Guest Editorial

Civilization and Savagery

Dominant discourses have designated September 11, 2001, to be a pivotal point in history. That tragic day generated a tsunami of speeches, conversations, debates, news reports, editorials, op-eds, policy documents, laws, research papers, theses, scholarly articles and books, magazine pieces, documentaries, television dramas, movies, novels, poems, plays, art works, and musical items. The 20 years that separate us from the event allow an overview of the broad historical and cultural contexts of not only what transpired in the last two decades but also what shaped them.

One of the reasons that 9/11 shocked deeply was the widespread belief in American exceptionalism, which made it unimaginable that the most heavily armed state on Earth could be vulnerable to a savage assault killing almost 3,000 people. Half a century before 9/11, another attack—one in which atomic bombs destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki—had also horrified the world. Studying attitudes toward enemies that were prevalent during America’s first two centuries, Robert Ivie (1980) discovered that one consistently views oneself as peaceful and the other as savagely aggressive. The September 11, 2001, attacks fell into this longstanding mould for cultural narratives. The iconic image of the tallest marvels of modern architecture laid waste by terrorists fits well into the age-old conceptual template of civilization’s struggle with savagery. Even complications stemming from the American government’s previous collaboration with Osama bin Laden and support for authoritarianism in Muslim-majority states (and elsewhere) did not negate the binary model of the “civilized world” versus the forces of global instability (Herrero, 2018). Contrarily, dominant Western views of the world could not align the American nuclear obliteration of 129,000 Japanese lives with the standard civilization-savagery frame.

We have to look back to the beginnings of colonialism to comprehend the insidious power invested in the contemporary notion of civilization. Various peoples throughout history have conquered and subjugated others. From the early sixteenth century, however, European colonization took a global form that made one continent’s inhabitants ascendant over all others (Ross, 1982). It produced a planetary structuration on a racial basis. European theorization about racial hierarchy helped justify the systemic exploitation of other lands and the enslavement of Africans on a massive scale (Gilroy, 1993). Colonizers assigned themselves the mis-
sion of civilizing other “races” characterized as “barbarous” by scholars such as the seventeenth-century scholar Hugo Grotius (1925), who helped lay the foundations of international law. Non-Europeans were excluded from the supposedly universal schemes of human rights of philosophers Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill. The Enlightenment was presented to Western and other societies as uniformly beneficial to all peoples, even as its ruminations enabled Europeans to repress others.

The dominant discursive structures underlying a naturalized and omnipresent belief in white supremacy provided sanction to individuals, who otherwise saw themselves as good Christians, to perpetuate unspeakable cruelty and rapacious robbery in the name of civilization. *La mission civilisatrice* justified the structuring of colonial networks of communications and transportation to stunt Indigenous economic systems and deprive the rest of the world of its wealth. Economist Utsa Patnaik (2006) calculates that British colonial interests in India, which Western discourses portray as ushering in the rule of law, stole $4.5 trillion between 1765 and 1938. Protests and rebellions of the colonized were crushed with genocide and other forms of mass killings, mutilation, rape, physical and psychological torture, detention in concentration camps, the destruction of communities, the relocation of people, the separation of family members, and cultural and linguistic erasure. Elements of this treatment are meted out from time to time to “rogue” postcolonial states.

These acts are rarely, if ever, described as barbarism or savagery. The dominant script does not seem to allow such characterization for even the most shocking crimes of people of European origins, whether historical or contemporary. Multiple word association searches show that the terms barbaric, barbarous, barbarian, barbarism, savage, or savagery were not used in media references to the heinous acts carried out by Western forces in the aftermath of 9/11. They include reports about the torture of suspected Al-Qaeda members at the U.S. military prison in Guantanamo Bay, the U.S. Army and the CIA’s extreme humiliation of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, the British military’s shoot-to-kill policy against civilians in southern Iraq, American (Blackwater) mercenaries’ massacre of commuters in Baghdad, the U.S. drone bombing of Afghan wedding parties, and members of the U.S. Marines urinating on the bodies of dead Taliban (Center for Civilians in Conflict and Columbia Law School Human Rights Institute, 2020). There appears to be an unspoken and perhaps unconscious cultural resistance in dominant discourses against linking barbarism to symbols of progress such as the Western state and Western technology. The massacre of defenceless young civilians by terrorist groups is often described as “barbaric,” but this adjective was not applied to the Israeli air attacks that killed 63 defenceless children in Gaza over a two-week period in May 2021 (Hunter et al, 2021). Instead, mainstream media habitually display sleek fighter jets and drones firing state-of-the-art missiles as expressions of modernity.
Colonialism’s general approach toward subjugated peoples is to eliminate their opposition and to incorporate them culturally and economically into a capitalist society under Western dominance. Education is wielded not only as a tool but as a weapon. One particularly dreadful manifestation of this approach is the Church-run residential schools in Canada, the last of which closed in 1997. The places where Indigenous children were ostensibly taken to be civilized became sites for physical and mental torture, rape, humiliation, suicide, and murder. Yet, even critical discourses are reluctant to name this as savagery (e.g., Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012).

