

What is the difference, if any, between the developed/underdeveloped distinction, and the civilized/uncivilized distinction?

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[...] it is very much as if, in undertaking to divide the human race into two parts, one should make the division as most people in this country do; they separate the Hellenic race from all the rest as one, and to all other races, which are countless in number and have no relation in blood or language to one another, they give the single name 'barbarian'.

(Plato, as cited in Ginzburg, 2017)

Through the comparison between the categories of civilized/uncivilized and developed/underdeveloped, the essay aims to highlight the structural differences between the two. Although the author acknowledges formal and historical distinctions in the significance of the terms, the thesis advanced suggests that there is no substantial contrast in the employment of the categories, proposing that both these dichotomies have been weaponized to imply similar if not equal mechanism of oppression and colonial power. The essay suggests that the main difference consists in a shift of world hegemony from Europe to the US, for in the international arena 'Developed' has become the accepted definition of a set of beliefs which, although hiding behind financial and economics standards, are in fact pregnant with the same patronising superiority and rapacity of European imperialism. Therefore, the main point suggests that there aren't any differences, in substance, between these terms, but rather variations of the same subject, and this essay addresses the question by proposing a consequential linearity, a historical shift of hegemonies (and lexicon) from the European imperialism to the American one. The thesis will fall into, and be reinforced by, a simple

equation, such is “Christianity is to Civilized / Uncivilized as Modernity is to Developed / Undeveloped”, linking the variables to diverse apparatuses of power, and yet to the same outcomes. The argument will be explained through an overview of some of the features which characterise the terms, dragging a parallelism between them and making an attempt in defining their core values, starting from the utilisation of the words in an historical context. Perhaps unexpectedly, this will happen by beginning from the most recent one. The term ‘developed’.

When thinking of Harry S. Truman, three facts inevitably come to one’s mind. The first and most deplorable, after consulting with his advisers at the peak of the war with Japan, Harry Truman orders to drop atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The second is the Marshall Plan. The third represents what’s now familiarly called “the Truman’s speech”, which made out of ‘Development’ a concept that contributed to shape the face of Neo-colonialism.

On the 20th of January 1949, Harry Truman gets on stage and addresses to the US Vice-President, the Chief Justice and all the American citizens its inaugural speech. On that occasion, Truman reasserts the threat of Communism and the intention to restrain it and reinforces his policy of “world economic recovery”, not only on the European flank (in severe distress after the II World War), but also in those countries which he initially describes as “freedom-lovers” for their intention to reject Communist (and Soviet) ideology, and then immediately labels “underdeveloped areas”.

“[...], We must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas.”, he claims, setting the stone for a new interpretation of the international relation based on an old hierarchy. The “underdeveloped areas”, he states, are plagued with misery and

scientific backwardness, and need to be rescued from their “primitive and stagnant economic life”. (Inaugural Address, Harry S. Truman Library Museum)

Truman’s choice of the word ‘primitive’ comes here particularly useful. Let’s take a step back and analyse the interesting decision of the US President to define half of the world’s financial policies as “primitive”. As per the Britannica Dictionary, primitive as a term has four general meanings. The first and third ones appear almost harmless, implying either something coming “from an ancient past” or “very basic and simple”. It’s in the second and fourth definitions of the Dictionary that it’s possible to detect the poisonous sense of the term, meaning “not having written language / advanced technology, etc” or, worse, “coming from that part of person, which is wild or like an animal / not based on reason” ("Primitive," Britannica Dictionary). Out of personal and academic curiosity, we shall now look for the word “uncivilized’ on the Dictionary. Also ‘uncivilized’ bears several meanings, the first and second ones referring to a set of behaviours rather than a belief system (being rude, impolite, or not behaving properly in the presence of other people). The third one, finally, recites “old-fashioned: not having the kinds of social systems, technologies, etc., that are seen in most modern societies/ uncivilized [=primitive] cultures” ("Uncivilized," Britannica Dictionary). Far from pushing it, it appears already quite clear how the controversial choice of defining the “underdeveloped” areas’ economic life as “primitive” doomed since the very beginning the significance of the word ‘development’, inevitably bonding it to a very much alive “colonial discourse” (Bhabha, as cited in Escobar, 2012) in the Global South. On the 20th of January 1949, the US President Harry S. Truman held two speeches: one consisting in what he apparently said, which was a reinforcement of the Cold War’s inflexible policies (Inaugural Address, Harry S. Truman Library Museum). The second one, the one he implied in the lines, was reasserting the US

hegemony in the Global South starting from the presumptions of financial and technological entitlement.

