Saving civilization from empire: Belligerency, pacifism and the two faces of civilization during the Second Opium War

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Saving civilization from empire: Belligerency, pacifism and the two faces of civilization during the Second Opium War

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Abstract
Conventional accounts of international society’s expansion have traditionally emphasized the role played by ‘civilizing missions’ in facilitating and legitimating European aggression and imperial expansion. Conversely, in this article, I demonstrate that the relationship between imperial violence and the rhetoric of ‘civilizing missions’ was far more contested and contingent than International Relations scholars have generally assumed. Using the parliamentary debate surrounding Britain’s involvement in the Second Opium War as a case study, I reveal that civilizational rhetoric in the 1857 ‘China debate’ was equally implicated in both anti-imperialist and imperialist agendas. Richard Cobden’s victory in the debate over Palmerston’s pro-war ministry further illustrates the political potency of appeals to civilization as a brake — however temporary — on Britain’s imperial expansion. An appreciation of civilization’s janus-faced character — as a rhetorical commonplace that at different times abetted and inhibited imperial aggression — is therefore critical if we are to comprehend the halting and arrhythmic pattern of international society’s progressive expansion under British leadership in the mid-Victorian period.

Keywords
China, civilization, empire, historical sociology, international history, International Relations, international society, war

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The character of the local Chinese government is such that it is impossible to apply to them those maxims and that conduct which are proper and usual among civilized nations. I agree most cordially that there is no reason why, because a nation with whom we happen to be dealing is semi-barbarous, that we should act towards it with violence, and with a disposition to make might the rule of right. On the contrary, we are bound by every consideration of religion and policy to be more than ordinarily forbearing of such nations. But, on the other hand, it is more necessary to make a display of force sooner, and in a different manner, in dealings with nations which understand no other argument than force than it would be in dealing with Christian and civilized communities. (HC Deb, 1857: 144, col. 1434)

You tell us it is necessary that the Chinese should learn to know our force. It is not true: all these papers tell us that China knows and dreads our force; and what China doubts is, the friendliness of our intentions and the simple rectitude of our objects. In dealing with countries less civilized than ourselves, it is by lofty truth and forbearing humanity that the genius of commerce contrasts the ambition of conquerors. Talk not of the interests of trade! Your trade cannot prosper if you make yourselves an object of detestation to those you trade with. You may, indeed, force a road for your merchants to the market-place at Canton over the ruins of the city and the corpses of your customers — you may carry your tariffs at the point of the sword and surround your factories by armed garrisons and bristling cannon, but I warn you that your trade will fly the place, for commerce recoils at unnecessary bloodshed. (HC Deb, 1857: 144, col. 1446)

Introduction

In October 1856, the then-governor of Hong Kong, John Bowring, lauded Canton’s indiscriminate shelling as a just punishment for a barbarous government, as well as a necessary prelude to the spread of commerce, Christianity and civilization throughout China (Ceadel, 2000: 58; Todd, 2008: 395). That a former foreign secretary of the Society for Universal Peace could characterize the bombardment of an unfortified entrepot as an act of ‘civilization’ initially presents as simply another grim irony in the sordid narrative of imperial violence that attended international society’s expansion. Hypocrisy has long lubricated the path of conquest, and Victoria’s foot soldiers were far from unique in justifying their violence through reference to ‘civilizing missions’. What is more startling than the invocation of ‘civilizing missions’ by empire’s advocates, however, is the equally insistent appeal to civilization that empire’s critics invoked during the Second Opium War. For while Bowring was celebrating Canton’s bombardment as a great victory for civilization, fellow liberal Richard Cobden was busy denouncing Bowring’s actions as a barbaric outrage inflicted upon an innocent people (Wong, 1998: 193–194). Moreover, lest Cobden be dismissed as a radical unrepresentative of his time, it is worth noting that he was far from alone in his condemnation of British policy, nor were his protestations without political import. Rather, following a four-day parliamentary debate in February and March 1857, Cobden rallied a diverse coalition of MPs to censure the Palmerston ministry for endorsing Bowring’s aggression in China (Gelber, 2004: 180). Humbled in the Commons, the government was forced to a general election, and it was only after Palmerston’s return
with an increased parliamentary majority that Britain could resume its war to ‘civilize’ China unimpeded by its domestic critics.

Why did British aggression against China prove so divisive for Britain’s political establishment during the Second Opium War, and what does the controversy that surrounded the conflict reveal about British understandings of ‘civilization’ as a moral and legal concept in global politics at that time? Conventional accounts of international society’s expansion have rightly stressed the centrality of the civilized–barbarian divide as a legitimizing discourse for Western imperialism (Gong, 1984; Hobson, 2004; Keene, 2002). Nevertheless, in the following pages, I will argue that it would be mistaken to reduce civilization exclusively to a mere alibi for empire. For while discourses of civilization were intimately implicated in empire’s expansion, the controversy that surrounded the Second Opium War also illustrates civilization’s second aspect, where it served as a bridle — however ineffectual in the long term — on imperial ambitions. A recognition of civilization’s janus-faced character — as a rhetorical commonplace that featured in the arguments of empire’s critics as well as its advocates — is therefore essential if we are to fully comprehend the complexity and ambiguity of civilizational politics in mid-Victorian Britain, and thus also if we are to properly understand the normative dynamics of international society’s 19th-century expansion.

The following discussion proceeds in four sections. The first section revisits civilization’s Enlightenment origins, before then qualifying existing treatments of civilization that identify it exclusively with imperial aggression. The second section examines the ways in which nascent notions of progress and civilization began to inform Britain’s perception of its interests and obligations in Asia from the early 19th century. I argue that while hubristic notions of civilizational superiority increasingly conditioned Britain’s interactions with Asian polities from this time onwards, British opinion remained fundamentally divided over the question of how legitimate — if at all — the use of force could be as a means of expanding the frontiers of civilization to these societies. Multiple understandings of civilization lent themselves to pacifist as well as bellicist interpretations concerning the scope and nature of Britain’s imperial prerogatives, and the tensions between these visions were never more evident than in the succession of conflicts that attended Britain’s imperial swing eastwards in the 19th century.

In the third section, I empirically demonstrate the complexity and ambiguity of civilization’s relationship to imperial aggression through an analysis of the debate surrounding the legitimacy of Britain’s military actions following the onset of the Second Opium War. For Palmerston and his allies, Britain’s status as civilization’s torch-bearer in Asia went unquestioned. Similarly, the moral legitimacy of using violence as a means of vindicating the rights of British subjects, punishing ‘barbarian’ defiance and facilitating the civilizing spread of commerce and Christianity into China was also vigorously asserted. Conversely, for Palmerston’s critics, Britain’s recourse to arms against China was legally dubious and morally unjustifiable. In violating China’s sovereign rights without just cause, and in directing British firepower against the unfortified commercial city of Canton, Britain’s representatives in China had themselves acted in a ‘barbarous’ fashion in the eyes of their domestic critics, inviting some to challenge the entire opposition between ‘civilized’ Britons and ‘barbarous’ Chinese upon which the government’s case rested (Gelber, 2004: 177). This essential ambiguity and contestation in the politics of
civilizational identity forms the focal point of my discussion, and establishes the context for the article’s conclusion, in which I consider the implications that a more nuanced understanding of civilizational politics offers for our understanding of the varying relationships — both historical and contemporary — between civilization, empire and the constitution of order in world politics.

