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2 | THINKING BARBARISM TODAY

Opposing arguments are easy to mount. Changing the terms of an argument is exceedingly difficult, since the dominant definition of the problem acquires, by repetition, and by weight and credibility of those who propose or subscribe it, the warrant of "common sense." Arguments which hold to this definition of the problem are accounted as following "logically." Arguments which seek to change the terms of reference are read as "straying from the point." So part of the struggle is over the way the problem is formulated: the terms of the debate, and the "logic" it entails.

—Stuart Hall, "The Rediscovery of Ideology" (81)

In this chapter, I situate my approach within contemporary debates around culture, civilization, and barbarism, and sketch the discursive and theoretical landscape in which this study seeks to intervene. First, I focus on examples from the contemporary discourse of politics, and particularly on the rhetoric of the U.S. administration after the events on September 11, 2001, but also on some "milder" variants of this rhetoric. After looking at the terms of this rhetoric, I discuss certain critical responses to it. Coming from sociologists, political and cultural theorists, philosophers, and other intellectuals, these responses reflect various theoretical perspectives, including conservative, liberal, humanist, left-wing, relativist, and deconstructionist. As I unpack the theoretical and ideological premises of these responses and critiques, I pay particular attention to the ways by which they signify and use "barbarism" and "civilization." Despite their divergent and often conflicting arguments and theoretical underpinnings, I will argue that in most of these approaches the term "barbarism" remains a negative signifier, trapped in an opposition to a positive notion of civilization. Even when the opposition is criticized or deconstructed, there remains an unfulfilled call for a new mode of speaking through which "barbarism" could be redeployed in more constructive ways. Thus, my own project is situated through as well as against these approaches, as an attempt to cause small shifts in the terms of these debates.

The Culturalization of Conflicts and the New Civilizational Rhetoric

In the aftermath of the Cold War and the collapse of communist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, there came the proclamation of the "end of history." Francis Fukuyama

famously saw the end of the Cold War as the terminal point of the ideological evolution of mankind and proclaimed the “universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” (5). Since the 1990s, the discourse of the great political and ideological divides (capitalism versus communism, democracy versus totalitarianism) has given its place to a discourse that foregrounds culture as the key to understanding global divides and conflicts. This discursive turn has been called the “culturalization” of politics and global conflicts (Mamdani 18).¹ In the words of Slavoj Žižek, “[p]olitical difference—differences conditioned by political inequality or economic exploitation—are naturalized and ‘neutralized’ into ‘cultural’ differences, that is into different ‘ways of life’ which are something given, something that cannot be overcome” (2009: 119). Within this new discourse, Žižek argues, cultural differences are essentialized. Differences between “us” and “them” are given, absolute, understood in terms of conflict, and often expressed through oppositional pairs.

Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996) is one of the first and most characteristic expressions of this discursive logic. Huntington sketches the image of “an era in which global politics is shaped by cultural and civilizational tides” (309). He argues that conflicts are no longer political or ideological, but premised on cultural and, particularly, religious differences. His model reduces conflicts and differences among nations to a “clash of civilizations” and thereby masks political and economic tensions under the banner of cultural difference. Thus, “civilization” and “culture” become the organizing principles of post-Cold War politics.²

Huntington’s narrative is marked by oppositional thinking in terms of “the West” and “the rest,” or civilization and barbarism. He detects a growing conflict between Western civilization and Islam, and identifies the latter as the main threat to the West.³ The West, under the leadership of the U.S., has to be ready to confront these enemies. In addition, Huntington holds multiculturalism in the U.S. responsible for the corrosion of the coherent and unitary U.S. national identity (305). He claims that “multiculturalism at home threatens the United States and the West” and rejects the possibility of a “multicultural America,” because “a non-Western America is not American” (318).⁴ This view suggests a purist look upon “civilization” as a uniform formation that considers all foreign elements as threats to its authentic identity. This outlook reinforces the opposition between civilization and barbarism, since it conceives “civilization” as a strictly delimited domain, which should keep all foreign, “barbarian” elements outside its borders. Western civilization, Huntington contends, is “unique” and needs to be preserved and protected from all the internal and external threats it currently faces.

¹ For the term “culturalization,” see also the introduction to this study.

² Huntington presented in Tsing and Hershatter 38.

³ The other great threat to the Western civilization comes from China.

⁴ While Huntington views multiculturalism as a domestic threat, he also concedes that the world is inevitably “multicultural” and thus a “global empire” is impossible (318).

