

## Toward an Inoperative Civilization

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**Abstract:** The unapologetic re-emergence in recent years of the term “civilization” in American foreign policy circles and best-selling books merits closer scrutiny. This essay examines two different views of civilization that have attracted recent critical attention. The first is a rather militant defense of civilization. In this view, civilized nations see themselves as exempt from the very laws and principles on which they are founded, thereby enabling them, in the name of the civilizing (or pro-democracy) mission, to exert force or violence on those others who threaten civilization (also known as “barbarians,” “savages,” “terrorists,” or “enemies of democracy”) and who also happen to be, conveniently, in a state of exception from civilization and can therefore be subjected to violence. The second model of civilization reflects a certain liberal optimism. Rather than precipitating “clashes,” civilization, in this view, does not confer exceptionality on a nation or allow for the exploitation of vulnerable others; instead, a civilization should concern itself with the expansion and fusion of horizons and the need to engage in a dialogue with other cultures and societies without exception or exclusion. In describing these two views, I note the violence inherent in the model of civilization as an exception and the difficulties that confront the dialogical model. Drawing on the work of Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben, as well as J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, I conclude with some reflections on the need to revise our current views of civilization by sketching an alternative possibility of an inoperative civilization.

**Keywords:** civilization, Giorgio Agamben, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jean-Luc Nancy, J. M. Coetzee

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. . . in order to then bring to light the Ungovernable, which is the beginning and, at the same time, the vanishing point of every politics.

Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?* (24)

On the evening of 25 September 2002, in a speech delivered at the National Republican Senatorial Committee dinner, George W. Bush declared, “We owe it to our children’s children to defend freedom, to free people from the clutches of barbarism. We owe it to civilization itself, to remain strong and focused and diligent” (“Remarks”). Six months later in March 2003, the United States invaded Iraq. In the last few months of his presidency in June 2008, on a farewell visit to the United Kingdom to thank the British for their military contribution to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Bush remarked that “the liberation of 50 million people from the clutches of barbaric regimes is noteworthy at a minimum” (qtd. in Temkow). As described by the forty-third president of the US and his advisors, the twenty-first century appears to be caught in a clash between civilization and barbarism. “Civilization” has thus emerged, or rather, re-emerged, as a keyword in the political lexicon of our era.

In the course description of her 2009 Columbia University graduate anthropology class titled “Recognition, Espionage, Camouflage,” Professor Elizabeth Povinelli writes:

The post 9/11 world seems to have reorganized the logic and relations of recognition and civilization, the sovereign and neoliberal state. Pundits praised the “prescience” of Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations*. Scholars rushed to embrace Agamben’s state of exception. Politicians in democracies sought to reclaim strong executive powers, the right to designate enemies, to kill, to suspend constitutional rights, and to rely on nondemocratic regimes to torture for truth. Civilization re-emerged in an unapologetic form—a mode of differentiating the world in social and historical terms.

Recently, historian Niall Ferguson published a best-selling book titled *Civilization: The West and the Rest*. Ferguson claims that his text is not an

unapologetic affirmation of Western civilization (though there is nothing in it that would suggest the contrary). He tells us that it simply attempts to provide an explanation for why Western civilization rose to its position of dominance in the modern world. The book argues that the West's ascent is due to its successful application of "six identifiably novel complexes of institutions and associated ideas and behaviours" (12). The complexes that distinguish the West from the "rest" are: Competition, Science, Property Rights, Medicine, the Consumer Society, and the Work Ethic. Although Ferguson argues that his book is not just another smug account of the triumph of the West, nothing in his work denies that triumphalism or questions the central role played by military, economic, and epistemic violence in the establishment of Western dominance. Ferguson remarks: "I want to show that it was not just Western superiority that led to the conquest and colonization of so much of the rest of the world; it was also the fortuitous weakness of the West's rivals" (13). It appears then that it was not just Western superiority, a fact that Ferguson seems to accept as an unproblematic *fait accompli*, that led to the conquest of so much of the world; it was also the civilizational deficiencies of the Rest that allowed it to be dominated by the West. Ferguson's explanation for Western civilization's rise to global dominance is elegantly symmetrical but reductive: the strength of the West is seen as directly proportional to the weakness of the non-West. In Ferguson's book the civilizational differentiation of the world in the social and historical terms that Povinelli critically notes is still very much in evidence. Western civilization's rise to prominence and the advantages it can provide even to rival non-Western powers are never in doubt in Ferguson's book. "Of course Western civilization is far from flawless," he admits, but then adds, "Yet this Western package still seems to offer human societies the best available set of economic, social and political institutions—the ones most likely to unleash the individual human creativity capable of solving the problems the twenty-first century world faces" (324).

The unapologetic re-emergence of the term "civilization" in recent American foreign policy circles and best-selling books merits, in my view, closer critical scrutiny. This essay examines two different views

of civilization that have attracted critical attention in our post-9/11 era. The first is a rather militant defense of civilization, though State Department and Pentagon officials would no doubt characterize it as a “realist” view of how civilized nations and governments operate. In this view, civilized nations see themselves as exempt from the very laws on which they are founded, thereby enabling them, in the name of the civilizing (or pro-democracy) mission, to exert force or violence on those others (also known as “barbarians,” “savages,” “terrorists,” or “enemies of democracy”) who threaten them and who also happen to be, conveniently, in a state of exception from civilization and can therefore be subjected to violence. The second model of civilization reflects a certain liberal optimism as opposed to the paranoid “realism” of Bush’s neo-conservative advisors. Rather than precipitating “clashes,” civilization, in this view, does not confer exceptionality on a nation or allow the exploitation of the exceptionality of vulnerable others; instead, a civilization should concern itself with the expansion and fusion of horizons and the need to engage in a dialogue with other cultures and societies without exception or exclusion. In describing these two views, I will critically note the violence inherent in the model of civilization as exception and the difficulties that confront the dialogical model. Drawing on the work of Giorgio Agamben and Jean-Luc Nancy, as well as J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, I will conclude with some reflections on the need to revise our current views of civilization by sketching an alternative possibility of an inoperative civilization.