It comes natural then to further connect the dots by looking closer at the definition of the civilised / uncivilised dichotomy, which already appears embedded in the implications of Development like a Russian doll. Borrowing from Carlo Ginzburg and his essay “Civilisation and Barbarism”, when analysing the term civilised and its opposite, uncivilised or *barbaròs*, it is implied a reference to the Ancient Greek rationale of autochthones and barbarians. While discussing the implication of civilisation, though, interestingly Ginzburg highlights the not properly relativistic and yet flexible ideas of Herodotus when describing the Persians’ customs - “custom is the queen of all things – *nomos ho panton basileus* “ - (Herodotus, as cited in Ginzburg, 2017), and supports his thesis by reasserting the concept of *Nomos*, which “refers to an undifferentiated sphere in which ‘right’, ‘custom’ and ‘religion’ (in the sense in which we use these terms) mingle” (Ginzburg, 2017). In this regard, also German jurist Carl Schmitt scrutinised thoroughly the ancient reverberations of the word *Nomos* and observed its implications in the field of international law. Upon analysing Aristotle’s and Plato’s theories, Schmitt concluded that *Nomos* had to be considered, conversely to the vaguer definition of the Italian scholar, properly “the measure by which the land in a particular order is divided and situated; it is also the form of political, social, and religious order determined by this process”. According to Schmitt (1950/2003), accurate examples of the phenomenon could be “the appropriation of land and the founding of a city or a colony”, and, the jurist sustains, “the history of colonialism in its entirety is as well a history of spatially determined processes of settlement in which order and orientation [main features of the *Nomos*] are combined” (Schmitt, 1950/2003). Additionally, in his 1950’s book “The Nomos of the Earth”, Carl Schmitt contextualised the *Nomos* within a Western paradigm of Europeanness, reasserting the

Christian roots of European (and implicitly international) laws and stating how, from the 16th to the 20th century, “civilization was synonymous with *European* civilization”, when also the historical breakthrough of geographically locate Abya-Yala, far for shaking the Old World’s entitlement, became the opportunity to colonise what, according to Schmitt (1950/2003), was considered as a “*free space*”. In this regard, it appears reasonable to explain this sense of entitlement with Native-American scholar Richard Twiss’s theory of ‘Manifest Destiny’, for which native people were considered by colonisers as an obstacle to overcome in the eyes of God to conquer their promised land (Richard Twiss: *A Theology of Manifest Destiny*, 2008). Although fascinating, it results then that Ginzburg’s interpretation of Herodotus’s *Nomos*, and the arbitrariness behind, clashes with its explanation and application to international law made by Carl Schmitt, and even more it appears almost in contrast with the reasons of the Manifest Destiny proposed by Twiss, both of them claiming European immunity to land-appropriating as legally and religiously authorised in light of the civilization’ badge of honour held by the Christian and white European countries.

This passage supports the connection between the European Christian legacy of superior civilization and the dynamics which enabled the plunder of “free spaces” (Schmitt, 1950/2003) throughout the world, from the 16th century to more modern apparatuses of power such as the League of Nations, today rebranded as Bretton Woods Institution, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (Anghie, 2012). Concerning the League of Nations and the commanding role it had in reinforcing homogeneous standards of civilization, it is worth mentioning the reference to the “sacred trust of civilization” in Antony Anghie’s book “*Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law*” (2012) and further claim the sense of continuum from the “New World” colonisation to the much more recent disposition of the League to control “people not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous

condition of the modern world” (Anghie, 2012). However, at this point, it seems appropriate to note that something is shifting in the colonial approach of the Western countries. Compared with the de Victorian ‘just war’ approach against the natives, to be conquered and civilised *spada manu* for their own’s sake (de Vitoria, as cited in Anghie, 2012), the League’s proposition, although equally patronising, laid the foundation for a different kind of overture. To explain it with Antony Anghie (2012), on the one hand the League of Nations, sandwiched between two World Wars, championed a program which was meant to lead previous colonies from the German and Ottoman empires towards the sovereignty of the nation-states “under a system of international tutelage”. On the other hand, by looking closer at what that ‘sovereignty’ really meant, Anghie (2012) claimed how, within the Mandate System, that proposition facilitated both economic issues between the colonizer and the colonised and developed the cultural difference between advanced Western states and backward mandated people, embodying “the ideal policy of European civilization towards the cultures of Asia, Africa and Pacific”. Clustered in the “iron cage” (Weber, as cited in Berman, 1982) of the Mandate System, then, there wasn’t much left to do for the previous colonies but trying to reassert their self-determination within the standards and the bureaucracy they were forced into. From the Mandate System’ experience, it’s important to extrapolate two considerations, which will be later taken into account as keystones to unlock the relation of political continuity between the word uncivilised and underdeveloped. The first one concerns the crucial role of the Mandate System’s event in making the European countries acutely aware of the economic opulence represented by the mandated territories for the development of their modernization (Anghie, 2012). The second one is the birth of a set of “workable standards” (Anghie, 2012) employed by the Permanent Mandates Commission (PMC) to enhance the mandate people’s well-being. These standards were made possible through the “collection and systematization of information” (Anghie, 2012).

Returning to the previous assumption that the significance of civilization seemed since the beginning encapsulated in the theorisation of Development, hopefully it is now possible to revert the perspective and assume how the concept of Development seems to have been enucleated from the nutshell of the civilisation paradigm instead. From the Herodotean cultural recognition of different customs (or *nomoi*) among *barbaròs* (Ginzburg, 2017), to the more asserting definition of *Nomos* as the gesture of dividing and administrating the “(free) land” (Schmitt, 1950/2003), which barely hides its ramifications in Christianity (Schmitt, 1950/2003), to the entanglement of “wardship” (de Vitoria, as cited in Anghie, 2012), colonialism and standardisation (Anghie, 2012), it results not only how civilization, rather than an abstract conception, begins to shape itself into a quite definite *action*, but also how that same action has mutated chameleonicly to support a change of perspective from the assertion of a God who justifies massacres (Richard Twiss: A Theology of Manifest Destiny, 2008), to the only apparently more subtle dominance of statistic and plain commodities’ exploitation. To support, and reinforced by, Schmitt’s thesis, the latter intentions of the League of Nations kept that tenacious patronising Christian saviourism’ intent for which there never could possibly be atonement.

"By the side of every religion is to be found a political opinion, which is connected with it by affinity." said Alexis de Tocqueville (Tocqueville, as cited in Gustafson, 1968). Bearing this mind, it is suggested to try and locate the implications of this last paragraph in an even bigger picture. It has already been suggested how the idea of Development was conceived and grown within the shell of civilization, which was implicitly Western and Christian. To support this thesis and pave the way to the analysis of the dichotomy ‘developed’ and ‘underdeveloped’ compared to ‘civilised’ and ‘uncivilised’ in an optic of consequentiality, it is necessary to come

back to the first sections of the essay and resume the character of Harry S. Truman, as an individual and as a worthy representative of the American *weltanschauung* of his times. In his article “The Religion of a President”, Merlin Gustafson (1968) suggests that “there is an intimate relationship between political and religious philosophy” in the Truman administration and writes: “He believed that the very essence of religion was to be found in the United Nations Charter, and he called upon the United States to aid the starving millions in Europe, Asia, and Africa. Such actions, he said, were supported by the precepts of the ancient prophets and the Sermon on the Mount.” (Gustafson, 1968). Truman was a believer, not an ideologist, Gustafson (1968) points out, and with his speeches he was also mirroring the Christian revival of a nation already triggered by the witch hunt against Communism. However, although crucial, 1949 and the man who fathered the term were still far from the conception of Development as it was consequentially theorised. In his book “The Development Dictionary: a guide to knowledge as power”, Gustavo Esteva (2010) provides an overview of the phenomenon, from the UN’s proposition of a unified approach to develop and planning through Participative Development, and UNESCO’s theorisation of the Endogenous Development, to the Global North’s attempts at Redevelopment, until the current theories on Sustainable Development. Although diverse, it is possible to individuate a common trait which ties these different approaches together. That feature is a presumption of scarcity (Esteva, 2010). “I bought into underdevelopment when I was thirteen years old. I mean that I fully assumed my “lacks”: I wanted development for me, for my family, and for my country, to satisfy all the “needs” that had suddenly been created for me.”, says Esteva in conversation with Arturo Escobar (Esteva, as cited in Escobar, 2020), “It was in the course of my lifetime that all current “needs” were created and we were transmogrified into needy, measured, and controlled people.” (Esteva, as cited in Escobar, 2020). In order to understand the ‘needs’ mentioned by Esteva, it is important to introduce then another attempt of contextualisation, the same element which was so powerful that, with its

own presence and proliferation, almost made difficult to detect the Christian reverberations of Harry S. Truman. The concept of Modernity.