Huntington divides the world into eight civilizations. He thus uses the term “civilization” in the plural and in a seemingly neutral way, in order to denote different ways of life. However, he also talks about “Civilization in the singular” with a capital “C,” to denote a “mix of higher levels of morality, religion, learning, art, philosophy, technology, material well-being and probably other things” (320). His use of “civilization” in the plural is not at odds with the term’s generic singular use as a moral category and a marker of a highly developed standard of living. Huntington envisions the future prospect of a “universal civilization” based on commonly shared values and practices. To form this civilization, “peoples in all civilizations should search for and attempt to expand the values, institutions, and practices they have in common with peoples of other civilizations” (320). The prospect of a universal civilization is in constant struggle with forces of barbarism in the world. Thus, whereas modernization has improved “the material level of Civilization throughout the world,” a series of contemporary phenomena suggest that “Civilization” is currently under assault: “On a worldwide basis Civilization seems in many respects to be yielding to barbarism, generating the image of an unprecedented phenomenon, a global Dark Ages, possibly descending on humanity” (321).⁵

In Huntington’s account, the unprecedented threat to “Civilization,” which is his diagnosis of our time, is associated with a current decline of Western power. Thus, Huntington implicitly views the West as the source of civilizational norms. As political theorist Wendy Brown argues, even as Huntington calls all civilizations to fight barbarism together, in his view “only the values of the West can lead this fight: what will hold barbarism at bay is precisely what recenters the West as the defining essence of civilization and what legitimates its efforts at controlling the globe” (2006: 181). Therefore, Huntington’s use of “civilization” in the plural is not all that neutral. In fact, it cloaks rather than negates the Western superiority with which the term is invested (180).

In Huntington’s narrative, barbarism remains the great opposite both of “Civilization” and of every “civilization.” It is the evil force that threatens “Civilization” and that all civilizations should resist. As Huntington notes in his concluding paragraph, “[i]n the greater clash, the global ‘real clash,’ between Civilization and barbarism, the world’s great civilizations” will “hang together or hang separately” (321).

Although the culturalization of global conflicts, as we see it in Huntington, Bernard Lewis, and others, already had an underlying moral dimension since its introduction in the 1990s, this dimension becomes even more pronounced after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.⁶ The rhetoric of the Bush administration after September 11 played a

⁵ In the 1990s, when Huntington’s study was written, these phenomena include a “global breakdown of law and order,” “increasing anarchy,” “a global crime wave,” “mafias and drug cartels,” a “weakening of the family,” and “ethnic, religious, and civilizational violence” (321). The dramatic, almost apocalyptic tone of Huntington’s diagnosis reflects the tendency to regard one’s present era as unique and unprecedented in all respects.

⁶ Bernard Lewis introduced the phrase “clash of civilizations” in “The Roots of Muslim Rage” (1990).

significant role in the establishment and popularization of a religious and moral framework within which citizens of the West were called to understand global conflicts. Culture, religion, and moral values became the key terms of a new “civilizational discourse” that has been popular in the West in the wake of the twenty-first century. This discourse is not homogeneous, but comprises different strands, which range from aggressive approaches (the “war on terror” and “zero tolerance” policy against the world’s “new barbarians”) to a more nuanced rhetoric, which puts the emphasis on tolerance for other cultures, respect for universal human rights, and the promotion of “civilized” values. Although these strands may seem opposing, I will argue in the following that they, in fact, depart from similar premises.

The rhetoric of the Bush administration exemplifies the aggressive version of civilizational discourse. In going through a compilation of speeches by president George W. Bush dating from September 11, 2001 until the Iraq phase of the “war on terror,” it did not take me long to notice that the most recurrent word is “evil.” He speaks of “the forces of evil,” “the world of evil,” the “evil ones,” the “evildoers,” and so on. The word “evil” is not only used frequently, but also repetitively within the same sentence or paragraph: “The people who did this act on America [...] are evil people. They don’t represent an ideology, they don’t represent a legitimate political group of people. They’re flat evil. That’s all they can think about, is evil. And as a nation of good folks, we’re going to hunt them down.”⁷ The references to forces of Evil (the terrorists and those who harbor and support them) versus forces of Good (America and its allies) are accompanied by religious vocabulary, often enhanced by Biblical quotes.⁸ Thus, the world is divided into two camps: “the axis of evil” versus the Western “free world.” The “good” side is not just America, but America as representative of (and practically synonymous with) civilization: “This is not, however, just America’s fight. [...] This is the world’s fight. This is civilization’s fight,” and thus the “civilized world is rallying to America’s side.”⁹

This rhetoric, which to an extent was also taken up by leaders in Western European countries after September 11, divides the world through a series of oppositional pairs. On the one side we find “civilization,” “America,” “freedom,” “liberty,” “compassion,” “strength,” “courage,” “justice,” “humanity,” “morality,” and “honor,” while on the other side we find “evil,” “terrorists,” “criminals,” “fear,” “cruelty,” “barbarism,” “cowardice,” and “hatred.” The civilized world appears to be at war with the world of evil: a world of terrorist networks and their allies who hate America and the West. Those who do not side with America (including “relativists” or “undecideds”) automatically

⁷ From Bush’s “Speech to Employees at the Federal Bureau of Investigation” 25 September 2001 (Bush 22).

⁸ For example, in his presidential address to the nation on September 11, 2001, he quotes from Psalm 23: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me” (Bush 3).

⁹ From the “Presidential Address to a Joint Session of Congress” 23 September 2001 (Bush 15-16).

join the axis of evil, according to Bush's famous dictum "either you're for us or you're against us" (or, in one of its variations "[s]tand with the civilized world or stand with the terrorists").¹⁰ This discursive framework, as Jamie Warner remarks, "became the accepted paradigm for American foreign policy."¹¹ Bush's "either/or construction not only had the effect of demonizing the terrorists, it also worked to demonize anyone who questioned either side of the binary or even the construction of the binary itself" (Warner).