### **Civilization as State of Exception**

Before discussing the model of civilization as a state of exception, I would like to examine a bit more carefully the concept of the sovereign exception in the work of Agamben, who has helped to elevate it to its current theoretical prominence. In an illuminating essay on the complex relation between law and sovereignty in Agamben’s work, William Rasch explains that like any totalizing proposition that cannot include itself within the set it proposes, so too law cannot be subject to law itself. Law thus appears to need an external higher authority or sovereign to legitimize it. Here, however, it has to resort to the dogma of faith (god

as the ultimate self-exempting sovereign) or face the problem of “a classically bad infinity of provisional sovereigns whose sovereignty is forever relative to the next higher, yet equally provisional, equally relative sovereign” (Rasch 94). Moreover, both theological closure and bad infinity deny law’s own sovereignty. These problems can be avoided, however, if law strives to be absolute by remaining “immanent to the set in which it rules and stand[s] in no hierarchical relation to the outside” (94). That is, law must base its authority on the sovereign exception, on its own self-exemption from law. In Agamben’s formulation, “the law is outside itself” (*Homo Sacer* 15). Rather than depending on an external source to legitimize its power, law authorizes itself and establishes its own power by exempting itself from itself, by making itself exempt from its own rules. Law, then, is based on the sovereign exception, a concept that Agamben adopts from the German jurist Carl Schmitt. Schmitt’s influential definition that “[s]overeign is he who decides on the exception” (qtd. in Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 15) becomes, in Agamben’s interpretation, the paradox of sovereignty in the Western political tradition which “consists in the fact [that] the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order” (*Homo Sacer* 15). The sovereign is outside law or the juridical order because as sovereign, as exception to the law, it decides not only what law is but also when to suspend the validity of the law. At the same time, the sovereign is inside the law or juridical order because it is only through the sovereign’s suspension of *its own law* that the sovereign exception is manifested. In short, the sovereign imposes the law precisely by exempting itself from that same law. The sovereign exception is thus a form of exclusion or exemption that works only through its inclusion in the set from which it is excluded or exempted. The exception, in other words, needs to be a part of the rule just as the rule requires the exception to authorize itself. Sovereignty is thus paradoxically a state of exception that emerges from within a political and juridical order that has been suspended or withdrawn so that the sovereign exception can manifest its lawful authority.

One more point needs to be addressed before we can relate this complex discussion of the sovereign exception to the topic of civilization. Recall that for Agamben the sovereign exception enables the sovereign

to be both within and without the space of the law that the sovereign decision demarcates and authorizes. The ambiguous position occupied by the sovereign, its inclusive exclusion from the space of the politico-judicial order, is matched, according to Agamben, by a structural analog: the ambiguous position occupied by “bare life, that is, the life of *homo sacer* (sacred man)” (*Homo Sacer* 8). Referring to an enigmatic figure from archaic Roman law, Agamben describes *homo sacer* (*sacer*, in this instance, meaning “to set apart” rather than the modern reverential meaning of “sacred”) as occupying an ambiguous position, a zone of indistinction much like the sovereign’s in being both within and without, both included and excluded from the realm of the politico-judicial order. As bare life—bare because it is life outside the protection of the law of the *polis*—*homo sacer* can be killed without that act being punishable as homicide. Even though *homo sacer* can be killed with impunity because it is outside the law, it is still included in the law since it is the law itself that decides to sanction *homo sacer*’s unsacrificeability by deeming it a life separated from humanity and given over to an extra-legal or extra-human sphere, a life already ritually set apart or excluded that therefore cannot be further sacrificed. *Homo sacer* is thus ambiguously positioned according to ancient Roman law: being outside the law it can be killed, but still included in the law it cannot be sacrificed. Hence, like the sovereign in the Western political tradition, the *homo sacer* of the Roman codex is in a relation of exception to the politico-judicial sphere; like the sovereign, it is both within and without the law. Pursuing the analogy further, Agamben argues that the originary “sovereign decision, which suspends law in the state of exception” (*Homo Sacer* 83), is also the decision that decisively implicates *homo sacer*’s bare life in a state of exception. As Agamben puts it, “The sovereign sphere is the sphere in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice, and sacred life [or *homo sacer*’s bare life]—that is, life that may be killed but not sacrificed—is the life that has been captured in this sphere” (*Homo Sacer* 83). The constitution of sovereignty is thus also the production of *homo sacer*’s bare life. The structural similarity or symmetry that occurs between the sovereign and *homo sacer* does not go unnoticed by Agamben. “At the two extreme limits of the order,”

he explains, “the sovereign and *homo sacer* present two symmetrical figures that have the same structure and are correlative: the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially *homines sacri*, and *homo sacer* is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns” (*Homo Sacer* 84).

Returning to the topic of civilization, I wish to argue that one influential view of civilization resembles, *mutatis mutandis*, the logic of the sovereign exception and its co-related production of bare life as described by Agamben. In such a view, civilization deploys a double exclusion or exception: civilization exists in a state of exception exempt from its own laws and principles while the other of civilization—the bare life outside civilization that belongs to the barbarian or the savage—is deemed to be equally in a state of exception from civilization’s laws. We have here a truly lethal chiasmic structure in which the civilized exception as an exemption from civilization’s laws is matched by the barbaric exception, which is also exempt from civilization’s laws and can thus be subjected to civilization’s violence.

In asserting a state of exception from its own laws and principles, civilization accomplishes two goals. First, it is able to override any challenge to its own foundational legitimacy (such as the question “Who civilizes the civilizer?”). Just as sovereignty is based on its exemption from its own politico-judicial order, so too civilization invokes its exception from its own civilizational order to legitimize and authorize itself. If sovereignty is about achieving sovereignty through its exemption from its own laws and from any external authority, civilization is about defining itself as civilization through its exemption from its own principles and any external authority that will define it. As Anthony Pagden remarks, definitions of civilization often involve “the implicit claim that only the civilized can know what it is to be civilized” (33). The reply to the question of civilization’s legitimacy (or “Who civilizes the civilizer?”) would be that in already being civilized and thereby exercising its civilized sovereignty, civilization (or the civilizer) is exempt from the question. The civilized exception, like the sovereign exception, relies on a kind of tautology: Just as the sovereign is sovereign because of its sovereign exception, so too civilization is civilization because of its civilized exception.