‘Civilization’ and international order: Conceptual origins and existing treatments

A prefatory note on the origins of ‘civilization’

Civilization’s origins as a distinctive concept within Western thought can be specified with surprising precision. According to Bruce Mazlish, the term was first coined in 1756 by Mirabeau the elder ‘to designate a society in which civil law had replaced military law … [and also] to describe a group of people who were polished, refined and mannered, as well as virtuous in their social existence’ (Mazlish, 2001: 293). In its initial focus, the concept of civilization thus addressed questions of judicial organization and public morality. As a judicial notion, civilization elevated the civil power of the magistrate over the coercive power of the absolute despot (Mazlish, 2001: 293). Likewise, on the question of public morality, civilization emphasized the importance of establishing internalized habits of restraint among the populace, with civilization’s advocates being especially concerned with the restraint of impulses towards physical violence (Elias and Jephcott, 1978; Mazlish, 2001: 294). Indeed, common to civilization as both a judicial notion and a prescription for popular virtue was its emphasis on limiting the role of violence in public life, either through the imposition of civil laws to curb princely power, or alternatively through the inculcation of correct manners emphasizing habits of internalized self-restraint among the broader populace. In this respect, ‘civilization’ reflected its Enlightenment origins as a construct undergirded by the belief that human nature was both malleable and susceptible to refinement through the ameliorative influences of legislation and education (Bowden, 2009: 49; Metcalf, 1994: 37). This conviction in turn reflected a progressivist view of history, in which humanity was seen as steadily moving away from a ‘rude and barbarous’ state, and towards a condition of ever-greater moral and material improvement.

For civilization’s early sponsors, then, civilization was not necessarily a byword for European superiority. Rather, it was an end-state towards which Europeans themselves might progress, as atavistic impulses were sublimated and old prejudices dissolved through the application of reason. As the 19th century unfolded and industrialization bequeathed on Europeans unprecedented material supremacy over the Afro-Asian world, the concept of civilization undeniably assumed more chauvinistic overtones (Adas, 1989: 199). But the more pacifistic aspect of civilization that had earlier predominated, and that was animated by a deep concern for advancing Europe’s moral improvement through the elimination of practices of arbitrary violence, was never entirely eclipsed. On the contrary, as a host of colonial wars steadily yielded the Europeans global dominion, civilization would serve as both a touchstone of the liberal conscience and as a licence for empire. It is this essential polyvalence of civilization that accounts for the
intense controversy that attended empire’s coercive spread at various points in the 19th century, and that has hitherto been overlooked in the literature on international society’s expansion. I will shortly expound in greater detail on the complexities of civilizational discourses as they manifested themselves in mid-Victorian Britain. But before I do so, a more extensive survey of existing treatments of the relationship between civilization and empire is in order. It is to this task that I now turn.

**Civilization, empire and the expansion of international society: A critique of existing treatments**

Given its historic centrality in legitimating European imperialism and its continuing associations as a licence for Western aggression, it is unsurprising that the ‘dark’ side of civilization has attracted so much scholarly attention. For many, civilization can best be understood as merely one of a range of narcissistic self-projections that Westerners have contrived to provide a morally edifying warrant for imperial violence. Scholars such as John Hobson have thus emphasized the connections between the civilized–barbarian dichotomy enshrined in 19th-century international law and earlier, more explicitly religious binaries (Christian versus infidel or pagan) that informed both the Crusades and the conquest of the New World (Hobson, 2004: 309–312). This tendency to identify connections between civilization and other exclusionary constructs finds further support in the fact that discourses of civilizational supremacy had by the late 19th century become thoroughly entangled with newer notions of ‘scientific racism’ in legitimizing Western imperialism (Adas, 1989: 318; Hannaford, 1996: 359).

While there is much to commend attempts to situate civilizational discourses within a broader comparative analysis of Western imperialism, two critical and distinctive features of civilizational discourses are omitted when civilization is reduced to merely one more licence for empire. First, such a move elides the fact that when ‘civilization’ first emerged as a coherent concept in Enlightenment Europe, it did so within the context of debates on how best to harness and limit the exercise of arbitrary violence within Europe itself. As I have already noted, civilization first emerged among Enlightenment thinkers as part of a broader project of normative pacification that was at least partially geared towards morally transforming the Occident rather than the Orient (Mazlish, 2001: 293). ‘Civilization’ thus conferred upon actors capacities for self-reflection and self-criticism that differed substantially from either the God-given certainties of the Christian–infidel divide or the supposedly immutable ‘scientific realities’ underpinning arguments in favour of white supremacy.

Second, and relatedly, attempts to conflate civilizational identities with other exclusionary constructs in Western thought overlook the uniquely high degree of permeability that Europeans perceived between ‘civilized’ and ‘barbarian’ peoples. Certainly, liminal actors such as the Iberian *conversos* bedevilled early modern state-builders’ efforts to forge unambiguously homogeneous religious *cum* national communities following the *Reconquista* (Rae, 2002: 57–59). The spectre of miscegenation similarly fuelled racial anxieties in both the Old World and the New as Westerners defended social orders predicated on rigid distinctions distinguishing the European *Herrenvolk* from other races (Lake and Reynolds, 2008: 66). The liminal exceptions of *marannos*, *moriscos* and
mulattos notwithstanding, neither religious nor racial boundaries possessed in European thought the same mutability as those that were deemed to separate ‘civilized’ from ‘barbarian’ peoples. For at the heart of the European ‘civilizing project’ lay the hope and expectation that non-European peoples could through tutelage and supervision incrementally advance from a ‘barbarous’ to a more civilized state (Bain, 2003; Pomeranz, 2005: 36). Equally, however, shadowing European hopes to ‘civilize’ the non-European world lay the corresponding fear that Europeans could themselves potentially regress from a more ‘civilized’ to a more ‘barbarous’ state (Spadafora, 1990: 404; Spencer, 1902: 132–133). The aspiration to civilize and the parallel fear of barbarization mark out civilizational discourses from other patterns of Western exclusion, and an understanding of this distinctiveness is essential if we are to understand the controversies that attended European efforts to coercively extend civilization’s frontiers during the age of empire.

Given its historical specificity, attempts to reduce civilization to merely one more expression of European chauvinism are of limited value. More historically sensitive approaches have conversely acknowledged civilization’s distinctiveness by tracing its evolution from a relatively nebulous moral concept in the late 18th century towards a legally institutionalized category of discrimination (a ‘standard of civilization’) in world politics less than a century later. International legal historians and English School scholars have been particularly helpful in charting civilization’s evolutionary trajectory along this path, and have done much to trace the correspondence between this transformation and the eclipse of natural international law in favour of legal positivism (Alexandrowicz, 1967; Gong, 1984). Civilization’s ascendancy as a discriminatory standard of legitimate statehood corresponded directly with the doctrinal shift from declarative to constitutive theories of sovereign recognition, and the resulting hierarchy of ‘civilized’ and ‘barbarian’ states departed radically from the much more egalitarian mould of East–West international legal relations that had prevailed down to the late 18th century (Alexandrowicz, 1967: 9). English School scholars have also helpfully reminded us of how protracted the process was by which civilization emerged as a formally codified standard of legitimate statehood, with a formal ‘standard of civilization’ crystallizing in international law only in the last decade of the 19th century (Gong, 1984: 14).1

A historicization of civilization’s emergence as a formally codified category of legal discrimination is thus of great value, not least because it remains sensitive to the more egalitarian and cooperative aspects of interactions between Europe and Asia that persisted down to the early 1800s. There are nevertheless dangers in fixing exclusively on civilization’s evolution from a moral concept into an institutionalized legal category when studying the dynamics of international society’s expansion. The most significant of these is that such an approach risks underestimating the residual ambiguity and flexibility of civilization as a moral and political concept. This ambiguity and flexibility persisted following the rise of legal positivism and civilization’s corresponding (though partial and incomplete) incorporation into the rhetorical armoury of European imperialists. Throughout the 19th century, and even under the lengthening shadow of European imperialism, ‘civilization’ contained multiple meanings, some of which served to aid and abet imperial violence, while others worked to arrest — or at least temporarily inhibit and frustrate — imperial enterprises. Far from there being a tight and inevitable nexus between ‘civilization’ and empire, the relationship between the two was ambiguous and
contested. This claim contradicts established understandings of the significance of civilizing discourses for the expansion of international society, and I will shortly attempt to empirically corroborate this claim through an examination of the fraught politics of civilizational identity as they played out during the Second Opium War. But before I do so, a deeper consideration is required of civilization’s multiple connotations and growing political significance within Britain as they developed in the decades immediately preceding the conflict. Hence, it is to this component of my analysis that I now proceed.