Bush's rhetoric calls to mind the "Christian civilization" and the cultural mobilization against infidels that it required in order to wage wars, while also evoking "global civility" (Tsing and Hershatter 38-39). In the context of colonialism, this rhetoric was useful for distinguishing "illegitimate" from "legitimate" forms of warfare: the uncivilized needed to be punished or saved by the civilized by any means necessary (39). Likewise, in contemporary civilizational rhetoric, violence and military force are legitimized either in the name of "preemptive action" or of a new kind of "civilizing mission": they are means either of defending Western citizens and their values against the barbarism of other regimes and groups, or of conferring liberal values (such as individualism, tolerance or freedom) on other cultures. Brown calls this rhetoric Bush's "liberation theology": a mission to free the unfree world both in the name of what is good for others and in the name of what makes the world a safer place" (2006: 165).

The assumption that the civilized world is dealing with "evil forces" leaves no room for negotiation or for understanding the enemy's perspective and motives. No one should negotiate with evil; the barbarian enemy needs to be eliminated. In this discourse, barbarism is the "rule" of the enemy's behavior. When the civilized "we" commits barbaric acts, these are viewed as isolated incidents: exceptions to the rule. According to Bush, the decapitation of Nicholas Berg, a U.S. civilian working in Saudi Arabia, "shows the evil nature of the enemy we face—these are barbaric people." Nevertheless, the "abhorrent" torture practices in Abu Ghraib "don't represent our America" and do not reflect "the nature of the men and women who serve our country."¹² This kind of barbarism is seen as unfit for the West.

This discourse is not exclusive to official political rhetoric, but is adopted and adapted by many social or political theorists and historians alike.¹³ A "milder" strand of this civilizational discourse uses a rhetoric that focuses on tolerance, human rights, and

¹⁰ The first quote is from Bush's "Speech to the Employees of the Department of Labor" 4 October 2001, and the second from the "Presidential Radio Address to the Nation" 6 October 2001 (30, 32).

¹¹ Warner's article "Tyranny of the Dichotomy" is published online and has no page numbers.

¹² The first quote (about Nicholas Berg's decapitation) is from "President Thanks Military Personnel and Families for Serving Our Country" 7 December 2004 and "President's Radio Address" 15 May 2004 (<http://157.166.255.31/TRANSCRIPTS/0406/19/smn.01.html>. Accessed 10 Feb. 2010). The second is from an interview with *Al Arabiya* 5 May 2004 (<http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/story?id=120660&page=1>. Accessed 10 Feb. 2010). Parts of these quotes are also quoted in Brown 2006: 159.

¹³ One example among many is Israeli historian Élie Barnavi's study *Les Religions meurtrières* (2006), in which he seeks the origins of terrorism in religion.

universal values. This strand reflects a humanist ideology and the belief in universal and culturally neutral values applicable to all cultures. Political philosopher Seyla Benhabib, for example, argues that resolving cultural conflicts should be based on “universal respect and egalitarian reciprocity” (132). Both conditions require “free” subjects who are “self-interpreting and self-defining beings whose actions and deeds are constituted through culturally informed narratives” (132). While the discourse employed by the Bush administration withholds tolerance (cf. the “zero tolerance” policy on terrorism), this strand of humanist and universalist civilizational discourse confers tolerance on others (Brown 2006: 203).

Critiques

How is the rhetoric of “zero tolerance” compatible with the latter discursive strand that advocates tolerance and human rights? Both strands are part of a discourse that guards the definition of civilization by (implicitly or explicitly) identifying it with Western liberal values. In *Regulating Aversion*, Brown offers an in-depth critical analysis of these variants of Western (and specifically U.S.) civilizational discourse. For Brown, the concept of tolerance is the crux of contemporary civilizational discourse. She observes that from the mid-1980s, and especially at the turn of the twenty-first century, there is “a global renaissance in tolerance talk” which coincides with multiculturalism taking center stage in discussions of liberal democratic citizenship (2006: 1-2). Her analysis shows how Western liberalism disguises power and cultural imperialism under a discourse of tolerance. In contemporary civilizational discourse, Brown argues, the liberal subject poses as having a unique capacity for tolerance—a capacity identified with civilization (166). This is accompanied by the belief that nonliberal societies—especially those designated as fundamentalist—are “inherently intolerant.” Western societies, according to Brown, “become the broker of what is tolerable and intolerable,” and cast other social and political formations as incapable of tolerance and individuation, and thus as barbaric (166). Because the liberal West is deemed capable of tolerance and respect for all other cultures, Western principles and values can pose as “*universalizable*” and culturally neutral without being considered “culturally imperialist” (170).

As Brown convincingly argues, the discourse on tolerance is based on hierarchical 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 “tolerating” and “tolerated” subjects are radically opposed and “hierarchically ordered according to a table of virtue” (187). The “object” of tolerance is therefore produced as inferior, outside the “universal values” of the Western subject. Thus, Brown contends, the discourse on tolerance in the modern West is a power discourse that produces “the universal and the particular, the tolerant and the tolerated, the West

and the East, [...] the civilized and the barbaric" (187). In this rhetoric, the West poses as the generous "tolerator" of minorities. Civilizational discourse "identifies both tolerance and the tolerable with the West, marking nonliberal societies and practices as candidates for an intolerable barbarism that is itself signaled by the putative intolerance ruling these societies" (6). The sovereign tolerant individual of the West poses as a necessary condition for countering the barbarism that fundamentalism breeds.