Second, as an exception to the laws that regulate and maintain good order and peace within its borders, civilization is able to act outside those laws and exert uncivil force and violence against the “uncivilized” outside its borders, namely barbarians or savages. For example, as Napoleon set off on a military invasion of Egypt in 1798, he exhorted his troops: “Soldiers, you are undertaking a conquest with incalculable consequences for civilization” (qtd. in Levin 11). Insecurity, disorder, violence, and the destruction of life and property which cannot be tolerated in civilized society can be unleashed by the French army on Egyptians because French civilization exempts itself from its own civilized laws and has the sovereign power to suspend its own laws especially when it acts outside its borders. As historians note, the intolerance and savagery shown in colonial wars of conquest seem to be at odds with assertions of civilizational mores, thus making the first casualty of such wars the much vaunted civilized principles of the colonizers (Bowden 132). But there is nothing odd or contradictory about civilizational violence if we follow the logic of the civilized exception.

Just as sovereignty, according to Agamben, produces bare life or *homo sacer*, so too does civilization produce the barbarian. Bruce Mazlish, at the end of his magisterial survey of the uses of the term “civilization,” notes that the “invocation of civilization as an ideological construct, characterizing one’s own society against the barbarians without, will persist” (160). Civilization as a term or concept thus demands another form of exception, namely, the barbarian. Civilization as a state of exception to its own civilized order symmetrically generates its twin figure, the barbarian, who also inhabits a state of exception to civilization. From civilization’s perspective, however, the barbarian’s state of exception does not lead to sovereign agency but to something resembling Agamben’s “bare life”—a life that can be killed, violated, or forcefully changed without legal consequences. In 1539, Spanish theologian Franciscus de Vitoria, considered one of the founding fathers of modern international law, noted that the Indians of the New World “seem little different from brute animals and are utterly incapable of governing, and it is unquestionably better for them to be ruled by others than to rule themselves”



(qtd. in Bowden 114). Vitoria argued that “our sovereigns” should treat the natives as if they are “infants” or “people of defective intelligence” for “they are no whit or little better than such so far as self-government is concerned, or even that of wild beasts, for their food is not more pleasant and hardly better than that of beasts” (qtd. in Bowden 116). Vitoria’s justification for Spanish imperial rule in the Americas relied on a state of exception model in which the Indians were judged from within civilization as a type of “bare life” lying outside its purview, as exceptions to its jurisdiction and, therefore, as people who could be treated extra-legally. Commenting on Vitoria’s jurisprudence, Brett Bowden notes that one of its consequences “is the construction of the ‘uncivilized’ ‘other,’ who is subject to the law’s sanction but deprived of any real measure of protection afforded by it. Thus it creates an object against which sovereignty may express its fullest powers by engaging in an unmediated and unqualified violence which is justified as leading to conversion, salvation, civilization” (127).

A similar state of exception reserved for the barbarian is present even in the writings of a liberal philosopher like John Stuart Mill. In 1859 (perhaps in response to the Indian Mutiny of 1857), Mill wrote that “[n]ations which are still barbarian have not got beyond the period during which it is likely to be for their benefit that they should be conquered and held in subjection by foreigners” (qtd. in Levin 48). The author of *On Liberty* warned, rather ominously, that to “characterize any conduct whatever towards a barbarous people as a violation of the laws of nations, only shows that he who so speaks has never considered the subject” (qtd. in Levin 48). What exactly does Mill mean by “any conduct whatever towards a barbarous people”? One presumes that civilization’s conduct towards its barbarous exception may range from the civilizing mission to extreme violence. Mill generally favoured the former. He believed that through the imposition of law and order, good governance, and education, the civilizing mission will bring barbarous or savage peoples into civilization’s fold. Even as the civilizing mission attempts to do so, however, it still has to demarcate them as being outside that fold—in a state of exception—in order to justify its mission. The civilizing mission seeks to include the barbarians only by excluding them first.

Civilization and the civilizing mission thus gain their identity and *raison d'être* through the constitutive exception called “the barbarian.” As the Greek poet Constantin Cavafy notes in his well-known poem “Waiting for the Barbarians,” barbarians have always been “a kind of solution” for the civilized (12).

However, as structural doubles who each inhabit a state of exception, the civilized man and the barbarian may suffer from a certain indistinction in identity. This is a point well illustrated in an exchange between the Magistrate and Colonel Joll in Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which is named after Cavafy’s poem. The Magistrate angrily states that there were no border troubles with the so-called barbarians before the Colonel’s arrival on a punitive mission. The Colonel replies that the Magistrate is ignorant of the facts and that the small groups of peaceful nomads to whom he refers are in fact a well-organized enemy. In a forceful response, the Magistrate exclaims: “Those pitiable prisoners you brought in—are *they* the enemy I must fear? Is that what you say? *You* are the enemy, Colonel! . . . *You* are the enemy, *you* have made the war, and *you* have given them all the martyrs they need—starting not now but a year ago when you committed your first filthy barbarities here!” (Coetzee 112; emphasis in original). The exchange bears an uncanny resemblance to our post-9/11 world, with Colonel Joll’s prison cells standing in for Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, and illustrates the intimate entanglement of civilization and barbarism in any model of civilization that relies on an “enemy” other, the barbaric exception, to secure its own exceptional identity. As Walter Benjamin succinctly states: “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (256). Or as Evelyn Baring (Lord Cromer) expressed even more succinctly: “Civilization must unfortunately have its victims” (44).