The imagined superiority of one’s “race” maintains a perception of one’s goodness even while brutalizing darker-skinned peoples. That the self has become savage in pursuing the mission to civilize others is supposedly “the white man’s burden.” Such self-centred morality, combined with its financial and social benefits, appears to erase doubts. This is seemingly the very purpose for which European ideas of racial hierarchy were developed: the “white” self remains pure, even as it is drenched in the blood of others. The self-assured and self-righteous expression on police officer Derek Chauvin’s face as he stared at a camera while deliberately and proficiently draining George Floyd's life (Moshtaghian, 2020) is an iconic symbol of this deep conviction, which has been nurtured over centuries. There is a through line running from the early emergence of white supremacist thinking to slavery and from colonialism to systemic discrimination and violence against racialized peoples in our times.

A continual engagement between dominant and alternative discourses produces cycles of advancement and regression in the struggle for human equity. For example, the abolition of slavery in the U.S. was followed by the Jim Crow laws that obstructed the rights of African Americans; and in a display of thinly veiled racism, various states are currently enacting legislation aimed at increasing restrictions against the latter’s access to the polls (Tensley, 2021). Even with the formal dismantling of supremacist systems, ideas about the hegemony of Western culture remain embedded in ostensibly non-Eurocentric global thinking. Modernity, development, progress, and democracy are promoted for all, but these words and ideas remain implicit markers of Western civilization and its vaunted superiority (Daly, 2008).

Conversely, “the Third World” connotes a lack of advancement, in effect acting as a synonym for barbarism. North American media periodically lament the lack of clean water in many Indigenous locales as “Third World conditions,” even though this situation has been produced and sustained for generations by the environmental pollution and neglect of “First World” states (Murphy, 2017). Democracy, a significant characteristic of modernity, is seen as the natural preserve of Western polities. One of the major discussions in which Western policymakers, scholars, and journalists engaged in after 9/11 was the (in)capability of Muslim-
majority countries to democratize, recalling development communication scholar Daniel Lerner’s 1950s pronouncement that Islam was the obstacle (Lerner, 1958). The irony was lost on Western ideologues as their own governments continued to contribute to the region’s instability through war, vastly increased arms sales to client states, support for authoritarians, and the neglect of the Arab Spring’s democratic impulses.

There was a brief time following the attacks of September 11, 2001, when a space opened up for a critical policy discussion on Western society’s relationships with Muslim-majority countries. For example, the Chautauqua Institute in New York state held public discussions with scholars and religious leaders to explore the Abrahamic relationships between Jews, Christians, and Muslims (Chautauqua Institute, 2002). However, the dominant discourse on global hierarchies reasserted itself and the drumbeats of war drowned out reasoned debate. Bernard Lewis (1990) and Samuel Huntington’s (1996) “clash of civilizations” thesis (generally decoded as Western civilization versus Muslim barbarism) provided the script for responding to 9/11. A London Sunday Telegraph column by Sir Peregrine Worsthorne (1991) (a Conrad Black protégé), written in the earlier run-up to the 1991 war against Iraq, asserted that:

The riches of the First World provoke passionate envy in the Third World, and so do all the appurtenances of civilization. … The aim must be for America to win an overwhelming victory; for Western technology to prove devastatingly, chasteningly superior … there can be no doubt who are the masters now … (p. 10)

Dark-skinned barbarians at the gate have to be crushed and European omnipotence made overwhelmingly and triumphantly clear to anyone who dare challenge it. Such approaches, which have been in place for centuries, underlie military actions by NATO and the Kremlin against southern countries (Karim, 2003). And in local and national contexts, police forces carry out these functions against racialized minorities (Stelkia, 2020).

White supremacist concepts not only structure extreme right-wing doctrine but are part of the ideational matrix that feeds mainstream conservative and liberal ideas. Edward Said (1993) has shown how the civilizing mission’s underbelly was obscured in the literature produced under European imperialism, as it continues to be today. Whereas liberalism does produce progressive legislation and programs to alleviate inequity, such actions are continually undermined by the structural resilience of white supremacy. The very terminology developed to fight racism, such as person of colour and visible minority, invariably essentializes a central pillar of racial hierarchization: skin colour. Under this scheme, those who are supposedly without colour remain unique and the standard by which the rest are judged.