In her critique, Brown shows how civilizational discourse places the differences between Western and non-Western societies in a Manichean rhetorical scheme. Terms that we usually find on the one side of this scheme are 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). In this discourse, cultural, ethnic, and religious feuds are often ontologized, and the terms of the above oppositions tend to acquire essentialist qualities. Brown argues that contemporary civilizational discourse is a "colonially inflected discourse" that establishes norms of what is tolerable, acceptable or civilized, and consequently provides a legitimation for new forms of imperial state action against intolerant, barbaric, non-liberal subjects (191). In February 2002, Bush stated that the U.S. 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 In this statement, Brown argues, it is not hard to see 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" (179).

Brown problematizes the uses of terms like "barbarism" and "barbarians" in Western politics and liberal discourse and exposes the logic of these uses. However, she does not suggest that the vocabulary of this discourse—with "barbarism," "civilization" and "tolerance" as key terms—can (or should) be discarded. Rather, she invites the reader to be shrewd about the ways in which this discourse operates and to develop alternative speech and practices, in order to "configure conflicts through grammars of power rather than ontologized ethnic or religious feuds" (295). Although Brown concludes her argument with this suggestion, she does not make any concrete proposal regarding the content of these alternative practices or modes of speaking.

The kind of deconstructive critique of liberal discourses that Brown performs is not left uncriticized. Žižek, for example, criticizes a theoretical approach that Brown, at least partly, adopts in her study, although he does not specifically refer to Brown's work. In *Violence*, Žižek lays out his objections to what he calls "the 'radical' postcolonial critique of liberalism," which "remains at the standard Marxist level of denouncing false universality, of showing how a position that presents itself as neutral-universal effectively privileges a

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

certain (heterosexual, male, Christian) culture" (126). This "standard postmodern anti-essentialist position," "so common among politically correct critics of the left," is for Žižek no longer enough (126, 128). The Marxist point about the gap between what appears to be universal (i.e., democracy and human rights discourse) and the particular interests behind it (liberal values, capitalism) fails to see that the "appearance" of things is not "just appearance" but has its own power (128). Thus, Žižek argues, the symbolic fiction of human rights discourse cannot simply be dismissed as an illusion that hides a different reality (namely, particular Western interests and ideology), because it has its own efficiency and "real" effects (129). All universals receive particular contents. Therefore, Žižek argues, it is meaningless to ask whether universality is true or "a mask of particular interests" (132). The universal form of what we call "human rights" is inevitably tied to the particular interpretation it receives at a certain historical moment. The tension between the professed universality of human rights and their meaning at a particular historical moment, Žižek contends, is not an anomaly, but part of their identity (130-31).¹⁵

Another reaction to contemporary civilizational discourse comes from a relativist perspective, which is often—not always justly—conflated with postmodernism. Relativism contends that truth-claims and cultural or moral propositions about what is civilized and barbaric are never absolute and transcendental, but are always made from a particular perspective and "must be judged with respect to the context in which they are made" (Bérubé 307). From a relativist viewpoint, terms like "barbarism" and "barbarians" tend to lose their meaning and relevance: since we are all "barbarians" from the perspective of other cultures, we have no right to confer these labels on others as objective moral judgments. Naming other cultures or individuals "barbarian" only reflects our own perspective and moral preferences.

The approach labeled as "postmodern relativism" has received vehement attacks since September 11, 2001. Already by September 22, 2001, Edward Rothstein wrote a piece in *The New York Times* entitled "Attacks on U.S. Challenge the Perspectives of Postmodern True Believers." On September 24, 2001, Roger Rosenblatt declared in an article in *Time* magazine that the "age of irony" has come to an end. Whereas, Rosenblatt wrote, in the postmodern "age of irony, even the most serious things were not to be taken seriously" and "[n]othing was real," the attacks on the twin towers changed all that for good. According to the same article, academics and intellectuals would now have to acknowledge what is "real" and "serious." "Are you looking for something to take seriously? Rosenblatt asks; the reply: "Begin with evil" (79). As Peter Beinart remarked in an article in *The New Republic*, after 9/11 "ambiguity became impossible" and "dissent [...] immoral" (Beinart qtd in Fish 2002a: 27).

¹⁵ Žižek goes even further to argue that the real problem with capitalism does not lie in its "secret Eurocentric bias" but in "the fact that it *really* is universal, a neutral matrix of social relations." For the way this argument is developed, see 132-34.