### **Civilization as Dialogical Openness**

Civilization as a state of exception requires, as we have seen, its structural double, the barbarian. Civilization, in this view, constructs an alterity that it both needs and seeks to violate, suppress, or control. But we can turn to another model of civilization that is based on a

changing, mobile horizon of anticipation rather than a demarcated state of exception. This is a model of civilization based on *plurality* rather than locked into a *binary opposition*. Instead of the barbarian as civilization's other, civilization encounters other civilizations. Instead of the closure of exception, there is an opening out into dialogue and exchange.

Fred Dallmayr helpfully suggests that the dialogical model of a conversation between civilizations can find its inspiration in the hermeneutical perspective promoted by German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (*Dialogue* 27). Gadamer's notion of *Horizontverschmelzung*, or the "fusion of horizons," allows us to see a civilization or culture not as immured within its own state of exception, but as a "horizon." While the concept of a horizon clearly refers to a particular standpoint and confirms that one is always situated within that finite, limited point of view, Gadamer argues that a horizon is also, at the same time, always essentially open. He writes that "[t]he closed horizon that is supposed to enclose a culture is an abstraction. The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never utterly bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon. The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us. Horizons change for a person who is moving" (271). To conceive of civilization as a horizon is, therefore, to see it as both situated within its own historical and cultural standpoint *and* always in motion, changing, and opening out to other civilizational or cultural horizons. What happens, then, when a civilization tries to understand the horizon of another civilization? We cannot step out of our own civilizational horizon into that of another because we are always situated ontologically in ours. Yet because a horizon is always open, we can, Gadamer suggests, strive to effect a "fusion of horizons" which will result in an enlargement and enrichment of our own. Our civilizational horizon, or our point of view, will no doubt be challenged and tested in the fusion of horizons, but it is only through this challenge by another civilization that we will arrive at a truer, less ethnocentric understanding of our own. Drawing our attention to Gadamer's work, Zhang Longxi describes, for example, how the concept of the fusion of horizons may help us replace Orientalist di-

chotomies with a better model of civilizational understanding between China and the West:

That moment of fusion would eliminate the isolated horizon of either the self or the Other, the East or the West, and bring their positive dynamic relationship into prominence. In the fusion of horizons, we are able to transcend the boundaries of language and culture so that there is no longer the isolation of East or West, no longer the exotic, mystifying, inexplicable Other, but something to be learned and assimilated until it becomes part of our knowledge and experience of the world. (53–54)

A fusion of horizons, therefore, requires the ability to go beyond one's own civilizational horizon and, in the process, risk one's prevailing beliefs by engaging in an open dialogue with the other. Richard Bernstein notes that “[f]or Gadamer, it is not a dead metaphor to liken the fusion of horizons . . . to an ongoing and open dialogue or conversation” (144). The question that arises, however, is how ongoing and open the dialogue can really be given the hermeneutical need for the conversation between dialogical partners to be guided by a common topic and a desire to achieve mutual understanding. This and other related questions will be posed to Gadamer's model of dialogue shortly.

For Gadamer, dialogue begins with an open question that puts one's established beliefs and opinions at risk: “To question means to bring into the open. The openness of what is in question consists in the unsettled state of the answer” (363). He notes that “[i]n order to be able to question one must will to *know*, and that means, however, to know that you do not know” (qtd. in Palmer 198; emphasis in original). Gadamer's theory of dialogue and conversation “stresses not only the common bond and the genuine novelty that a turn in conversation may take but the mutuality, the respect required, the genuine seeking to listen to and understand what the other is saying, the openness to risk and test our own opinions through such an encounter” (Bernstein 162). All of the dialogical traits that facilitate a fusion of horizons are clearly important elements present in the model of civilization as a dialogical opening to other civilizations.

In the spirit of Gadamer's insistence that dialogue should start with questioning, however, I want to pose four questions to the model of civilization as a dialogical opening. My first question concerns the status of the normative values underlying the concept of dialogue or fusion of horizons. Why should a civilization seek dialogue or a fusion of horizons with another civilization? Gadamer might reply that dialogue with the other allows us to learn something about the other but also forces us to question our own assumptions, thereby enabling us to learn more about ourselves and our limitations. But what exactly is good about learning something new about others or ourselves? Moreover, why should we assume that the other is worthy of dialogue? Gadamer is not very clear on the nature of the normative values such questions raise, but Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, in invoking Gadamer's fusion of horizons, offers an answer. The presumption of equal worth—that is, that other civilizations or cultures are worthy of entering into dialogue with us—can be grounded either in the divinely-ordained providential belief that a greater harmony will emerge out of variety or, on a human level, in the argument that “it is reasonable to suppose that cultures [or civilizations] that have provided the horizon of meaning for large numbers of human beings, of diverse characters and temperaments, over a long period of time . . . are almost certain to have something that deserves our admiration and respect, even if it is accompanied by much that we have to abhor and reject” (72–73). Taylor adds that “[w]e only need a sense of our own limited part in the whole human story to accept the presumption [of dialogue]. . . . [W]hat the presumption requires of us . . . is an admission that we are very far away from that ultimate horizon from which the relative worth of different cultures might be evident” (73). In short, Taylor's answer is based on his conviction that dialogue or the fusion of horizons leads to “the whole human story” or “the ultimate horizon” even if we are still far from achieving this wholeness or totality. Here we encounter the problem that the end or *telos* toward which dialogue is heading turns dialogue's openness to the other into a pseudo-openness, since the self and the other are ultimately seen to be part of the same totality, and transforms dialogue's risking of the self into a pseudo-risk since ultimately nothing is lost when all is gathered

into “the whole human story.” The dialogue between civilizations is, in this reading, stripped of all surprise, drama, and risk as it is subsumed into a kind of Hegelian teleology in which all horizons and differences inevitably merge into an Absolute Subject.

