficulties in elocution and pronunciation, harsh sounds or inarticulate speech, stuttering or lisping, nonsense or irrational talk (Long 1986, 130–31; Hartog 2001, 80; Boletsi 2013, 69). This linguistic basis of the *barbarian* was later on channeled into the second meaning of *barbarism*, developed in the rhetorical tradition: barbarism as a countable noun, often in the plural, denotes "mistakes in speech or writing, inferior linguistic forms, or foreignisms and linguistic hybridizations" (Boletsi 2013, 72). Additional language-related stereotypes were attached to the *barbarian* based on popular representations of Rome's invaders: barbarians are thought to speak in a crude, straightforward manner, they despise sophisticated rhetoric and nuance, and are unable to grasp multi-layered language.[29]

Bringing these traits to bear on Trump's language does not take much effort. During his campaign and presidency, his language was replete with linguistic barbarisms of various types. Based on a study of his campaign speeches, Sam Leith distinguishes three striking elements about his language. First, Trump used very limited and simplistic vocabulary (2017, n. pag.). Second, his language was marked by erroneous "syntax, spelling and punctuation": his tweets, for example, were full of "run-on sentences," "misspellings and malapropisms" or "verbless exclamations," while his speeches comprised repetitive formulas, fragmentary utterances, and "sentences whose grammar collapses" (n. pag.). A third striking element was his use of "charged but empty adjectives and adverbs": "Things are 'great,' 'wonderful,' 'amazing,' 'the best,' or they're 'crooked,' 'fake,' 'unfair,' 'failing'" (n. pag.).

According to David Horsey's article "Trump the Barbarian" in *The Baltimore Sun*, precisely those aspects of Trump's language that qualified him as a *barbarian* made him come across "as strangely authentic" (2015, n. pag.). Despite his "disjointed, stream-of-consciousness rambles," in the minds of voters disillusioned with both political parties in the US he posed as a confident man "who unapologetically sticks up for himself and boldly states uncomfortable truths" with "an unfiltered voice" (n. pag.). One of the seeming paradoxes of post-truth politics is that it renders truth irrelevant, yet mistrusts sophisticated, eloquent language as potentially hypocritical,

28 See also Winkler's Introduction in vol. 1 of this study, p. 2–4.

29 Let us remember here that in C. P. Cavafy's poem "Waiting for the Barbarians" the city's "distinguished orators" disappear from public space because the citizens assume that the barbarians they are waiting for are "bored by rhetoric and public speaking" (Cavafy 1992, 19).

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fake, and untruthful. Trump's barbarian language thus worked to his benefit. As Leith observes, "His spelling and grammar are disastrous, he contradicts himself, trails into incoherence, never sounds dignified or recognisably presidential—but none of it does him any harm. In fact, it seems to help" (2015, n. pag.). Trump's rhetorical *flatness*—the fact that he has the same register regardless of the occasion—becomes a "selling point" (n.pag): it enhances the impression that he 'tells it as it is.' This 'barbarian' language that promises unmediated access to reality forces us to shift our understanding of truth: 'truth' is redefined as the truth-*effect* of a strongly emotive language[30] that is so simplified, singe-layered, and blunt that it *appears* to hide nothing.

The second aspect that typifies Trump's 'barbarian' persona is his profiling as an alpha-male. In his August 2015 article "Donald Trump: Warrior Male Extraordinaire" for the conservative *World News Daily* website, Kent G. Bailey approvingly describes Trump as a "strong warrior male" of the kind that "sustained the human race from the dawn of time" (2015, n. pag.). In support of this qualification, Bailey musters stereotypes attached to Rome's invaders, filtered through popular fiction's figure of 'Conan the Barbarian':[31] "Donald Trump is the prototypical, archetypal and testosterone-driven alpha male who rules by the sheer force of his personality, imposing physique, quick wit, mastery of repartee and almost hypnotic control over his gathering masses of adoring followers" (2015, n. pag.). For many Trump supporters these are virtues: an antidote to political correctness that has purportedly weakened the American nation. "Nuance, complexity and verifiable facts are not of particular concern to those who long for a warrior male to lead them," Horsey writes about Trump's followers (2015, n.pag). Horsey's discussion of "Trump the Barbarian" in his homonymous article is visually accompanied by a cartoon that, in analogy with Rome's invaders, depicts Trump as a crude barbarian leader menacingly holding a sledgehammer. Behind him we see the cheering hordes of his barbarian followers, while two sophisticated-looking figures, a man and a woman, are set apart from the crowd. "But he's so crude! Inarticulate! Simplistic!" the man exclaims, while the woman replies: "This crowd isn't into nuance."