These attacks were not left unanswered. In his essay “Don’t Blame Relativism,” Stanley Fish, a well-known proponent of relativism, defends postmodern relativism against what he calls a “scapegoating” directed at anyone who after 9/11 still dares to claim things like “there are no universal standards of judgment” (27).¹⁶ As Fish observes, the gist of the critiques against postmodernism was twofold: first, the events on 9/11 “prove postmodernism to be wrong,” and second, “postmodernism is somehow responsible for September 11” (28). According to the polemicists of postmodernism, the unwillingness to accept that there are moral truths worth defending, which has weakened the nation’s “moral fiber,” is a result of the radical cultural relativism injected into American life by the “virus of Postmodernism” (27, 30). Since postmodernism disavows the existence of universal principles or a “transcendent ethical perspective,” the same argument continues, it leaves us no grounds on which to condemn the attacks on the twin towers and terrorism in general.¹⁷ The relativism of postmodernism makes it impossible, many argue, to “objectively” tag the perpetrators as “terrorists” or “barbarians.” From a relativist viewpoint, one would ask: from whose perspective is this designation made? And a relativist would argue that those people the West sees as “barbarians” or “terrorists” would be “freedom fighters” from the perspective of other groups.

Fish, however, fends off the claim that relativism does not leave room for condemning barbaric actions. Nothing prevents us from denouncing certain actions, Fish argues, but we can do that without resorting to an “abstract vocabulary of justice, truth and virtue” or to the “illusory justification of universal absolutes,” which every party defines differently (28). Condemnation can be issued on the basis of “the historical reality” of “our way of life” (28). Reducing the enemy to the “abstraction of ‘Evil,’” a “shape-shifting demon,” or a barbaric and irrational being, is a dangerous political strategy: it underestimates our enemies and prevents us from understanding their motives and from finding the most effective way to counter their threat (29-30).¹⁸

The relativist approach, in which the “barbarian” is a matter of perspective and not an absolute moral category, was channeled towards new directions and some more

¹⁶ His essay appeared in a symposium in an issue of the journal *The Responsive Community* dedicated to the question “Can Postmodernists Condemn Terrorism?” His essay in this issue is followed by eleven critical responses by Richard Rorty, Benjamin R. Barber, Joshua Cohen, Cass Sunstein, William A. Galston, David Novak, Simon Blackburn, John Haldane, John D. Caputo, Amitai Etzioni, and Charles W. Collier. Fish responded to the attacks on postmodernism after 9/11 with a number of articles, including “Condemnation Without Absolutes” (2001) and “Postmodern Warfare: The Ignorance of Our Warrior Intellectuals” (2002). These essays sparked several reactions. See, for example, Edward Rothstein’s response in *The New York Times*, entitled “Moral Relativity is a Hot Topic? True. Absolutely.”

¹⁷ See, for example, Rothstein (2002).

¹⁸ Fish concludes: “if by relativism one means the practice of putting yourself in your adversary’s shoes, not in order to wear them as your own but in order to have some understanding (far short of approval) of why someone else—in your view, a deluded someone—might want to wear them, then relativism will not and should not end because it is simply another name for serious thought” (2002a: 31).

nuanced versions during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Richard Bernstein's *The Abuse of Evil* (2005), for example, replaces Huntington's "clash of civilizations" with a "clash of mentalities" within (and outside) the West. Scrutinizing the new discourse of "good versus evil" in post-9/11 America, Bernstein argues that this discourse of simplistic dichotomies represents a mentality "drawn to absolutes" and moral certainties. To this, he contrasts a mentality that questions rigid dichotomies and absolutes in politics, which he names "pragmatic fallibilism." In rejecting universal absolutes, this mentality does not fall far from the relativism attacked after 9/11. Contrary to what adversaries of relativism contend, Bernstein argues that renouncing absolutes does not entail lack of commitment "to act decisively in fighting our real enemies" (viii). On this point, he is on the same page as Fish.

Another set of recent reactions to civilizational discourse shares the tendency to reverse the key terms and oppositions of this discourse: civilization, culture, and barbarism. To begin with, Žižek reverses Huntington's thesis of the "clash of civilizations" by arguing, in a Benjaminian vein, that "every clash of civilizations really is a clash of underlying barbarisms."¹⁹ Thus, 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" (2009: 150). In *Fear of Small Numbers* (2006), social and cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai adjusts Huntington's model to argue that we are "in a worldwide civilization of clashes rather than in a clash of civilizations" (18). Through this reversal, he draws attention to conflicts and tensions within each of the cultural formations Huntington calls "civilizations," and particularly within the Islamic world and the West.

The Clash of Barbarisms: The Making of the New World Disorder (2006) by Lebanese-French political theorist Gilbert Achcar reverses Huntington's title by using the negative opposites of "civilization" and "order."²⁰ Achcar argues that violent conflicts and terrorism today, including the attacks on September 11, do not reflect a clash between civilizations with different value systems, but rather a clash of the dark sides of these civilizations. This is based on the premise that in the course of the historical "civilizing process" each civilization "produces its own specific forms of barbarism" (Achcar 84). These are not abnormalities in the "civilizing process" but "an expression of one of its potentialities, one of its faces, one of its possible offshoots" (Traverso 153; qtd in Achcar 84). These forms of barbarism tend to surface in periods of crisis. Both the Bush Administration and al-Qa'ida embody this barbaric side rather than the Western or Islamic civilization as such.

That the West does not embody the essence of civilization but a form of barbarism is another quite popular reversal of the barbarism/civilization dichotomy. Critics, particularly

¹⁹ This evokes Walter Benjamin's famous dictum in "Theses on the Philosophy of History": "[t]here is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (1999b: 248).