My second question for Gadamer’s notion of dialogue concerns the orientation or direction of the question that Gadamer says initiates dialogue. Dallmayr notes that, for Gadamer, questioning “is not whimsical or pointless; rather, it is guided by concern for a topic or issue [*die Sache*]<sup>1</sup>—a concern shared by all dialogue partners in an open-ended search for truth” (*Dialogue* 27). In Gadamer’s words, “[t]o conduct a dialogue requires first of all that the partners do not talk at cross-purposes. . . . [It] means to allow oneself to be guided by the subject matter to which the partners in the dialogue are also oriented” (qtd. in Dallmayr, *Dialogue* 27). Questioning is, therefore, not absolutely open for Gadamer since a certain orientation is pre-built into it; open dialogue is thus open only within the parameters set by the dialogue’s topic [*die Sache*]. Richard Palmer illustrates the open but guided movement of Gadamerian dialogue when he writes that “[t]he sense of the question already contains the direction in which the answer to *that* question must come, if it is to be meaningful and appropriate. With the placing of the question, what is questioned is put in a certain light. . . . Real questioning, then, presupposes openness . . . and at the same time it necessarily specifies boundaries” (199; emphasis in original). A series of questions can be posed to this notion of a dialogue that is at once open and oriented by a specified topic: How do the partners in a dialogue decide what constitutes the topic of the dialogue? Is another dialogue on what constitutes the topic needed before dialogue can get underway? Does this raise the prospect of a dialogical infinite regress? If the topic guides the dialogue, then is it not the case that dialogue’s openness is compromised since its directionality and destination are already determined from the start? Once a question is framed around a specified topic, would the answer to the question not also be shaped accordingly? What happens to the sense of surprise or novelty that a genuinely open question can elicit when the question’s openness is bounded by a topic? If these are troubling questions for the dialogue between a single self and

its other, we can imagine how much more troubling these questions will be for the dialogue between civilizations and to the many complex and diverse topics that will no doubt govern that dialogue.

My third question concerns the issue of power and its distribution in Gadamerian dialogue. We can best approach this issue by returning to one of the questions I asked above: How do the partners in a dialogue decide what constitutes the topic of the dialogue? One answer may be that they both equally decide and agree on the topic. But it is also possible to entertain the view that one of the partners will have more say over what the topic should be. This is not such an unlikely outcome in our historical world in which some social classes, nations, and civilizations have more power than others. Gadamer has always insisted on the historicity of the human condition. Acknowledging this, it is hard to imagine that we might ever find an untouched, pristinely level field in which various parties can gather and engage in a dialogue of equals. Gadamer can object that his dialogical model is more a regulative ideal than an empirical or historical reality. Nevertheless, as Bernstein points out, “if we are really to appropriate this central idea to our historical situation, it will point us toward important practical and political tasks. It would be a gross distortion to imagine that we might conceive of the entire political realm organized on the principle of dialogue or conversation, considering the fragile conditions that are required for genuine dialogue and conversation” (162). Bernstein argues that Gadamer’s dialogical ideal must be joined to a political awareness of the role played by power in any dialogue. We need to be aware, for example, of how power can distort what may appear to be dialogue. A seemingly benign and well-intentioned attempt to initiate a dialogue with an other may conceal the fact that the dialogue occurs in an asymmetrical field of power. Similarly, the refusal of the other to engage in dialogue cannot always be dismissed as a case of wrong-headed stubbornness or perverse solipsism; it may well be a form of resistance to an encounter that the other knows is not truly dialogical because of its unequal nature.

In Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, for example, the Magistrate, out of a mixed sense of guilt, compassion, and ethnographic and erotic curiosity, takes into his household and attempts to understand a barbar-

ian girl who has been tortured and blinded by the authorities. He seeks to engage in conversation with her, to fuse his horizon with hers, but discovers that “in the makeshift language we share there are no nuances” (Coetzee 39). He confesses that “with this [barbarian] woman it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry” (42). Reaching out to her, he does not discover an “answering life”: “It is like caressing an urn or ball, something which is all surface” (48). In place of dialogue, he only encounters a blank response from the barbarian girl, which he likens to “the image of a face masked by two black glassy insect eyes from which there comes no reciprocal gaze but only my doubled image cast back at me” (43). We can understand her “blankness,” however, as an indication of her awareness that she is not the Magistrate’s equal in the field of power that constitutes his “civilization,” as well as a sign of her resistance to his attempts to elicit an answer from her. His desire to initiate a conversation can be seen as an attempt to force her to yield her identity and her secret to him. The language he uses to describe his hermeneutic endeavours is, for example, full of figures of violence. He says that he seeks “to swoop and circle around the irreducible figure of the girl, casting one net of meaning after another over her” (79). He recognizes that the distance between her torturers and himself may be “negligible” (27) and likens his efforts to understand her to her torturers’ attempt to uncover her secret: “Is this how her torturers felt hunting their secret, whatever they thought it was?” (42). But try as her torturers and the Magistrate may, the blinded and maimed girl refuses to yield meaning and resists any hermeneutic penetration or invitation for a fusion of horizons.

In a poem titled “Conversation with a Stone,” Wislawa Szymborska, the Polish poet who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996, expresses a similar suspicion of the violence that may be present in conversation. The “I” of the poem rather insistently demands to enter the interior of its conversational partner, the stone:

“It’s only me, let me come in.  
I want to enter your insides,  
have a look round,  
breathe my fill of you.” (62)



The stone, however, resists the “I”’s demand while alluding to the violence the “I” might employ:

“I’m shut tight.  
Even if you break me to pieces,  
we’ll all still be closed.  
You can grind us to sand,  
we still won’t let you in.” (62)

Like Coetzee’s barbarian girl, the stone presents only a blank surface, resisting and refusing the “I”’s desire for a hermeneutic fusion of horizons: “You may get to know me, but you’ll never know me through. / My whole surface is turned toward you, / all my insides turned away” (Szyborska 63). Szyborska’s poetic parable, like Coetzee’s novel, illustrates a central difficulty facing any attempt at establishing an open and non-coercive dialogue between civilizations. Given our historical world and its very real inequalities and asymmetries of power, the call for dialogue may often be more rhetorical than realizable.