‘Commerce, Christianity and civilization’: Bellicist and pacifist visions of Britain’s ‘civilizing project’ in the lead-up to the Second Opium War

The emergence of a ‘civilizing discourse’ in Victorian Britain must be understood within the context of the steady rise of progress as a dominating theme in British intellectual life over the course of the preceding century. Refuting earlier Franco-centric narratives concerning the origins of the idea of progress, David Spadafora has convincingly argued for the emergence of independent conceptions of progress within both Scotland and England during the 18th century (Spadafora, 1990). Predictably, Scottish and English conceptions of progress varied significantly, but their cross-pollination and eventual synthesis proved pivotal in informing Britain’s conception of its ‘civilizing mission’ in Asia in the 19th century. A brief consideration of these traditions and their respective contributions to the Victorian ‘civilizing mission’ is therefore essential for comprehending the intellectual backdrop against which the controversies surrounding the Second Opium War eventually played out.

Central to the idea of progress as it developed within the Scottish Enlightenment was the embrace of a stadial vision of history, which envisaged human societies evolving through a succession of developmental stages, ranging from simpler and more ‘barbarous’ to more complex and more ‘civilized’ states (Pitts, 2005: 35; Spadafora, 1990: 271). Beginning in a condition of primitive tribalism where hunting formed the primary means of subsistence, human communities were expected to progressively advance through pastoralist and agriculturalist phases before eventually achieving their highest state of ‘civilization’ in the form of commercial society (Meek, 1976: 117; Pitts, 2005: 36). For thinkers such as Adam Smith, each material phase of human development corresponded with its own distinctive mode of sociability and accompanying form of morality. While careful to argue that each moral code was generally appropriate for its corresponding stage of material development, Smith and his followers — including John Bowring’s mentor, Jeremy Bentham — emphatically concluded that it was in commercial society that humanity achieved its most perfect moral state (Pitts, 2005: 41). This was because it was only within commercial society that the ‘invisible hand’ of the market could work to draw strangers into routine and voluntary contact with one another through the centripetal force of mutual self-interest (Pitts, 2005: 41). In facilitating greater communication and expanding webs of mutual interdependence, many Scottish Enlightenment thinkers speculated that commerce created the enabling circumstances in which greater moral sympathies could develop between strangers, thus improving
both humanity’s moral and its material condition (Spadafora, 1990: 275–279; Stanley, 1983: 75). This conviction — that expanded commercial ties contributed to humanity’s moral and material elevation — would be one of the Scottish Enlightenment’s chief legacies to Victorian Britain, and would decisively shape Britain’s ‘civilizing mission’ in Asia in the following century.

Scottish Enlightenment intellectuals offered a vision of progress that while undeniably expansive, was both more secular and more limited than that which developed further south. For Scottish thinkers, fundamental moral progress was possible through the ennobling influences of commerce, legislation and education, but this progress was inevitably confined by the limits of human reason. Again, Spadafora is instructive on this point, arguing that English conceptions of progress were by contrast decidedly more providentialist and open-ended than their Scottish counterparts (Spadafora, 1990: 13). Enlightenment English thinkers conceived that the potential for humanity’s material and moral progress was virtually unlimited, and would be gradually realized as the application of human reason enabled actors to better discern the natural and social laws governing a providentially ordered universe (Spadafora, 1990: 248). This millenarian aspect of English thought assumed even greater significance following evangelical Christianity’s prodigious growth in Britain in the early 19th century. For an increasing number of Britons from this time onwards, Britain appeared to have been specially ordained by God for the divine purpose of spreading His word throughout the world. Britain’s burgeoning industrial growth; the fact that it was relatively spared from the ‘wreck of nations’ that had engulfed the Continent during the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars; the rapid and seemingly relentless growth of Britain’s Asian empire from the Battle of Plassey onwards — each of these factors combined to nurture the conceit that Britain alone possessed a special responsibility to advance humanity’s moral transformation and spiritual redemption by promoting Christianity’s global spread (Stanley, 1983: 73).

The visions of progress that respectively inhered in Scottish and English Enlightenment thought gradually coalesced into a distinctive ‘civilizing mission’ that helped abet Britain’s prodigious imperial expansion during the Victorian era. From the Scottish Enlightenment, Victorian liberals took a stadial vision of history, as well as a distinctive faith in the civilizing potential of unfettered commercial exchange. These ideas were soon joined by notions of Britain’s ‘special responsibility’ as an elect nation to evangelize the world in accordance with the precepts of Protestant Christianity. Fusing the Christian telos of salvation with Enlightenment conceptions of progress, British evangelicals held that humanity’s moral and spiritual redemption was both an urgent moral necessity and a foreseeable possibility, particularly in light of Britain’s burgeoning material power and its rapidly expanding suzerainty over ever broader swathes of ‘heathen’ populations in Asia and Africa (Porter, 1985: 613; Stanley, 1983: 75). For the evangelicals, Protestant Christianity provided the one sure path from barbarism to civilization, and just as the individual experience of conversion testified to the rapidly transformative power of faith, so too did it suggest the practical possibility of reclaiming African and Asian souls from the perils of paganism and idolatry (Stokes, 1959: 34).

Drawing eclectically from both Scottish and English sources, Victorian liberalism thus produced a hybrid civilizing mission — pithily encapsulated in the contemporary slogan ‘commerce, Christianity and civilization’ — that decisively conditioned its
engagement with non-European peoples throughout the 19th century. Within the Asian context, this mission implied for Britain the task of liberating Asia’s millions from the threefold scourges of monopoly, tyranny and idolatry via the introduction of the beneficent influences of free trade, ‘responsible government’ and Protestant Christianity (Stokes, 1959: 34). British ‘civilizers’ in the mid-19th century located Asians within a universal moral community (i.e. humanity), but nevertheless regarded them as having temporarily sunk into a condition of ‘barbarism’ as a result of bad customs and bad government (Metcalf, 1994: 57). Critically, as Asians’ alleged moral degradation was seen as the product of custom rather than biology, Britain’s ‘civilizing’ agents were confident that they could be rapidly redeemed with the help of British tutelage. Contrasting Western liberty to Oriental despotism, Victorian Britons adhered to the view that with the introduction of unfettered commercial exchange, Protestant Christianity and ‘responsible’ government, the moral and material conditions that had formerly held Asians in a state of subjection and stagnation would rapidly dissolve, enabling them to rapidly ascend from a more ‘barbarous’ to a more ‘civilized’ condition (Stokes, 1959: 30). As Britain’s technological and military lead over the decaying Asian gunpowder empires further increased, the Victorians’ cultural self-confidence grew accordingly, until by the advent of the Second Opium War the essential elements of Britain’s ‘civilizing mission’ enjoyed broad appeal across Britain’s political and intellectual establishment.