²⁰ The book was first published in French in 2004 with the title *Le choc des barbaries: terrorismes et désordre mondial*.

from the Left, scrutinize recent practices of torture and violence by the U.S. as phenomena that weaken and invalidate the distinction between the West as “civilized” versus the “barbarian terrorists.” Recent studies draw attention not only to Western barbarism in the twenty-first century, but also to the history of twentieth-century Europe as a history of barbarism—or a history wherein barbarism and civilization are inextricably linked. Historian Bernard Wasserstein’s *Barbarism and Civilization: A History of Europe in Our Time* (2007), for example, argues that in the history of twentieth-century Europe barbarism and civilization are not polar opposites but march side by side.²¹

So far, I have laid out the following reversals and puns: Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” turns into a “civilization of clashes” (Appadurai), a “clash of barbarisms” (Žižek, Achcar) or a “clash of mentalities” (Bernstein).²² In some of these reversals, barbarism and civilization (as moral categories) are seen as coexisting sides within all civilizations. Other reversals focus on the West and view it as a domain of barbarism instead of the beacon of civilization. The merits and critical functions of such reversals are undeniable. Nevertheless, these reversals neither debunk the hierarchy between “barbarism” and “civilization” nor do they try to shift the semantic content of barbarism. Rather, they shuffle the referents of the terms involved. The terms themselves retain their conventional meanings and valuation (civilization is good, barbarism is bad), but they switch places or represent different sides of an argument. They are pawns called to make a different point each time. Although the arguments made through these reversals may, indeed, be different from, and opposed to, popular manifestations of civilizational discourse, they do not really change the terms by which the debate is held. As Jacques Derrida argues in *Dissemination*, “[t]o remain content with reversal is of course to operate within the immanence of the system to be destroyed” (5). Therefore, reversals may criticize an argument or viewpoint, but do not radically disrupt the established equilibrium of a binary or cause a crisis in the terms, which could lead to resignifications and different modes of use. Civilization remains the superior part of the opposition, while barbarism continues to be a negative signifier for violent, irrational, and brutal behavior, whether this behavior is attributed to the West, to terrorists, to Muslim fundamentalists or to every civilization.

Another noteworthy reversal of the referent of “barbarism,” which also fails to shift its meaning, unravels in the book *Left in Dark Times: A Stand Against the New Barbarism* (2008) by French intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy. Lévy finds barbarism not only in the

²¹ In Wasserstein’s intertwining of the two concepts barbarism is given more emphasis. This is suggested not only in the book’s title (in which barbarism is placed first, before civilization) but also visually: on the book’s cover “barbarism” is written in bigger letters, overshadowing “civilization.” This harbors the implication that we are, in fact, dealing with a reversal: a view of European history as principally a history of barbarism (and then of civilization).

²² Another noteworthy reversal takes place in a piece by Terry Eagleton in *The Guardian* entitled “Culture Conundrum,” in which he elaborates the claim that “culture is the new barbarism.” Eagleton’s reversal is discussed in Chapter Three.

conflicts and challenges Western societies face today by terrorists and “evil others,” but also in the turn the Left has taken in cultural debates. In his book, the Left is associated with a “new barbarism.” In what is, in my view, a rather simplistic and caricatured dismissal of Left intellectual thought today, Lévy takes issue with what he sees as a current crisis in the European (and American) Left, which has moved away from what he believes the Left stands for. Although he explicitly positions himself on the Left, Lévy contends that Left intellectuals today are “flirting with evil” and have betrayed the true commitment of the Left, namely its anti-totalitarian and antifascist ideals. Contrary to these ideals, Lévy argues, the Left today endorses anti-semitism and either allies with Islamism or treats Islamism with “the indulgence that tradition demands for the humble and the ill-fated” (167). Moreover, he takes issue with the tendency of the Left to short-circuit and dismiss liberalism (which becomes a “bad word”) as well as “the idea of Europe, the politics of human rights, or the dream of an all-embracing concept of humanity” (209). Lévy sketches the turn of the Left and its “new evil” tendencies in religious and even apocalyptic terms. In doing so, he comes rhetorically close to the rhetoric of George W. Bush and his administration, also dominated by the evocation of forces of good and evil.

The French context, in which Lévy is situated, has produced several defenses of liberalism. Some of them house more nuanced humanist approaches. French-Bulgarian philosopher Tzvetan Todorov’s *La peur des barbares* (2008) represents a kind of liberal humanism growing as a popular counterdiscourse to the allegedly relativist postmodern position. Todorov looks at Western countries today as dominated by fear, specifically the fear of barbarians. Reactions of the U.S. to the attacks on September 11, including military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere under the banner of the “war on terror,” exemplifies the dangers of giving in to this fear (18). His central thesis is that our fear of barbarians threatens to turn us into barbarians.²³ Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib have become symbols of the kind of barbarism this fear supplies. While “we” (by which Todorov refers to the West) set out to defend democratic and humanist values, we end up sacrificing and betraying them (20, 158).²⁴

Todorov defines barbarism and civilization as universal moral categories, applicable to all cultures (25). He rejects relative and relational definitions of “barbarism,” according to which barbarism is in the eye of the beholder, and pleads for an absolute definition: barbarism exists *as such, absolutely* (38-39). Thus, by narrowing down the meanings

²³ He writes: “Le peur des barbares est ce qui risque de nous rendre barbares” (18). As a result, the “medicine” may be worse than the “illness” (18). All references to Todorov are from the French edition and all quotations in English from Todorov’s book are my own translations.