The sexist overtones of this 'alpha-male' barbarian persona are undeniable. The 2016 *New York Times* opinion piece "Donald Trump, Barbarian at the Debate" pejoratively casts Trump as a barbarian based primarily on his sexism and his attempts to "normalize sexual predation" (Blow 2016, n. pag.). In a similar spirit, a blog piece in *The Huffington Post* titled "Trump the Barbarian" lists Trump's 'barbarian' traits: self-absorbed, "angry," "contemptuous," and "a stone braggart" who "loves to mock and belittle people" (Raphael 2016, n. pag.). The piece concludes with Conan the Barbarian's definition of happiness from the homonymous 1982 film starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, which to the author sounds "tremendously Trumpy": "To crush your enemies, to see them driven before you, and to hear the lamentations of their women" (qtd in Raphael 2016, n. pag.). The figure of the hypermasculine barbarian

30 Discussing the earlier but related term "truthiness," Dick Meyer succinctly describes this felt truth as follows: "Truth today is just what you feel" (Meyer 2006, n. pag.)

31 On Conan the Barbarian, see below chapter 6.4.1.7 and Winkler's chapter 6.4.2 in this volume.

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warrior that defies rules of civility but gets things done supports a political persona that disavows political correctness and projects racist, sexist, macho-rhetoric as a merit under the guise of authenticity.

Trump's profiling as a 'barbarian leader' serves to legitimize an exercise (or abuse) of power whereby the leader can bend rules in order to achieve his goals. While Trump's supporters praise this 'barbarian' feature, his critics foreground it as a danger to US security and democracy. A March 2016 article in *Foreign Policy* titled "Donald Trump, Barbarian Emperor," for example, takes issue with Trump's isolationist views on foreign policy and his disregard for American commitments to its allies, especially in Asia. The author casts Trump as a "barbarian emperor" to highlight how he tends to use his power, presenting "himself as a great dealmaker who would use other countries' reliance on us [Americans] to induce them to turn a profit for us" (Schake 2016, n. pag.). In effect, Schake argues, this use of power threatens US security and "raises the costs to the United States" (n. pag.).

The use of the barbarian-figure also accentuated Trump's profiling as an *outsider* to the political establishment. Another cartoon by Horsey in the *LA Times* borrows the imagery of imperial Rome to depict Trump as a barbarian leader invading and burning down the headquarters of the Republican party with his hordes, while addressing two terrified republicans: "Relax, I've brought you new voters."[32] Noah Millman's "How Republican Mandarins Will Try To Civilize Trump the Barbarian" builds a similar analogy: "As Kublai Khan conquered the ancient Song Empire of China to become its first barbarian emperor, Trump swooped down and conquered the once-mighty party of Lincoln" (2016, n.pag). In comparable terms, John Kass' February 2016 article "Trump: The Barbarian at the GOP Gates," applauds Trump's 'barbarian invasion' of the Republican party (2016, n. pag.).

In yet another positive mobilization of the *barbarian*, in an article from July 2015, Jim Picht looks at both Trump and democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders as "Barbarians in a Milquetoast World" (Picht 2015, n. pag.). Despite their radically different views, the author sees the popularity of both candidates as stemming from their 'barbarian' qualities, to wit: refreshing frankness, willingness to stand up and "fix problems," anti-establishment stances, and the tendency to "simplify complex problems down to simple stories" which hold "truths that resonate with people" (n. pag.). Whether or not the comparison between Trump and Sanders holds up, the fact that commentators often drew this comparison during the primary season of the 2016 election testifies to a redrawing of distinctions in politics: the opposing sides were not so much Democrats versus Republicans but anti-establishment 'outsiders' ('barbarians') versus establishment politicians ('civilized').

The barbarian imagery that the media attached to Trump taps into the culturalization discourse that dominated US politics since the 1990s and even more after 9/11. However, as the above examples suggest, the valuation attached to 'barbarism' and 'civilization' in the context of Trump's populist post-truth politics was far from stable. While for some the barbarian-figure captured all that was destructive about Trump, others endorsed his barbarian image as refreshing.