This brings us to the fourth question. Does dialogue’s goal of achieving understanding result in too quick and too confident a narrowing of the distance between the dialogical partners? Behind every invitation to dialogue we find a hermeneutic intentionality, an orientation or directive to reach understanding. The “I” in Szyborska’s poem, like the Magistrate in Coetzee’s novel, seeks, through dialogue, an understanding of the alien other. But the intentionality present in understanding, as Bernhard Waldenfels warns, “does not leave sufficient room for the alien as the alien” (*Question 22*). Waldenfels explains:

Intentionality means that *something* is intended or understood *as something*, that it is taken in a certain sense. Anything that might be alien would be previously conceived in such a way that it is reduced to some *part of a sense-whole*. . . . Understanding turns out to be a special kind of appropriation, trying to overcome alienness by understanding, as Hans-Georg Gadamer explicitly claims in his great work *Truth and Method*. Understanding appears as a peculiarly sublime way of appro-

priation; it is supposed to be able to make everything appear as itself by overcoming its alienness or otherness, by making it familiar. (*Question 22*; emphasis in original)

If the alien other fails to be “incorporated into the reign of sense,” it is turned “into the negativity of something that is without sense” (*Question 23*). Waldenfels, however, seeks a responsiveness that would be even more open than Gadamer’s dialogical hermeneutics, a responsiveness “not confined to the realm of sense . . . [and that] shows features of an originary heterology” (*Phenomenology 36*). Waldenfels calls for an interruption that maintains the alien other’s distance, thereby enabling the constant renewal of responsivity to its otherness rather than a rejection of the dialogical:

The transgression of the sphere of an intentional or rule-governed sense takes place in responding to *an alien demand that does not have sense and does not follow rule*, but which interrupts the familiar formations of sense and rule, thus provoking the creation of new ones. . . . The alien as alien requires a responsive form of phenomenology that begins with that which challenges us, calls upon us, or puts our own possibilities in question in an alienating, shocking, or amazing fashion before we enter into our own wanting-to-know and wanting-to-understand situation. The pathos of the alien surpasses its questionability. (*Phenomenology 36*; emphasis in original)

While a Gadamerian hermeneutics “is predicated on a dialogical interplay where the other’s revelatory power is released only through a questioning that necessarily proceeds from the vantage of situated modes of self-understanding (what Gadamer calls ‘prejudgments’)” (Dallmayr, *Alternative Visions 7*), Waldenfels’ phenomenology of the alien begins with the self’s affective exposure to the other’s pathos and the other’s interruption of the self’s certitudes before it engages in the process of dialogical understanding. Gadamer’s view of dialogical understanding need not be rejected, but it can be made more responsive to that which resists hermeneutic enclosure and that which remains alien or other

without appropriating it or overcoming its otherness and turning it into something that makes sense.

We may wish, therefore, to supplement a Gadamerian dialogical model of civilization with another that is less insistent on achieving consensual understanding or fusion of horizons and more alert to being exposed to otherness without having to understand it fully. In our dealings with an alien civilization we can choose a form of relationality that is not predisposed to closing the hermeneutic circle too quickly, especially since any understanding may leave out that which is still unheard. Such a form of relationality that nonetheless remains open to the alienness of the other is what Szymborska advocates in her poem “The Silence of Plants”: “We try to understand things, each in our own way, / and what we don’t know brings us closer too” (269).

### **Toward an Inoperative Civilization**

To avoid the difficulties that confront a dialogical model of civilization, such as the threat posed by the imbalance of power and the possibility of hermeneutic appropriation, we may wish to move in the direction proposed by Nancy. Nancy wants us to think of the plurality of singularities that do not fuse or result in a communion, yet are not atomistic, as a form of relationality or a “being-with.” Emphasizing the importance of the preposition “with,” Nancy describes it as “dry and neutral: neither communion nor atomization, simply the sharing of a place, at the most a contact: a being-together without assemblage” (qtd. in Watkin 57). A “being-together” without communion or atomization is what Nancy also calls the “inoperative” or unworkable community (*la communauté désœuvrée*). Communities that work to achieve fusion or communion are basically producing “their own essence as their work, and furthermore producing precisely this essence as *community*” (Nancy 2; emphasis in original). As such, the community becomes tightly fused and confining in its drive toward self-completion or “immanentism” (3). As Nancy explains, a community that works to produce its own communitarian essence employs “economic ties, technological operations, and political fusion (into a *body* or under a *leader*) [to] represent or rather present, expose, and realize this essence necessarily in them-

selves. Essence is set to work in them; through them, it becomes its own work. This is what we have called ‘totalitarianism,’ but it might be better named ‘immanentism’” (3; emphasis in original). To escape from a totalizing fusion or “immanentism” requires us to think of being as ecstatic, exceeding the limit of any compact immanence, and rupturing or interrupting the production of communitarian essence. Nancy thus proposes a rethinking of community that interrupts and makes inoperative the work of any community that seeks its own immanent essence, its absolute self-completion or self-fulfillment through the fusion of all its elements or parts. He calls for an inoperative or unworkable community that disrupts all totalizing, communitarian forms of closure. The “inoperative community” does not entail passivity or inaction; it is in fact an active political and ethical challenge to any totalizing or immanentist notion of community:

The passion of and for “community” propagates itself, unworked, appealing, demanding to pass beyond every limit and every fulfillment. . . . It is thus not an absence, but a movement, it is unworking in its singular “activity,” it is the propagation, even the contagion . . . that propagates itself or communicates its contagion *by its very interruption*. (60; emphasis in original)

In its anti-totalizing disruption of limits, the inoperative community stands away from itself in ecstatic exposure to other singularities. It thus appears as a place of sharing and co-appearance or compearance (*com-parution*) with other singularities; it is “constitutive of being-in-common—precisely inasmuch as being-in-common is not a common being” as in the totally fused community (29).