That Britain was civilized, that Asians were not yet civilized, and that the former had a moral duty to nudge the latter along the path from barbarism to civilization was broadly accepted by the 1850s. Where the scope for disagreement lay was over the question of how legitimate — if at all — the use of force might be in assisting Asia’s progress towards civilization. Even prior to the onset of the Second Opium War, this question starkly divided liberal opinion. According to one line of interpretation (which I shall dub the bellicist position), Britain’s duty to promote the spread of Christianity, commerce and civilization throughout the non-European world constituted an indefeasible moral obligation. A corollary of this position was that ‘barbarians’ retained no legitimate rights under either natural or human law to resist the agents of their future redemption, and that any attempts to do so merely confirmed the barbarians’ degraded moral state. In light of barbarian intransigence and unwillingness to submit to civilization’s peaceful spread, proponents of the bellicist position freely advocated the use of force as a practical and ethically sound means of overcoming their resistance and thereby extending the frontiers of liberal civilization to the presumed benefit of civilizer and barbarian alike (Bowden, 2009: 130; Schrueder, 1976: 308; Todd, 2008: 394).

Opposing this bellicist reading of Britain’s civilizing imperative, a more pacifistic reading of Britain’s responsibilities conversely decried war as neither an ethical nor expedient means of advancing civilization. This aversion to violence rested on several justifications. While sharing with their more belligerent counterparts a belief in Britain’s civilizational superiority, more pacifistic adherents to Britain’s civilizing mission nevertheless maintained that barbarians retained basic sovereign rights under natural law that precluded Britain from unilaterally imposing its will on barbarians without due consideration for these rights. This principled opposition to violence was fortified by the more pragmatic conviction that Britain’s favoured means of civilization — the peaceful expansion of commercial exchange between civilizers and barbarians — could best be
promoted through conciliation and persuasion rather than compulsion (MacDonagh, 1962: 498). Finally, and most critically, Britain’s more peacefully inclined would-be civilizers demonstrated an acute sensitivity to a basic tension at the heart of the bellicist position. Specifically, to the extent that ‘civilization’ was meant to signify a society in which arbitrary violence had been minimized as a feature of public life, arguments for promoting civilization’s spread through the use of force appeared at best paradoxical, and at worst self-contradictory, if not morally perverse.5

In some respects at least, the tensions between bellicist and pacifist proponents of Britain’s civilizing mission were far from new. Martin Wight once astutely observed that the ‘barbarian’ problem — that is, the fundamental problem of determining how the ‘civilized’ should relate morally to ‘barbarians’ — has vexed thinkers and statesmen going at least as far back as the Las Casas–Sepulveda debates on Spain’s conquest of the Americas in the 16th century (Wight, 1991: 69). This caveat aside, the terms of the ‘barbarian’ problem shifted dramatically following the Enlightenment’s identification of civilization with the restraint of arbitrary violence in public life. On the one hand, the notion that civilized societies are those where despotic power is subordinated to civil law provided bellicist civilizers with a powerful justification for challenging Asian monarchs’ legitimacy and authority. Conversely, however, this self-same identification of civilization with the restraint of violence also enabled pacifist civilizers to oppose as ironic, self-contradictory and morally perverse efforts to promote civilization’s spread through resort to war. Exemplary force and the force of moral example thus stood as two distinct and opposed means of advancing Britain’s civilizing mission, while the resulting tension between bellicist and pacifist interpretations of the civilizing imperative provided a potentially explosive source of disagreement for Britons as the empire’s reach inexorably extended further into the non-European world. Ultimately, it was precisely this disagreement — over the legitimacy of violence as a means of extending civilization’s frontiers — that was brought into sharp relief following the initiation of hostilities between Britain and the Qing Dynasty in October 1856. Thus it is to a consideration of the ensuing debate on this issue that I now turn.

China and the ambiguities of civilization during the Second Opium War

The Arrow incident, the outbreak of war and the prelude to the ‘China’ debate, October 1856–March 1857

On 8 October 1856, Qing officials boarded the Arrow, a Chinese-owned ship registered in Hong Kong, in the course of anti-smuggling operations, and subsequently arrested 12 Chinese sailors on board on suspicion of piracy. British officials swiftly seized on the incident as an alleged violation of the treaty of Nanjing (which exempted British-registered ships from Qing interdiction) and furthermore demanded the immediate release of the prisoners, as well as an official apology from the Chinese government. When it was subsequently demonstrated that the ship’s registration had expired, rendering the Qing government’s actions lawful under the treaty, British representatives sustained the dispute by claiming that the Arrow had been flying a British ensign and that
Qing officials had insulted the flag in the course of seizing the ship. While denying British accusations that their agents had behaved inappropriately, Qing officials sought unsuccessfully to defuse the crisis by returning the captured sailors and offering a written undertaking that British ships would not be improperly boarded. Despite Chinese efforts at conciliation and the questionable legality of British grievances, Governor Bowring soon capitalized on what he perceived as merely the latest in a series of Chinese violations of the treaty of Nanjing. Hoping both to vindicate Britain’s existing claims under the treaty as well as to significantly extend the trading privileges afforded to Britain, Bowring authorized the commencement of punitive military operations against the Qing government shortly thereafter. On 23 October 1856, long-standing Anglo-Chinese tensions that had been simmering from the conclusion of the First Opium War thus erupted into violence, as British forces began a naval bombardment of Canton in the hopes of definitively overcoming Qing intransigence and thereby permanently opening China to Western trade. Given the vast distance separating Hong Kong from Britain and the slowness with which news could be conveyed in the pre-telegraph era, word of the revived hostilities took several months to reach London (Knuesel, 2007: 521). Once news of the conflict reached Britain, however, it soon sparked an intense and often vituperative debate concerning the moral legitimacy of Bowring’s actions. This debate culminated in a four-day debate in the House of Commons in February and March 1857, the broad contours of which will now be considered.

Debating civilization in the shadow of war: The House of Commons debate, February–March 1857

The legitimacy of John Bowring’s actions as the British Plenipotentiary in Hong Kong formed the ostensible subject of the ‘China debate’ that raged in the House of Commons from 26 February to 3 March 1857. Initiating the debate on Thursday, 26 February, Richard Cobden tabled the following motion before the Commons:

That this House has heard with concern of the conflicts which have occurred between the British and Chinese authorities in the Canton river; and, without expressing an opinion as to the extent to which the Government of China may have afforded this Country cause of complaint respecting the non-fulfilment of the Treaty of 1842, this House considers that the Papers which have been laid upon the table fail to establish satisfactory grounds for the violent measures resorted to at Canton in the late affair of the Arrow. (HC Deb., 1857: 144, col. 1421)

The debate was thus nominally confined to a consideration of the rightness of Bowring’s conduct in authorizing punitive violence against the Cantonese authorities, and the legitimacy of the Palmerston government’s retrospective endorsement of the same. The circumscribed character of Cobden’s motion notwithstanding, from the outset the debate touched upon more fundamental concerns pertaining to Britain’s relations with China. At the unavoidable risk of simplification, I maintain that the legal, prudential and existential aspects of the China debate formed the primary focal points of disagreement for the war’s advocates and critics. Consequently, it is around this
triumvirate of themes that my analysis of the respective arguments for and against war will be organized.