32 The cartoon accompanies Horsey's article "GOP Reels from Donald Trump's Conquest of their Party" (2016).

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Such contradictory uses of the barbarian-figure were not new.[33] They can be traced, for example, in the concept's nineteenth-century uses.[34] In decadent literature of the late nineteenth century, the barbarian was an ambivalent figure that attracted both fear and longing. The culturally pessimist *fin de siècle* climate in Europe generated a proliferation of analogies with the decline of the Roman Empire, in which barbarians were cast as a "threat" to European civilization but also "a potential source of its rejuvenation" (Tziovas 1986, 169, 172). Thus, nineteenth-century evocations of decadent empires often evoked the barbarian positively, as a figure of vitality, energy, and regenerative potential. The *positive barbarian* as a destroyer-creator who breaks with the old to innovate and start anew, or as an antidote to the conventional structures of European culture, also took center stage in twentieth-century avant-garde movements as well as in Walter Benjamin's writings.[35]

Echoing the above historical contexts, the barbarian-tag was often used by Trump's critics in order to discredit him, but it was also 'hijacked' by his own camp to reinforce his appeal. The ambivalent functions of barbarian, which I briefly laid out above, made this figure well-suited for Trump's post-truth populism: the barbarian can make negative traits appear positive; it can make destruction appear as a necessary means of bringing change; it can make incoherent, insolent language appear refreshingly direct; it can make a wealthy, powerful businessman that profits from the system pose as an outsider to the status quo. Because post-truth politics invests in the affective impact of narratives instead of their truth-value or consistency, it can mobilize stereotypical figures in contradictory ways without them losing their power to move the public. Hence, in this context the *barbarian* could be mobilized both as a means of demonizing and excluding others and as a positive (self-)description of a populist politician and his supporters.

The *barbarian* of course also popped up in critiques of Trump, not only during the 2016 election campaign but also during his campaign in 2020. Civilizational rhetoric was in fact central to the campaigns leading up to the 2020 US presidential election. The mobilization of such rhetoric by both conservatives and progressives highlights the contradictions and different ideological stakes involved in its use in the contemporary political arena. In her 2020 article "Trump the Barbarian," Mona Charen addressed some of these contradictions in her critique of Trump's campaign. While Trump's supporters ascribe barbarism to "the mobs toppling statues as evidence that safety and security are threatened," Charen argues, "they ignore the lawlessness in the Oval Office" where the real barbarian resides (2020, n. pag.). Typical for the way Trump's supporters drew on civilizational rhetoric in the 2020 campaign was the following statement by conservative historian Victor Davis Hanson in Fox News, who claimed that the 2020 election was "a Manichean choice between whether you want civilization or [whether] you feel [America] was inherently flawed with a

33 See also Winkler's Introduction in vol.1 of the present study, p. 21.

34 For uses of barbarism in the late nineteenth century and in the context of decadence, see Boletsi in vol. 1 of the present study, p. 310–21.

35 I refer here to Benjamin's notion of "positive barbarism" in his essay "Erfahrung und Armut" ("Experience and Poverty," 1933). For an extensive discussion of Benjamin's notion of "positive barbarism," see Winkler's chapter 5.3.3 in this volume and Boletsi 2013, 108–38.

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cancer and we have to use radiation and chemotherapy to kill the host to kill the cancer. [...] And I'm going to vote for civilization" (qtd in Charen 2020, n. pag.). In a similar vein, conservative television host Laura Ingraham described the democratic agenda as trying "to pull down our whole culture: the American founding, Western civilization, and everything that sprang from it" (qtd in Charen 2020, n. pag.). Charen, who quotes Hanson and Ingraham, identifies such statements as the "perennial" "conservative warning of barbarians at the gate" (n. pag.). However, while both "conservatives" and "progressives" used civilizational rhetoric to dismiss their opponents, the criteria on which they based their understanding of civilization and barbarism differ, as Charen notes: for conservatives, civilization rests on "order and sanctity" while progressives "value care, especially for victims of oppression" (2020, n. pag.). The responses to the toppling of statues of Confederate leaders, slave traders, and Christopher Columbus that was taking place in the US parallel to the 2020 presidential campaigns exemplifies the opposed understandings of "civilization" and "barbarism" in this recent chapter of the US 'culture wars.' From a conservative perspective, the toppling of statues was seen as the act of a 'barbarian mob' threatening US civilization. But for those engaging in, or supporting, the toppling of these statues, these monuments were a painful exaltation of the *barbarism* of slavery and colonialism and an affront to the victims of these violent structures.

In the case of the toppling of the statues, Charen finds the conservative "call to defend the gates of civilization" by appealing to law and order rather "flat": the protests accompanying the toppling of statues were generally peaceful, she notes, while the real threat to civilization at the time resided in the White House: "Donald Trump is the barbarian" (2020, n. pag.). Charen traces Trump's barbarism in his "contempt for law," flagrant lies, and manipulative or vengeful tactics, which one encounters in "corrupt dictatorships" (n. pag.). Here, the barbarian figure represents an internal threat to democratic rule.