Nancy’s inoperative community allows us to rethink civilization not as a hermeneutically-oriented dialogue calling for a fusion of civilizational horizons but as a shared space of exposure between singular civilizations that does not seek the completion of understanding and is willing to accept incomplete understanding as that which enables us to retain our singular plurality. To rethink civilization as inoperative allows us to remain alert to the other’s “insistent and possibly *unheard* demand”

(22; emphasis in original) rather than close off our exposure to the other through hermeneutic fulfillment.

Nancy's "inoperative" approach does not so much repudiate the dialogical model of civilization as disrupt or interrupt its work of hermeneutic fusion so as to open it more fully to the still "*unheard demand*" of the other. It is little wonder, then, that even an avowed Gadamerian like Dallmayr welcomes Nancy's rethinking of community. In a generous reading of Nancy's text, Dallmayr opposes Nancy's inoperative community with its shared being-in-common to Samuel Huntington's somewhat totalizing view of "the clash of civilizations." Dallmayr asks: "What are the implications—above all, the political and moral implications—of an 'inoperative community' in the midst of our 'clashing civilizations'?" (*Alternative Visions* 292). Nancy's concept, Dallmayr remarks, "carries a profound normative significance" in its questioning of any totalizing, self-enclosed structure or community (*Alternative Visions* 292). He thus chooses to side "with the vision of an 'inoperative' (that is nonmanagerial and nonhomogeneous) community, as this vision is articulated by Jean-Luc Nancy. The concept intimates an open-ended, cross-cultural relationship at odds with standardized uniformity and local fragmentation" (*Alternative Visions* 15).

A rethinking of civilization as inoperative, unfinished, open-ended, and exposed to otherness is what finally occurs in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Instead of a fusion of horizons or a full understanding, the novel demonstrates a shared exposure of one to the other that does not demand hermeneutic certainty. An inoperative civilization, as we shall see, interrupts and makes inoperative the lethal work of defining civilization against the alien other.

At the end of Coetzee's novel, the Magistrate, stripped of his power and shunned by his own civilization, watches a group of children building a snowman:

The wind had dropped, and now the snowflakes come floating down, the first fall of the year, flecking the roof tiles with white. All morning I stand at my window watching the snow fall. When I cross the barracks yard it is already inches deep and my footsteps crunch with an eerie lightness.

In the middle of the square there are children at play building a snowman. Anxious not to alarm them, but inexplicably joyful, I approach them across the snow.

They are not alarmed, they are too busy to cast me a glance. They have completed the great round body, now they are rolling a ball for the head.

“Someone fetch things for the mouth and nose and eyes,” says the child who is their leader.

It strikes me that the snowman will need arms too, but I do not want to interfere.

They settle the head on the shoulders and fill it out with pebbles for eyes, ears, nose and mouth. One of them crowns it with his cap.

It is not a bad snowman.

This is not the scene I dreamed of. Like much else nowadays I leave it feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere. (Coetzee 152)

The children are too busy at play to be bothered by the Magistrate’s presence. He wants to tell them to put arms on the snowman, but decides not to interfere. Neither party actively seeks to understand the other; there is no dialogue between them and no fusion of horizons takes place. Yet they share a space, an awareness of snowfall, and a sense of joyful exhilaration. There may be no verbal dialogue in the scene, but that does not mean there is nothing happening between the children’s play and the old man’s inexplicable joy. The scene is an example of what Nancy calls “being-with,” a sharing without assimilation, entities exposed to each other in their finitude, a being-together without unification or fusion. Civilization, as represented by the Magistrate, does not demarcate itself or arrogate power for itself as a state of exception, but is seen as being beside itself, somewhat unsettled and displaced, not sure where it is headed, no longer purposefully involved in the work of law or of civilizing others. What we have at the conclusion of Coetzee’s novel is a description of what one can call, after Nancy, “*la civilisation désœuvrée*.”

Nancy is of course writing about what he calls “*la communauté désœuvrée*” (the inoperative community), but if we replace the word “community” with “civilization” in the following passage from Nancy’s text, we have a theoretical gloss on the “*désœuvrement*” or “inoperativeness” of civilization with which we are presented at the end of Coetzee’s novel:

[T]he thinking of community as essence is in effect the closure of the political . . . because it assigns to community a *common being*, whereas community . . . [is not] absorbed into a common substance. Being *in* common has nothing to do with communion, with fusion into a body, into a unique and ultimate identity that would no longer be exposed. Being *in* common means, to the contrary, *no longer having, in any form, in any empirical or ideal place, such a substantial identity*. . . . [C]ommunity is made or is formed by the retreat or by the subtraction of something: this something, which would be the fulfilled infinite identity of community, is what I call its “work” [*oeuvre*]. All our political programs imply this work: either as the product of the working community, or else the community itself as work. But it is in fact the work that the community does *not* do and that it *is* not that forms community. In the work, the properly “common” character of community disappears, giving way to a unicity and a substantiality. . . . It yields its being-together to a being *of* togetherness. The truth of community, on the contrary, resides in the retreat of such a being. Community is made of what retreats from it: the hypostasis of the “common,” and its work. The retreat opens, and continues to keep open, this strange being-the-one-with-the-other to which we are exposed. (Nothing indicates more clearly what the logic of this being of togetherness can imply than the role of *Gemeinschaft*, of community, in Nazi ideology.) (Nancy xxxviii-xxxix; emphasis in original)

Coetzee’s Magistrate no longer works to maintain the “unicity” or “substantiality” of his civilization; he no longer yearns for community as *Gemeinschaft*. Retreating from his role as the man of law who works

to uphold the unique and ultimate identity of his civilization, he now shares being *in* common with the children. He does not issue edicts or commands to the children because he does not want to interfere. He lets the children play while confessing to “feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere.” Defenders of an exceptional civilization may find the Magistrate’s confession of *désœuvrement* or inoperativeness, of feeling stupid, losing his way, and having no goal or *telos* a sign of weakness and failure. But in doing so they would ignore or belittle a disarmingly radical view of civilization tentatively proffered in the concluding passages of Coetzee’s novel.