**Debating the legality of the war**

The perceived legitimacy of Bowring’s actions in response to the *Arrow* incident turned at one level on competing characterizations of the legal relationship established between Chinese and British authorities in Hong Kong following the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing. Throughout the debate, both sides contested the most basic facts pertaining to the *Arrow* incident. However, the underlying disagreement concerned the extent to which local Chinese authorities had permanently alienated their right to stop and search vessels suspected of piracy under the terms of the treaty. The government’s supporters insisted in the spirit of legal positivism that the treaty’s terms should be observed strictly, and that the Chinese had contracted away their sovereign prerogative to stop and search British-registered ships in the ports opened to British trade (HC Deb., 1857: 144, col. 1456). Following this line of reasoning, the Cantonese authorities’ interdiction of the *Arrow* constituted a clear violation of their treaty obligations, and the British were thus entitled to forcibly vindicate their legal claims in the face of Chinese malfeasance (HC Deb., 1857: 144, col. 1454). This argument was furthermore seen to hold irrespective of the fact that the *Arrow*’s crew were all Chinese subjects owing at least nominal allegiance to the Chinese Emperor, and regardless of the strength of the Chinese authorities’ suspicions that the vessel had long been involved in smuggling and piracy around Canton (HC Deb., 1857: 144, col. 1453).

That the Treaty of Nanjing accorded Britain asymmetric privileges in the treaty ports while simultaneously limiting the Qing Dynasty’s sovereign prerogatives was seen by the British government as a necessary and normal expedient for regulating relations between civilized and ‘semi-barbarous’ states. Arguing for the legitimacy of such arrangements, Palmerston averred: ‘It is well known that in all our treaties with nations less civilized than those in Europe, engagements of this sort are necessarily entered into. In Turkey, for instance, British subjects are not taken without the presence of the British Consul; in Persia the same; and in China the stipulation is more necessary’ (HC Deb., 1857: 144, col. 1822). Underlying this argument was the broader claim that given China’s ‘ferocious system of administration’, routine commercial intercourse would be impossible without the unilateral imposition of limits on Chinese sovereignty over British subjects and British property (HC Deb., 1857: 144, col. 1822). Differing degrees of civilization between polities conferred corresponding asymmetries in rights and obligations under positive international law, and the essential legitimacy of the resulting ‘unequal treaties’ afforded Britain an eminently just cause for seeking redress where Chinese authorities failed to honour their obligations. Seen through this lens, the interdiction of the *Arrow* and the temporary confinement of its crew jeopardized the entire edifice of unequal treaty arrangements assuring Britain access to Chinese markets, providing Britain with a legally and morally justifiable basis for vindicating its rights through the force of arms (HC Deb., 1857: 144, col. 1822).

For the most part, the war’s critics sought to evade the question of Chinese liability for the *Arrow* crisis, preferring instead to focus on what they characterized as Bowring’s
precipitate and disproportionate response to Chinese actions. Nevertheless, the question of legality could not be entirely sidestepped, and, on this point, the sentiments of some opposition speakers reflected a residual commitment to tenets of natural international law that contrasted significantly with the government’s endorsement of legal positivism. Thus, at least one opposition MP argued that a sovereign government’s right to board ships in search of contraband could not simply be dissolved through the imposition of a treaty, and that with respect to anti-piracy activities, the Qing authorities remained within their rights in intercepting and searching the Arrow (HC Deb., 1857: 144, col. 1446). At the core of this claim was the assumption that China and Britain remained part of a common ‘family of nations’ irrespective of putative differences in their civilizational status. The implication was that Britain’s pursuit of its commercial interests must consequently be pursued with a due consideration for the rights of the Chinese sovereign, which resided ultimately within natural international law and could be amended only partially (if at all) by agreements such as the Treaty of Nanjing (HC Deb., 1857: 144, col. 1446).

Within the context of the hostilities in Canton, a commitment to respecting the inalienable rights of the Chinese sovereign under natural international law necessarily called into question the legal foundations of British policy in China. This was especially so given the imposed character of the Treaty of Nanjing, and the plausible claim that the Qing authorities’ full compliance with the treaty’s terms could potentially worsen the problems of piracy and smuggling to the detriment of the Chinese sovereign. Invoking the authority of Vattel to fortify his position, Bulwer Lytton argued that universal considerations of natural justice absolved a sovereign from treaty obligations where treaty terms had been imposed under duress, and where fulfilment of such obligations would be profoundly injurious to the sovereign, before then arguing that precisely such a circumstance presently obtained to China (HC Deb., 1857: 144, col. 1443). This position was advanced only fitfully and inconsistently throughout the debate, and coincided with more nebulous but more wide-ranging appeals to natural justice that contested the substantive morality of British policy without directly questioning its legal foundations. Its marginality within the opposition’s case notwithstanding, the true significance of this legalistic dissent nevertheless lay in the fact that it exposed a deeper disagreement concerning China’s moral status within international society. For the government, China’s sovereign prerogatives were entirely governed by the tenets of positive international law, and China’s legal subjection within a framework of unequal treaties was a necessary expedient to expand trade between more and less ‘civilized’ political communities. Conversely, for at least some members of the opposition, China’s ‘semi-barbarous’ state did not entirely disqualify the Chinese authorities from enjoying the sovereign prerogatives accorded them by dint of their membership of a universal ‘family of nations’. Consequently, China’s alleged violation of the Treaty of Nanjing did not automatically accord Britain an unqualified right of vengeance, thereby calling into question the legality of Bowring’s sanguinary response to Chinese ‘provocations’. This tension — between emphasizing China’s character as a ‘semi-barbarous’ state and its residual status as part of a universal ‘family of nations’ — remained a persistent undercurrent throughout the debate, fundamentally informing the argument over the perceived prudence of British actions that we will now consider.
Debating the prudence of the war

Whereas a consideration of the legal status of Britain’s position within China formed a secondary theme of the debate, reflections on the alleged prudence of British policy in Canton conversely formed a primary subject of deliberation. This question in turn could not be treated separately from a moral assessment of the character of the Qing Dynasty and its officials, and a corresponding determination of their likely susceptibility to be brought to terms via either coercion or conciliation. Government speakers consistently asserted that the ‘barbarous’ Chinese were by nature duplicitous, and thus unlikely to uphold their treaty obligations in the absence of material threats of punishment (HC Deb., 1857: 144, col. 1431). While Bowring had acted without the government’s imprimatur in authorizing the shelling of Canton, Palmerston and his ministers thus retrospectively ratified his actions as representing the most prudent course of action in dealing with a ‘barbarian’ dynasty. This assessment was grounded in the belief that as ‘barbarians’, the Chinese were constitutionally susceptible to persuasion only through the use of force, and that continued conciliation would paradoxically inflame rather than reduce Sino-British tensions in the long term. Quoting from Hue’s Chinese Empire as his support, Henry Laboucherre (the secretary of colonies) thus argued: ‘The Chinese mandarins are pretty much like their own long bamboos. If one can but manage to get hold of them in the right way they are easily bent double and kept so; but if for a second you let go, they are up again in a moment as straight as ever’ (HC Deb., 1857: 144, cols 1513–1514). This refrain, coupled with broader admonitions that ‘unless we showed a jealous sensitiveness of anything that was intended as an insult it would be impossible to keep our footing there’, formed the backbone of the government’s case in support of Bowring (HC Deb., 1857: 144, cols 1513–1514). Supplementing it was the associated claim that the ignominy from being seen to capitulate to Chinese intransigence would redound to Britain’s universal disadvantage. Summing up the government’s case, Palmerston thus opined: ‘I say that foreign nations would feel that England has descended from the high station which she has hitherto occupied, at the beck of some of the basest, the meanest, and the most degraded beings in the civilized world’ were Cobden’s motion to be passed (HC Deb., 1857: 144, col. 1831).