It is noteworthy that Trump has not only been likened to Rome's external barbarians, but also to various infamous emperors and tyrants of the Roman republic, like Nero (Connolly 2017; Jones 2017; Brinkbäumer 2017). He was thus alternately cast as a barbarian leader and as a decadent or dangerous Roman Emperor; a defender of 'civilized values' (associated with law and order from a conservative perspective) and a lawless barbarian with disregard for the rule of law. Such contradictory representations can partly be credited to the opposed worldviews of conservatives and progressives in the polarized climate of the US culture wars, but they also signal the perplexed attitudes of commentators towards Trump's persona.

Importantly, such contradictions also underscore the shortcomings of historical analogies. Historical narratives can produce whichever 'truth' their current interpreters want them to produce when they are used as allegories for the present. What is more, resorting to popularized figures like that of the barbarian invasions in order to criticize post-truth populist rhetoric like Trump's risks reproducing the vocabulary and logic of this rhetoric. The use of civilizational rhetoric by both sides in the 2020 US election campaigns highlights the unwavering valence of this rhetoric in contemporary politics. As we move into the third decade of the twenty-first century, Western political rhetoric is clearly still far from finished with *barbarians*.

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### 6.4.1.7. From Barbarians in Politics to Barbarians in Pop Culture

The persona of Donald Trump as a ballsy barbarian that takes on the political establishment would not have been recognizable in public discourse were it not for the popularity of hypermasculine barbarian imagery in pop culture. The figure of the barbarian warrior entered popular fiction through the fantasy stories of Robert E. Howard, creator of the most famous fictional barbarian: Conan.[36] Howard created "Conan the Barbarian" in 1932 in a series of fantasy stories for *Weird Tales* magazine. His protagonist's popularity spiked in the last decades of the twentieth century, as a whole universe of fantasy fiction, films, tv series, comic books, video games, role-playing games, toys, and collectibles put Conan at the center, ushering a new genre known as "sword and sorcery" (Andreeva 2020). Popular movies such as "Conan the Barbarian" (1982) and "Conan the Destroyer" (1984),[37] starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, the US TV-series "Conan the Adventurer" (1997–1998) and the comics series "Conan the Barbarian" by Marvel Comics that ran for no less than twenty-three years (1970–1993) and produced 275 issues, offer a telling sample of the vogue formed around Howard's character since the 1970s. The fascination with Conan by no means came to an end in the twenty-first century. To mention just a few of the most recent examples that attest to the figure's continuing popularity, in 2019, Marvel Comics initiated a new run of *Conan the Barbarian* (with writer Jason Aaron and artist Mahmud A. Asrar) and in 2020 it was announced that a new "Conan the Barbarian" series is in development by the streaming service and production company Netflix (Andreeva 2020; Thorne 2020). Howard's "icon of thick-muscled, sword-wielding manhood" (Miller 2006) has not lost currency in today's pop culture.

The presence of Conan and related barbarian figures in the gaming community—from board games and role-playing games to video and multiplayer online games—is particularly prominent. In the *Wikipedia* entry on "List of Games Based on Conan the Barbarian" one can count 6 role-playing games and 11 video games, and this list is certainly not exhaustive. Games that allow players to play the role of a 'barbarian' include, among many others, *Barbarian: The Ultimate Warrior*, a video game released in 1987 by Palace Software; *Conan* (2007), a game in which the player controls Conan as he travels in search of his stolen armor; and *Conan Exiles*, in which the player is "in control of a condemned barbarian freed by Conan at the beginning of the game" (Drake 2019, n. pag.). Seeking to explain the popularity of games in which players enter into a barbarian's role, Jeff Drake ascribes it mainly to escapism: "You are placed in a role where you don't have to worry about rent, or car payments, or getting to work on time. Societal contracts don't apply to you, because you live apart from civilization. You only have to worry about the laws of nature as you carve out your destiny with the blade in your hand" (n. pag.). Temporarily entering into

36 On Schwarzenegger as Conan the Barbarian, see also Winkler's chapter 6.4.2 in this volume.

37 "Conan the Barbarian" (1982) was directed by John Milius and written by Milius and Oliver Stone. "Conan the Destroyer" (1984) was directed by Richard Fleischer and written by Roy Thomas and Gerry Conway.

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the skin of a barbarian who knows no moral inhibitions and follows instincts that usually lead him to extreme violence, may indeed offer a virtual escape or emotional release for players who feel restricted by the demands of normativity and by social or moral codes. However, when such barbarian imagery enters the arena of politics, as we saw in the previous section through the case of Donald Trump, escapism does not seem an adequate explanation for the pull of barbarian imagery in the public and political arena today.