²⁴ Todorov develops his position by arguing against a kind of relativism that shies from judgment of other cultures and, in Todorov’s view, leads to nihilism. But he also declares to be equally opposed to a dogmatism and absolutism that are based on a kind of ethnocentrism, whereby the “we” is the holder of the true and the just (29-30). He thus pleads for a more nuanced approach, which should focus on the complexity of every situation, instead of sweeping judgments based on black and white distinctions (23).

of the “barbarian,” he formulates the following definition: barbarian is someone who refuses to acknowledge the full humanity of others (33).²⁵ His definition reverses the traditional signification of the “barbarian” as less than human by locating barbarism not in the purportedly subhuman other, but in the act of *perceiving others as non-human*. The terms “barbarism” and “barbarian,” Todorov argues, should be used in order to denote the actions and behavior of those who ostracize others from the borders of humanity or perceive others as radically different and treat them as if they were inhuman, monsters, or wild men (36). He stresses that only actions and behavior can be deemed barbaric—not people and civilizations as such (41). This is for Todorov the only rightful and legitimate use of these terms—the rest are abuses. Todorov maintains that despite its abuses, the notion of barbarism needs to be sustained.²⁶ In his definition, barbarism remains the great opposite of civilization, and both terms become exclusively moral categories, bearing absolute value judgments (56). Todorov defends the unity and universality of humanity despite differences between particular cultures. It is this unity, he argues, that allows us to recognize, always and everywhere, what is barbaric and what is civilized (80).

By listing a set of binary pairs, Todorov determines whether certain conditions or traits belong to the realm of the barbaric or to civilization. For instance, equality before the law is civilized while discriminatory laws are closer to barbarism; a liberal state is more civilized than a tyrannical regime; magic is more barbarous than science; a dialogue that allows the speakers to exchange views is much more civilized than a harangue; endorsing an idea based on belief or because you were told to endorse it is barbarous, while to accept a proposition based on reason is civilized; within the same community, a person who has knowledge of the commonly shared codes and traditions is more civilized than an ignorant person who has limited understandings of these codes. The list goes on (43).

The normative standards Todorov forwards as markers of civilization or barbarism do not reflect a culturally neutral universal truth. Rather, they resonate the liberal and humanist values of Western democracies, wherein Enlightenment ideals, and particularly the belief in reason, play a pivotal role. Thus, even though Todorov declares his opposition to the idea that some cultures are by definition civilized while others barbaric, the “absolute” and “universal” values and modes of behavior on which he bases his definition of civilization and barbarism are fostered within a particular cultural space:

²⁵ The same definition is extended to “barbarism” too, defined by Todorov as the refusal to acknowledge the other’s humanity.

²⁶ According to Todorov, the term “barbarism” is abused when we use it to stigmatize people we do not like and people who offend us or when we ascribe it to others in order to legitimize our violent acts against them as acts of justice (36). In his account, “civilization” is an absolute and single notion, and the permanent opposite of barbarism. Therefore, where others—such as Huntington—use “civilizations,” Todorov uses the word “culture” in the plural to signify historical formations and groups of people with common ways of life and thinking, common traditions, and so on. In order to avoid semantic confusion and determine the meaning of civilization as accurately as possible, Todorov reserves the word “civilization” only for those absolute values that are the opposite of barbarism. In his definition, civilization is an exclusively moral category (45-46).

they are the legacy of European Enlightenment and represent today's liberal democratic West.²⁷ Of course, when the West deviates from these values—for example, by exercising torture—that is undoubtedly, according to Todorov's definition, also barbaric. But such phenomena in the West are usually seen as exceptions—the “rule” being that Western humanist values condemn torture. For Todorov, the West is not by definition civilized (no culture is) because it does not always follow the lessons of its own values. Nevertheless, for him the West is the source and broker of these values, and thus the defining essence of civilization.²⁸

Although one can very easily agree that torture, tyranny, prejudice, or legal discrimination are reprehensible, I take issue with Todorov's contention that the “civilized” features and conditions he lists, as well as his own definition of barbarism, represent absolutes: universal values, which always determine whether an action, condition, or mode of thinking is civilized or barbaric. In the final pages of his book Todorov writes: “there is no merit in favoring ‘good’ over ‘evil’ if we are the ones who define the meaning of these words” (286). Although his definitions of “barbarism” and “civilization” partly run counter to the traditional meanings of these terms, I cannot help reading Todorov's statement as an unwittingly self-ironic comment on the absolute character of his own definitions.