Central to the government’s case for war was the understanding that ‘barbarians’ were morally different from and inferior to ‘civilized’ nations, and that in light of such differences it was both just and prudent to favour violence as a means of compelling barbarians’ submission to the requirements of international law. For the government, the existence of a discriminatory double standard within international society — whereby civilized states enjoyed a greater latitude to employ violence against barbarians than they did against one another — was a given. Internationality in this mode of thinking implied reciprocity, and full reciprocity was deemed to be possible only between countries possessing a shared subscription to common moral convictions (HC Deb., 1857: 144, cols 1455–1456). Contrarily, in cases where this common adherence to shared norms was absent, ‘civilized’ states were at liberty to employ violence both to chastise recalcitrant ‘barbarians’, and also to vindicate their own legal claims. A duality of moral conditions (civilized versus barbarian) implied a duality of legal standards, while in the face of ‘barbarians’ duplicity and propensity for violence, considerations of prudence addition-
ally counselled the need for a resolute recourse to violence if Britain’s prestige and interests were to be upheld.

Despite largely (though not universally) accepting the government’s characterization of the Chinese as at best a ‘semi-barbarous’ people, the war’s opponents nevertheless questioned the moral and, political viability of the double standard upon which British policy was based. Specifically, critics argued that Britain’s precipitate resort to force jeopardized respectively Britain’s future relationship with China, its reputation and power within Asia, and, most generally, the entire foundation of international order, whether predicated on the institutions of either law or the balance of power. Speaking to the first of these points, opponents of the war charged that Bowring’s resort to violence risked permanently estranging Britain from the Chinese people, thus undermining rather than advancing the cause for greater trade with the Celestial Empire. Simultaneously appealing to both the sympathy and reason of his audience, Phillimore asked within this context: ‘Do we suppose that Chinese mothers do not weep for their sons? — that the Chinese bride will look with kindness on him who has slain the husband of her youth? Or that the Chinese father, when he sees the ruins of his home, and the mutilated limbs of his children, will not cherish an inextinguishable hatred against the author of his wrongs? The feeling engendered by such wrong would rankle and fester long after the occasion had passed away’ (HC Deb., 1857: 144, cols 1773–1774).

By attempting to evoke sympathy for the beleagured Cantonese, Phillimore and his allies sought not only to challenge the government’s moral authority, but also to undermine the war’s prudential justification by demonstrating that violence was more likely to beget greater resentment and resistance than it was to yield Chinese respect for British interests. This argument was soon extended to imply that unjust violence against China would weaken Britain’s moral authority and power throughout its Asian empire (HC Deb., 1857: 144, col. 1807). Finally, the government’s critics implied that Britain’s unilateral resort to force in China would also set a dangerous precedent internationally, weakening Britain’s moral authority to resist future Russian incursions in the Ottoman Empire, while potentially also calling into being a countervailing coalition in the Far East to curb British ambitions there. Speaking in favour of Cobden’s motion, Disraeli warned: ‘if you are not cautious and careful in your conduct now in dealing with China, you will find that you are likely not to extend commerce, but to excite the jealousy of powerful states, and to involve yourselves in hostilities with nations not inferior to yourselves’ (HC Deb., 1857: 144, col. 1837). While cast in less moralistic terms than those of other government critics, Disraeli’s intervention was nevertheless consistent in its insistence that neither justice nor prudence supported Bowring’s activities in Canton. Far from terrifying the ‘barbarians’ into obedience, British violence would merely fortify Chinese resolve and thereby impede rather than assist the extension of commercial civilization into China. Equally, an endorsement of the law of force in China would have deleterious systemic effects, weakening Britain’s moral authority to check Russian expansion, potentially drawing it into conflict with both Russia and America in East Asia, and all the while corroding the basis for an international order based on law rather than force.
Civilization is as civilization does: War, civilization and the existential dimension of the China debate

Whether seen through the prisms of legality or prudence, the conflict in Canton thus polarized British opinion between pro- and anti-war positions. Most significantly for this inquiry, however, debates on the legality and prudence of British policy were suffused by broader considerations concerning the implications of the war for Britain’s self-understanding as a civilized nation. Prominent in the government’s efforts to reconcile British violence in Canton with Britain’s presumed status as a ‘civilized’ nation were arguments for war based on both punitive and utilitarian grounds. Considering first the punitive logic of the government’s case, a succession of speakers justified Bowring’s actions by dwelling on the presumed ‘barbarism’ of the Chinese authorities, and the concomitant righteousness of British policy in punishing this barbarism through an exemplary show of force. For the government, it had been the arbitrary and unjust character of China’s ‘ferocious system of administration’ that had necessitated Britain’s treaty port privileges in the first place (HC Deb., 1857: 144, col. 1822). Equally, culpability for the resumed hostilities lay with the Chinese for failing to uphold their treaty obligations. Finally, the government conspicuously emphasized the allegedly barbarous way in which the Chinese had resisted British pressure subsequent to the onset of hostilities to further justify British retribution. In particular, a failed Chinese effort to poison Bowring was invoked as an example of Chinese duplicity and moral degradation, as were citations of official Chinese documents (albeit of questionable authenticity) that appeared to be inciting the local people to launch pogroms against the resident British population (HC Deb., 1857: 144, col. 1823). For Bowring’s supporters, such departures from the practices of ‘civilized nations’ imbued British violence with an explicitly punitive dimension that stood independently of the legal and prudential arguments for war already canvassed. In this sense, then, the war’s justifications encompassed existential as well as instrumental rationales. Chinese and British modes of warfare disclosed for Britain’s pro-war party deeper moral differences (‘barbarian’ versus ‘civilized’) between the two polities, differences that could only be overcome once Chinese barbarism had been chastised and the path thus cleared for civilization’s benevolent extension beyond the walls of Canton.

In addition to justifying the war on punitive grounds, Palmerston’s government also invoked a utilitarian rationale for war, whereby the benefits of increased Sino-British commerce (for both China as well as Britain) would ultimately compensate for the transient traumas that British gunboats were then inflicting on the people of Canton. On this point, Palmerston’s dismissal of claims that China retained the sovereign right to repel British encroachment is instructive:

I contend, therefore, that those who say that the Chinese have any right to keep us out for fear of the inroads and encroachments which we might make upon them are persons who are misapplying the facts and circumstances of the case. It would be, on the contrary, to the great and manifest advantage of the people of China if a larger commercial intercourse were established between them and other countries. (HC Deb., 1857: 144, col. 1827)
Palmerston’s implication was that the Qing Dynasty’s exercise of its sovereign prerogatives remained subordinate to the higher purpose of extending liberal civilization’s frontiers. The utilitarian influence of Bentham — albeit shorn of Bentham’s pacifistic inclinations via the mediation of his more bellicose disciple, John Bowring — is clearly evident in this aspect of the government’s case. Arguably, it is even more starkly expressed in intimations elsewhere that the British may even possess a moral obligation to bring the Chinese ‘into communication with the more fortunate races which enjoy the blessings of civilization’, in order to emancipate them from both ‘the ignorance and thraldom of heathenism’ and ‘from the tyrannical and cruel government which, like its Commissioner at Canton, seems only to exist for the misery and degradation of the human race’ (HC Deb., 1857: 144, col. 1433).