For reasons of space, it would be impossible to delve into the complete meaning and interpretations given to the term Modernity. Borrowing from Marshall Berman (1982) - in turn influenced by Octavio Paz (Paz, as cited in Berman, 1982) - the approach adopted here will look at it as “a shred that can make us look back two hundred years and connect our lives with the lives of other millions people” (Berman, 1982), suggesting, always with the words of Berman (1982), that “to be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world. And, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are”. Modernity as a promise, then, a promise to give something to those who are *missing* it, the perspective of “scientific advances and industrial progress”, to say it again with Truman (Inaugural Address, Harry S. Truman Library Museum), to be delivered to the Global South through Development projects. From the 16th to the 20th century, those of the European Civilization, as per Carl Schmitt’ statement (1950/2003), Modernity was also happening, in a race with God which ended with the death of the divine, to parrot Friedrich Nietzsche (1883-1885), and forced the godless European population to look within Modernity itself to find an impossible relief, as theorised by Nicolás Gómez Dávila (*¿Qué dice Nicolás Gómez Dávila sobre la modernidad?*, 2020). In a previous part of the text, it has already been asked the reader to keep on hold two considerations advanced regarding the League of Nations’ experience. The first one reasserted the economic interests of the Western countries in the previous colonies. According to Antony Anghie (2012), the policies of financial flourishing approved by the Mandate System within the mandated countries, on the one hand, were only apparently aiming to lead them to their independence from the colonisers. Deeply influenced by Michel Foucault

(Foucault, as cited in Anghie, 2012), Anghie (2012) suggests that what happened instead was an economization of their governments, the delivery of an only apparent sovereignty, which lacked the powers to control the political economy. While doing so, the Mandate System reinforced the standardisation of the economic progress as “universal category” (Anghie, 2012), despite culture or race: “the native people didn’t have to be “civilised” anymore, but rather becoming more productive” (Anghie, 2012). More modern. On the other hand, and what follows is directly linked to the second consideration on hold, the economization of government was complemented by the science of collecting data, shaping an inescapable western model which contributed to create “new institutions of subordinations” (the market consisting in the most dominant one), and nurtured an unfulfillable gap between the oppressors and the oppressed (Anghie, 2012). Within this context, it becomes hard not to attempt a parallelism between the homogeneity of economic criteria to respect presented by the League of Nations, and the same homogeneity of standards presented by the aforementioned models of Development. Observing how what was previously imposed *spada manu* in a perspective of civilisation, with the complacency of inescapable “total institutions” (Goffman, as cited in Berman, 1982) such as the League of Nations, turned two hundred years later into an equally violent form of prevarication, disguised by the allure (promise) of modernization and self-determination, it seems important to refer once again to Gustavo Esteva’s considerations: “We knew by then that “development,” as the universalization of the American way of life, was impossible; that we would never catch up with the developed, as Truman promised; that we would be permanently left behind.”(Esteva, as cited in Escobar, 2020). From “subject of investigation”, Development emerged as a “conservative if not reactionary myth”, which is now slowly evaporating (Esteva, 2010).

To conclude, the thesis hereby advanced proposed a relation of continuity between the categories of civilised / uncivilised and developed / underdeveloped, rather than a distinction, implying that the concept of Civilisation may be seen as the matrix of that of Development and therefore holding Development responsible for the reinforcement of current dynamics of colonial influence. The “American way of life” (Esteva, as cited in Escobar, 2020) forced itself in the Global South by soft – powering its political influence through the engine of Development, which has been in fact not even that “pregnant of its contrary” (Marx, as cited in Berman, 2012), to quote Marx, but rather quite eminently candid both in terms of its provenance and goals. Instead of looking at autochthonous solutions - one among many, “the celebration of the common men and women” (Esteva, 2010) - the American developmental approach intervened in the Global South using the same lens and instruments employed by former colonial and Western institutions (workable models of economic growth based on the collection of data), engaging with different countries with a methodology that, once the rhetoric has been shaken off, still seems to be implemented in *terra nullius*, positioning it not that far from the entitled European proposition of land-appropriating which characterised the primary goal of civilisation.

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