While Todorov's nuanced humanist argument is in many ways opposed to the offensive civilizational rhetoric of the Bush administration and its supporters, it does not radically break with this rhetoric. Both approaches share the contention that the “civilized” has to be distinguished from the “barbaric” in absolute, oppositional, and universally valid terms. For example, Huntington's conviction that “[c]ultures are relative” while “morality is absolute” seems to tie in well with Todorov's vision. What is more, they both implicitly view the West as the source from which civilized values emanate. In the rhetoric of the Bush administration, barbarism retains its long-standing meaning and function as the negative antipode of civilization, and, by extension, of Western values. The “universal values” that this rhetoric promotes echo Western liberal values. This rhetoric, as Brown shows, ends up recentering the West as morally superior. As a result, making the world more civilized and less barbaric demands the liberalization of the world (2006: 154). In the same spirit, Todorov views the project of the European Union as an attempt “to make the

²⁷ Todorov devotes a part of his book to the defense of the “true tradition of Enlightenment” and its humanist values against what he considers misconceptions and abuses of the legacy of Enlightenment today (49-53).

²⁸ As opposed to Todorov's argument, Žižek asserts that universality does not mean that different cultures share the same core values. What they share is “the experience of negativity, of the inadequacy-to-itself, of a particular identity.” Thus, instead of tolerating each other's differences, Žižek makes another suggestion: “in spite of our differences, we can identify the basic antagonism or antagonistic struggle in which we are both caught; so let us share our intolerance and join forces in the same struggle” (2009: 133).

course of the world a little more civilized.”²⁹ Although he claims not to equate civilization with Europe, he clearly favors the European value-system as an exemplar of civilization.

Contrary to relativist approaches, Todorov’s humanist perspective does not invalidate the notion of barbarism, but pleads for its judicious application to certain kinds of behavior and actions instead of to particular groups of people. The only way to avoid abuses of “barbarism” and the “barbarian,” Todorov argues, is to delimit and specify the precise content of these terms and to narrow down and absolutize their definitions. In his definition, barbarism and civilization remain entangled in an oppositional and hierarchical relation. Moreover, their dichotomy is so absolute that it leaves no room for intertwinement between the meanings and functions of these terms. In his view, reducing their different meanings to a single stable definition in which barbarism remains the negative pole of civilization, will enable us to identify barbarism whenever and wherever we experience it.

Shifting the Terms of the Debate

Although I share Todorov’s main thesis—namely, that the fear of barbarians threatens to turn us into barbarians—his approach to the concepts of barbarism and civilization runs counter to what I propose in this study. Instead of narrowing the meanings of barbarism, I plead for their pluralization. Instead of keeping barbarism as far as possible from civilization by absolutizing its meaning, I focus on the complex dynamics between barbarism and civilization. I contend that through the *intertwinement* of these notions, barbarism—taken as a relational concept with shifting and plural meanings—can challenge the certainties of civilization and expose its “universal truths” as discursive ruses. Instead of building an impenetrable wall between barbarism and civilization by means of an absolute dichotomy, I look for the fissures through which barbarism can enter the construct of civilization and perform critical and constructive operations.

In this chapter, I outlined certain popular uses of barbarism and the barbarian in contemporary Western politics as well as critical responses to these uses. Roughly speaking, most approaches I discussed either relativize “barbarism” in ways that invalidate its use and render the term practically redundant, or invest both “barbarism” and “civilization” with universal values and plead for using the terms in “the right way,” based on a vague consensus on what that way may be. Even critical reversals of these terms, as I argue, do not change their meanings or the dynamics between them, but usually shuffle their referents. In all these uses of barbarism, whether they belong to official political rhetoric or to critical oppositional voices, the meaning of barbarism and the barbarian remains generally intact. Even when it shifts a little, as in Todorov’s vision, the fixity of the barbarism/civilization opposition and the negativity with which barbarism is invested are treated as a given.

²⁹ The French text reads: “une tentative pour rendre la marche du monde un peu plus civilisée” (281).

In this study, I try to intervene in this semantic stagnation, which recycles the same relation between civilization and barbarism and thus also the discursive logic of their opposition. As Stuart Hall argues in his essay “The Rediscovery of Ideology,” the terms used in an argument “define the ‘rationality’ of the argument, and constrain how the discourse will ‘freely’ develop” (81). A counter argument, Hall says, “makes an opposite case: but inevitably, it also *reproduces the given terms of the argument*,” because it accepts the premise of the argument against which it is articulated (81). Hall argues that it is much more difficult to change the terms of the debate than oppose an argument by using the same terms, thereby reproducing its logic. Despite the risks involved in such an endeavor, I do not only wish to criticize and deconstruct existing discourses on barbarism and civilization, but to positively mobilize the concept of barbarism. I argue that we have a better chance countering the discursive violence of barbarism when we try to pluralize and open up the term rather than police its meanings and uses. There is violence involved in such “policing” too, which should not be overlooked. This does not mean that problematic uses of barbarism should remain unquestioned—far from it. But sometimes the terms by which this questioning takes place are even more crucial for the effectiveness of the questioning than the argument itself.

Instead of banishing barbarism from our vocabulary (radical relativism); instead of solidifying its negative meaning and its opposition with civilization (universalism, humanism); and instead of reversing the opposition by simply shifting its referents, I envision a different semantic space for this concept, in which its discursive violence could take constructive directions. This different future for barbarism can be envisioned not only against, but also through its long history and its relation to civilization. Only through an understanding of the historical memories that this term carries and of its shifting relation to civilization throughout history can we begin to think of ways to counter its violence and change its performativity in present and future contexts. Therefore, the next chapter moves from a synchronic to a diachronic view of the “barbarian” in Western history.