The government thus conceived of Sino-British hostilities as being expressive of a deeper clash between civilization and barbarism, and this provided the moral foundation for British bellicosity. This conception of the conflict simultaneously licenced Canton’s bombardment as a just punishment for a barbarous government, while offering the consolation that China’s barbarous condition was a transient by-product of misrule that would be ameliorated once the Chinese were redeemed through expanded intercourse with more ‘civilized’ nations. In arguing against the war, the opposition likewise focused their attention on the conflict’s deeper moral meaning, specifically concentrating on what the hostilities disclosed about the purported status of Britain and China respectively as ‘civilized’ and ‘barbarous’ nations. However, whereas the government found no fault in British actions, the opposition conversely condemned Canton’s bombardment as conduct unbecoming of a civilized nation. Echoing Burke’s indictment of Hastings decades earlier, the war’s critics sought to destabilize the conventional polarity between civilized Britons and barbarian Chinese by evoking sympathy for the Chinese victims of British aggression. Speaking in this spirit, Gladstone thus opined: ‘There is not war with China. There is hostility. There is bloodshed. There is a trampling of the weak by the strong’ (HC Deb., 1857: 144, col. 1802). Gladstone then proceeded to partially excuse Chinese actions such as Bowring’s attempted poisoning on the grounds that such excesses were the last resort of a people with no other means of effective resistance (HC Deb., 1857: 144, col. 1803). While soon forced to resile from his exoneration of Chinese violence, Gladstone’s broader position — that it was the barbarity of British rather than Chinese violence that should remain the primary subject of moral scrutiny — persisted as a dominant theme in the opposition’s case.

Complementing their critique of the conflict’s conduct, anti-war speakers also contested the war’s morality on the basis of Britain’s allegedly impure motives and bad faith in its negotiations with the Chinese. The government maintained that Bowring’s actions had constituted a just defence of British rights, and that Qing obstructionism merely frustrated a commercial exchange that would enrich China as well as Britain. Opposition speakers conversely identified British greed for ‘filthy lucre’ as the root cause of the conflict, and dwelt on the morally dubious trade in opium that formed the backbone of British commerce in China (HC Deb., 1857: 144, col. 1502). Whereas advocates of war axiomatically saw expanded Sino-British commerce as a catalyst for China’s moral regeneration, the war’s critics rather fretted over the potential for Britain’s moral corruption should profit continue to be pursued through the violent means that Bowring and his
apologists endorsed (HC Deb., 1857: 144, col. 1502). Through this reading, trade could yield the growth of sympathy among nations — and thus the fundamental moral improvement in human affairs envisaged by liberals — only when it was promoted through peaceful means. China’s forced opening to trade conversely threatened to nurture the avarice of the strong and the resentment of the weak, fuelling estrangement rather than sympathy between nations and thus subverting the civilizing ideal of a humanity peacefully united through commercial exchange (HC Deb., 1857: 144, cols 1529–1530).

Finally, in challenging both the moral legitimacy of Britain’s motives for war and decrying the means by which it was being prosecuted, the anti-war party came ultimately to also unsettle the very foundations of the established dichotomy distinguishing British ‘civilization’ from Chinese ‘barbarism’. In a peroration denouncing the government’s policy, Cobden robustly disputed characterizations of the Chinese as barbarous, instead juxtaposing China’s historical accomplishments in learning, government and commerce with Britain’s singular (and morally unedifying) aptitude for war (HC Deb., 1857: 144, cols 1420–1421). Like many of his government opponents, Cobden subscribed to the stadial view of history derived from the Scottish Enlightenment, whereby societies progressed through successively higher stages of moral and material development proceeding from hunting to pastoral, agricultural, and eventually to commercial societies. However, in contrast to the government’s dismissal of Chinese achievements, Cobden asserted that the Chinese — as ‘the very soul of commerce in the East’ — shared an affinity with Britain as a commercial (and therefore civilized) society (HC Deb., 1857: 144, col. 1420). More subversively still, Cobden’s invocation of ancient China’s accomplishments emphasized that China had attained the status of a commercial society centuries prior to the Western world, again implying the need to treat sceptically popular assumptions contrasting British ‘civilization’ with Chinese ‘barbarism’.

Cobden’s attempt to rehabilitate China’s reputation in the eyes of Parliament naturally dovetailed with his desire to stigmatize as immoral Britain’s acts of aggression in Canton. Hence, the following juxtaposition of Chinese refinement with British bellicosity, and the corresponding call for conciliation rather than coercion as the best way forward for managing Britain’s relationship with China:

You find them not as barbarians at home, where they cultivate all the arts and sciences, and here they have carried all, except one, to a point of perfection but little below our own — but that one is war. You have there a people who have carried agriculture to a state of horticulture, and whose great cities rival in population those of the Western world. Now, there must be something in such a people deserving of respect. If in speaking of them we stigmatize them as barbarians, and threaten them with force because we say they are inaccessible to reason, it must be because we do not understand them; because their ways are not our ways, nor our ways theirs. Now, is not so venerable an empire as that deserving of some sympathy — at least of some justice — at the hands of conservative England? (HC Deb., 1857: 144, col. 1421)

What Cobden sought here and in other statements was to repudiate the government’s attempt to cast the Canton dispute as a clash between civilization and barbarism. Instead, Cobden and his allies construed the conflict as one that had exposed the arbitrariness and injustice of Britain’s representatives in their dealings with a ‘civilized’ commercial
society, albeit one that even Cobden was unwilling to regard as having equalled the accomplishments of industrial Britain. In at once invoking sympathy for the Chinese victims of British violence, denouncing the motives and means of British aggression, and inviting qualified scepticism towards conventional contrasts between British ‘civilization’ and Chinese ‘barbarism’, the anti-war coalition thus launched a full-frontal assault on the moral as well as the legal and prudential bases for prosecuting the conflict in Canton. They did so in part by tapping into Enlightenment understandings of civilization that foregrounded the restraint of arbitrary public violence as the defining marker of a civilized society, and then negatively contrasting Bowring’s behaviour in Canton against this normative standard. In doing so, the anti-war coalition thus proved highly effective in harnessing the politics of civilizational identity as a means of mobilizing the moral sentiment of their parliamentary colleagues against war. The proof of their success came when the debate concluded with a narrow majority passing the anti-war motion, forcing Palmerston to a general election (Gelber, 2004: 180). For the war’s opponents, victory would prove fleeting, with Palmerston’s government returned with an increased majority seven weeks later off the back of a blatantly xenophobic electoral campaign (Steele, 1991: 73). One month after Palmerston’s return to office, the outbreak of the Indian Mutiny would further entrench tropes of Oriental ‘barbarism’ in the public imagination, further solidifying the triumph of chauvinism over the more pacifistic brand of civilizational politics that had briefly surfaced in the ‘China debate’ (Metcalf, 1994, 43). The temporary nature of the anti-war coalition’s victory notwithstanding, the ‘China debate’ was nevertheless salutary in illuminating the full complexity of civilizational politics during the course of Britain’s imperial ascendancy. It is towards a fuller consideration of this complexity for our understanding of civilization’s significance in world politics in light of the ‘China debate’ that I now turn.

Conclusion

The ‘China debate’ of 1857 undeniably confirms the strong affinities linking civilizing ideals with imperial ambitions at the highpoint of the Victorian ascendancy. But my analysis of the debate also reveals the existence of a counter-hegemonic discourse that vigorously — and, for a brief moment, successfully — mobilized the ideal of civilization for the purpose of critiquing the project of empire. The significance of Cobden’s fleeting triumph should not be exaggerated, for victory in the Commons was swiftly followed by nemesis at the ballot box, and the ‘China debate’ ultimately served as a speed bump rather than a roadblock for Britain’s imperial ambitions in East Asia. This caveat aside, we would be equally mistaken to relegate the ‘China debate’ to obscurity, for the insights that it provides transcend the circumstances of the case itself, and speak directly to issues of broader interest for International Relations scholars. Specifically, my analysis of the civilizational politics of the ‘China debate’ contributes three key insights concerning the relationship between civilization and order in world politics.