October 2021 marks a half-century from the time that the Canadian government became the first in the world to adopt multiculturalism as national policy
One of the major right-wing criticisms against it is that it obstructs the integration of immigrants into the receiving society. This critique intensified as certain Muslim newcomers conducted terrorist acts in Western countries. Nevertheless, the policy has survived—mainly because it has become a valuable electioneering tool for some politicians. Multiculturalism has helped formally enhance the legal status of marginalized peoples, but society’s fundamental structures, shaped by white supremacy, remain intact. This is evidenced in the firm hold that traditional elites maintain over the most vital levers of political, economic, and cultural power.

Daniel McNeil’s article on multiculturalism in this issue notes that “there is widespread denial of racism in a Canadian establishment that pays lip service to questions of equity” (p. 422). While ostensibly supporting cultural pluralism, Stephen Harper’s government’s Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act (Canada, 2015) did not hide its contempt for what it saw as Muslim barbarism. Reified structuring of difference, effected through cultural rather than racial distinctions, has become a way of expressing racism without seeming to be racist. A growing body of scholarly literature shows how discrimination against adherents of Islam is perpetrated through this manner of racialization. The current prime minister, Justin Trudeau, is reluctant to challenge Québec’s Act Respecting the Laicity of the State (Québec, 2019), which bars persons who wear religious symbols from holding public service jobs—legislation that primarily affects Muslims, Sikhs, and Jews. Tuen van Dijk (1997) has demonstrated how the discriminatory discourse of mainstream leaders enables populist racist rhetoric and even violent acts. Governments condemned right-wing extremists who murdered Muslims in mass killings in Québec City, Québec (2017), and London, Ontario (2021) (Boisvert, 2021), but remain oblivious to the cultural links between the official marginalization of specific groups and the frequent abuse and violence conducted against them. Politicians are then repeatedly able to express shock with an air of innocence that helps to distance them from their own complicity in fostering a social environment for the attacks. The Québec bill, which had been discussed in the public sphere for over a decade, was introduced in the provincial parliament—in a supreme act of irony—by the “Minister for Immigration, Diversity and Inclusiveness” (Québec, 2019).

Where do we go from here?
It is vital to recognize that white supremacy, although usually invisible, is deeply embedded in societal infrastructure and profoundly influences foreign and domestic policies. In studying incongruencies between Indigenous world views and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Mary Ellen Turpel (1989–1990) indicates how even our concepts about rights are foundationally based on parochial Eurocentric ideas that benefit the inner circles of socio-economic elites. Apart from marginalizing dark-skinned peoples, including non-European Christians, white

(Karim, 2012).
supremacy also racializes European working classes and European followers of non-Christian religions. Dominant discourses, influenced and manipulated by the privileged, continually divert public attention from the structural discrimination and violence of societal systems. Rational critique, to which the Enlightenment has contributed significantly, needs to be applied more rigorously to the Enlightenment itself to uncover its own place in intellectually underpinning racial oppression. Civilization’s claims and its intimate relationship with savagery should be studied for what they are. Critical race theory and critical multiculturalism provide valuable tools for understanding the ways in which white supremacy counters and co-opts progressive efforts toward equity, often with liberal arguments.

This guest editorial argues for the necessity of a perspective that examines broader temporal and spatial contexts that implicate the nation. It draws attention to historical structuring and the generational memories of human interactions, particularly the topoi of the civilizational and the savage. Reified global dynamics in the aftermath of 9/11 have shown that critical scholars face a massive project that is nothing less than overturning powerful discourses that have constricted human thinking for centuries. Communication studies has an important role to play in these scholarly and educational endeavours. It has to recognize as a prerequisite, however, the persistence of exclusion in how it structures research programs and curricula. The editorial strategies of publication series that lay claim to rubrics such as “how Canadians communicate” must endeavour to be inclusive of the concerns of all Canadians, particularly communities that are systematically neglected in mainstream discussions. The field’s inherent interdisciplinarity enables it to benefit integrally from various bodies of knowledge.

Communication scholars have long been studying societal structures of power and inter-group relations. Newer methods such as big data analytics enable the large-scale scrutiny of communicative acts in emerging platforms. It is crucial, however, that the theoretical frames of such research account for the structural, historical, and cultural continuities of communication practices. These perspectives afford insights into how the dominant narratives of events such as 9/11, which have contributed to the resilience of the structures of power and discrimination, can be challenged.

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