The leap from pop culture to politics may seem big, but it is not. Even before the persona of "Trump the Barbarian" was concocted both by Trump's critics and supporters (to different ends), another presidential figure had already been 'hijacked' by pop culture and refashioned into a barbarian icon in the comic book series *Barack the Barbarian*, released by Devil's Due Publishing in 2009. The comic books were written by Larry Hama with art by Christopher Schons, and appeared in a 4-issue mini-series, featuring Barack Obama as a black barbarian hero. This involvement of political figures in the "sword and sorcery" pop cultural genre (the series also included politicians like Sarah Palin, George W. Bush, and Dick Cheney in fictional roles) could be seen as an epiphenomenon of the culturalization of politics and the prominence of civilizational rhetoric in politics since 9/11: in this discursive regime, politicians tend to be seen (or to profile themselves) as proponents not of specific political ideologies but of 'civilization' or 'barbarism.' 'Barbarian' in this context is not always used in a derogatory manner as a means of discrediting one's political opponents. Barrack Obama's recasting as a positive barbarian cartoon-figure, as well as the willful appropriation of barbarian imagery by Trump's supporters, suggests that barbarism in contemporary politics can also be cast as a political virtue: as such, it is associated with the courage to challenge the political establishment.

But there may be more at stake in the construction of Trump's persona based on a cartoon-like representational regime that draws on pop-cultural barbarian imagery. There is a specific rhetorical logic at work in Trump's media communication that Sara Polak has called "cartoon logic." This logic became "a central catalyst" in the way Trump's persona was produced and received during his presidency. It is of course not uncommon at all for politicians to figure in political cartoons, which usually "follow a generic logic: characters appear as caricatures and a brief text interacts with an image, in which those invested with political power are usually ridiculed" (Polak 2018, 412). But Trump's "cartoon logic" is new and works differently: it "offer[s] a vehicle to transform the political logic in which he cannot be taken seriously into a cartoon logic in which his cartoonish behavior and expressions only help him, as long as he holds the attention" (417). Thus, if cartoons were traditionally used in order to ridicule politicians, "now the ridiculous acquires serious political impact" (417).

The impact of the infiltration of such a cartoon logic in politics, of which Trump's barbarian persona is an example, was also deeply felt during the invasion of the United States Capitol in January 2021 by a mob of Trump supporters.[38] The assault was staged by many of the invaders and framed by the press as a 'barbarian invasion' of sorts, though without a satirical intent this time. This event brought the barbarian

38 See also Winkler's chapter 6.4.2 in this volume.

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figure perhaps closer than ever to the far right and to a group of white perpetrators. Contrary to the common conception of white agents of terrorist violence, the mob that invaded the US Capitol could not be seen anymore as comprising 'loners,' 'monsters' or 'disturbed individuals': these were participants in an organized heinous act. The imagery and vocabulary that surrounded media responses to the Capitol assault unmistakably evoked the figure of 'barbarian invasions.' Headlines such as "Trump's Barbarians at the Gate" by the *Washington Examiner* confirm that 'barbarian' was one of the common signifiers the media attached to this mob. Some of the invaders willingly invited this framing. A case in point was a rioter from Arizona, Jacob Chansley, who was said to be the "public face of the Capitol riot" (qtd in Billeaud 2021, n. pag.). Photographs of him posing as a half-naked horned man in barbarian attire within a ransacked Capitol were widely disseminated through social media and the press that covered the news of the invasion. These photographs clearly suggest the intentional assumption of a barbarian identity as a badge of honor by this (as well as other) rioters.

The phenomenon of the positive appropriation of the barbarian in political contexts finds parallels in contemporary pop and entertainment culture. The preoccupation of the entertainment industry with barbarians is recently veering towards positive reappraisals of (historical or pseudo-historical) barbarians who are cast as the underdog of History. Series such as the immensely popular *Vikings* (2013–2020), created and written by Michael Hirst for the History Channel, and the Netflix series *Barbaren* (*Barbarians*) (2020) are cases in point.[39] They both prioritize and valorize the perspective of the 'barbarians,' casting them in a considerably different light than the way Edward Gibbon and, later on, other popularized historical narratives presented the 'barbarian' invaders of the Roman Empire. In the German historical war drama series *Barbaren*, for instance, the fearless and courageous barbarian tribes are the underdog that heroically beats the Roman empire's army. This reappraisal of the barbarian invasions in popular culture harks back to the affirmative role that Germanic barbarians have played in the national imaginary of certain European countries, like Germany (Jones 1971, 404), in which this series was produced.

39 In the following section, the Netflix series *Barbaren* will be discussed in more detail.

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