First, my analysis demonstrates the error of attempts to construe civilizational rhetoric as being uniformly supportive of 19th-century Western imperialism. That the rhetoric of ‘civilizing missions’ was central to mid-19th-century liberal imperialism both in Britain and elsewhere is indisputable. But the ‘China debate’ illustrates that civilizational
rhetoric also pervaded the world-views of liberal anti-imperialists as well. Having emerged during the Enlightenment as a critique of the role of arbitrary violence in public life, the concept of civilization had its origins prior to the ‘great divergence’ that marked Western Europe’s ascendency over the Asian gunpowder empires after 1800. The pacifistic ideal of the civilized society, then, as one in which civil law prevailed over despotic fiat, was initially directed towards the moral improvement of Europe rather than Asia, with civilization only later assuming its more well-remembered role as a justification for European imperialism. In light of these origins, Cobden’s mobilization of civilizational rhetoric against British imperialism during the ‘China debate’ becomes more easily comprehensible. For John Bowring’s actions in Canton exemplified for many of Bowring’s opponents exactly the type of arbitrary violence deemed antithetical to the values of a civilized society (Todd, 2008: 395–396). A despotic pro-consul, whose powers to coerce appeared practically unchecked by the authority of a distant capital, seemed for the anti-war party to be radically inconsistent with Britain’s conception of itself as a bastion of civilization (Wong, 1998: 214). Given the pacifistic origins of civilization as a discursive construct and the evident disconnect between the shelling of Canton and British claims to embody civilized virtue, the ‘China debate’ afforded Cobden and his allies the perfect opportunity to turn the language of civilization against empire. That they were able to do so is a testament to civilization’s janus-faced character, a character that is too often overlooked by accounts that fixate solely on civilization’s darker side.

An acknowledgement of civilization’s janus-faced character is additionally valuable in refining our understanding of the dynamics of international society’s expansion, a process that was more internally contested and protracted than English School scholars have commonly assumed. The liberal triumvirate of ‘commerce, Christianity and civilization’ undeniably helped inspire Britain’s prodigious imperial expansion after 1800. But this expansion proceeded in an arrhythmic rather than uniform pattern, being driven by local crises and the opportunism of distant pro-consuls and adventurers rather than representing the gradual unfolding of any preordained grand strategy (Darwin, 1997: 641). Consequently, both the pace and means of the empire’s growth remained contentious subjects in the metropole, with episodes such as the ‘China debate’ providing opportunities for Britain’s political elites to air fundamental disagreements concerning the legal and moral bases of Britain’s relationships to non-Western polities. Chauvinistic assumptions of civilizational supremacy undoubtedly predominated in these debates. But by the time of the ‘China debate’, no uniform consensus existed to endorse the idea of separate logics of toleration and civilization governing Britain’s relationships with ‘civilized’ versus ‘barbarian’ states, even if moves towards such a consensus were by this time well progressed. In mid-Victorian Britain, anti-imperialists were still capable of invoking a waning natural law tradition to argue that China belonged to a universal ‘family of nations’, and that this status entitled it to a modicum of respect and toleration from Britain. By the 1880s, such notions had been largely overtaken, as pre-existing sentiments of civilizational chauvinism were reinforced by the further consolidation of positive international law and the rise of ideas of social Darwinism and ‘scientific’ racism (Adas, 1989: 336; Gong, 1984: 50). But the full crystallization of the toleration–civilization divide came late in the history of European imperialism, and the contests within Britain that preceded its arrival powerfully
conditioned the manner in which non-European (and especially north-east Asian) polities were drawn into international society.

Finally, while this article speaks predominantly to issues of historical concern, the ambiguities of civilizing discourses emphasized here continue to manifest themselves in contemporary global political struggles. Consequently, I contend that a more nuanced understanding of civilization’s multiple meanings, one that remains sensitive to its pacifistic as well as its bellicist aspects, is needed if we are to fully comprehend the contemporary significance of civilizational discourses in global politics. Essentialist invocations of civilization’s identity have featured conspicuously in both Muslim-majority countries and in the West since 9/11, while the ‘war on terror’ has rejuvenated Islamic and Western tropes pitting ‘civilization’ against the forces of ‘barbarism’ (Bush, 2006; Haqqani, 2003). In the 21st century, then, as in the 19th, civilizational chauvinism remains a potent force for legitimizing violence. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to reduce civilization exclusively to a mere byword for collective narcissism, and to comprehend its political significance purely as an apologia for violence and imperialism. For to do so would be to forget the pacifistic ideals that have infused the concept of civilization from the moment of its inception, and that have recurrently enabled actors to mobilize civilizational rhetoric in pursuit of peace. The invocation of civilization as both a licence for imperial violence and a critique of the same in the ongoing ‘war on terror’ alerts us to the fact that moral discourses in world politics are always likely to be informed by appeals to civilization. Rather than simply repudiating the language of civilization as an instrument for imperial violence, it therefore behoves us to consider the ways in which civilization’s pacifistic potential — as a resource for self-criticism and introspection and a bridle on imperial temptation — might be accented at the expense of the less reflexive but all too prominent expressions of chauvinistic narcissism that the language of civilization has so often been invoked to support.

Notes

1 Admittedly, Gong argues that the ‘standard of civilization’ was in the process of crystallization from the mid-19th century, but he locates its definitive emergence as an explicit legal principle around the turn of the century, dating its arrival ‘at the latest’ as a core legal principle underwriting the international order to 1905, following a rapid process of refinement and elaboration in the 1890s (Gong, 1984: 14).

2 Although it is worth noting that Scottish thinkers’ endorsement of commerce as a civilizing force was necessarily qualified by their acknowledgement that its positive effects on public morality could be diminished through the growth of luxury, hedonism and licentiousness (Spadafora, 1990: 275–279).

3 This sentiment was perhaps most starkly expressed in private correspondence between Palmerston and the Foreign Secretary, Lord Clarendon, during the Arrow crisis, where the latter expressed the conviction that the restraints of international law need not apply when dealing with ‘barbarous states’ (Steele, 1991: 58).

4 On this point, it is worth noting that Clarendon’s insouciant attitude towards the application of international law to ‘barbarous states’ was even privately contested by individuals within the government, who publicly supported Palmerston in his endorsement of Bowring, but privately deplored the notion that states such as China could be held subject to the obligations of international law without being entitled to its corresponding rights and liberties (Steele, 1991: 58).
It is worth noting here the fears many harboured that imperialism abroad would not only retard civilization’s global spread, but may even jeopardize liberty and thus portend a return to barbarism within Britain itself (Taylor, 1991: 9).

Both Adas and Gong nevertheless make the valuable point that ascendant notions of ‘scientific racism’, positing the existence of immutable and biologically based differences in aptitude between the European and non-European races, never achieved total dominance in Western conceptions of international order even at the high point of Western imperialism. Non-racist ‘improvers’, who believed in the possibility and inevitability of a universal convergence towards modern civilization (albeit one cast in Eurocentric terms), were never entirely marginalized, although their influence in the areas of international law and colonial administration declined markedly towards the end of the 19th century (Adas, 1989: 228; Gong, 1984: 50).

References


**Biographical note**

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