Though the Magistrate may feel stupid and aimless, he also confesses to a feeling of inexplicable joy at watching the children play. His joy, triggered by the children’s play, points to the possibility of another form of life—that of play—that is different from the juridical life he has led as a magistrate in charge of the work of civilization, protecting it from lawless barbarians. Extending Nancy’s concept of the “inoperative community,” Agamben argues that it is “not work, but inoperativeness [that is] the paradigm of the coming politics” (qtd. in de la Durantaye 331). *Désœuvrement* or inoperativeness, for Agamben, is related to a reevaluation of work, of use, and of those values like law which civilization has long prized. In Agamben’s writing, inoperativeness as critical reevaluation takes the form of play and of play as profanation, disappropriation, or deactivation of those serious, canonical values sacred to civilized societies. I cite two passages from separate works by Agamben in which play takes on the role of profaning, deactivating, and rendering unworkable the legal, economic, political or religious machines that enable civilization to operate as a violent state of exception:

One day humanity will play with law just as children play with disused objects, not in order to restore them to their canonical use but to free them from it for good. . . . And use, which has been contaminated by law, must also be freed from its own value. This liberation is the task of study, or of play. And this studious play is the passage that allows us to arrive



at that justice that one of Benjamin's posthumous fragments define as a state of the world in which the world appears as a good that absolutely cannot be appropriated or made juridical. (*State of Exception* 64)

[T]he "profanation" of play does not solely concern the religious sphere. Children, who play with whatever old thing falls into their hands, make toys out of things that also belong to the spheres of economics, war, law, and other activities that we are used to thinking of as serious. All of a sudden, a car, a firearm, or a legal contract becomes a toy. What is common to these cases and the profanation of the sacred is the passage from a *religio* that is now felt to be false or oppressive to negligence as *vera religio*. This, however, does not mean neglect (no kind of attention can compare to that of a child at play) but a new dimension of use. . . . It is the sort of use that Benjamin must have had in mind when he wrote of Kafka's *The New Attorney* that the law that is no longer applied but only studied is the gate to justice. Just as the *religio* that is played with but no longer observed opens the gate to use, so the powers [*potenze*] of economics, law, and politics, deactivated in play, can become the gateways to a new happiness. (*Profanations* 76)

The children's play in Coetzee's novel is in a way a profanation or deactivation of those efforts by human civilization not only to draw legal, economic, political, and religious distinctions and divisions between human beings but also to enforce the anthropological divide between the human and the animal. The work of defining what it is to be human or what it is to be civilized is, as we know, both serious and lethal. It can lead to the definition and demarcation of states of exception in which the exception of sovereign power requires the exception of *homo sacer* or bare life (the life that can be killed but not sacrificed) and the exception of the civilized requires the exception of the barbarian. In building the snowman, the children profane civilization's serious work of defining and demarcating the human by toying with its definition. They playfully deactivate the anthropological machine by creating an entity that

escapes capture by civilization's codes and categories insofar as it is its own being, neither just man nor just snow, neither purely human (it is a figure of snow with a head but no arms) nor purely mineral (the pebbles are also eyes, ears, nose, and mouth). Even the remark that one of the children acts as a leader does not necessarily reintroduce the notion of hierarchy as we understand it in civilization. If there is a hierarchy, it is a hierarchy in play or as a form of play-acting. It turns the serious concept of hierarchy into another ludic activity in the same manner in which, to recall Agamben's words, "a car, a firearm, or a legal contract becomes a toy." Hierarchy is subjected to the same playful parody as the anthropocentric. Watching the children's playful profanation of what passes in civilization as humanity and as serious work, the Magistrate, the former arbiter of civilization's law, is filled with inexplicable joy. Perhaps he feels an intimation of that "happy life" which Agamben sees as "one of the essential tasks of the coming thought" (*Means Without End* 113). Agamben writes:

The "happy life" on which political philosophy should be founded . . . cannot be the naked life that sovereignty posits as a presupposition so as to turn it into its own subject. . . . This "happy life" should be, rather, an absolutely profane "sufficient life" that has reached the perfection of its own power and of its own communicability—a life over which sovereignty and right no longer have any hold. (*Means Without End* 113–14)

No longer under the hold of sovereignty or right and no longer serving the civilized state of exception, the ex-Magistrate correctly acknowledges his "stupidity," his useless status, since it is this inoperative stupidity that puts him on the way to an absolutely profane "sufficient life" not unlike the "life" of the children's snowman. Perhaps, in observing the children's snowman, the Magistrate understands the possibility of reaching a state of ontological Being, a truly bare life that is not juridically produced but is stripped of civilization's fictions and in possession of the perfection of its own undefined potential. In observing the children's snowman, the Magistrate may recognize what the listener in Wallace Stevens' "The Snow Man" comes to understand: "For the listener, who listens in the

snow / And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (9). Is it not the truly bare ("nothing that is not there") but undefined sufficiency ("the nothing that is") of the snowman for which a profane civilization should strive? Should civilization be regarded not as a state of exception or a dialogical opening but as a playfully self-profaning, self-deactivating structure that can become the gateway to a new happiness?

Perhaps one might object that playful profanation merely offers an aesthetic solution that does not count as a coherent political response to the problems of our world. But the point to note is that profanation and inoperativeness are mobilized precisely to avoid political actualization (which often acts as political foreclosure) and the implementation of the serious but juridically divisive work of the civilized state (of exception). I think it would be a mistake to see profanation and inoperativeness as merely aesthetic concepts that have no political effectivity. Their effectivity is of a different order and lies in a questioning of the effectiveness of politics as conventionally understood. Indeed their effectivity, if we can still call it that, lies in their revision of the political not as the actualization of sovereignty or the art of the possible, but as its unworking, the intervention of an inoperativity that will release a radical potentiality or what Agamben also calls the "Ungovernable" (*What Is an Apparatus?* 24): the impossible possibility of a critical opening to that which is incalculable and indeterminable and which unfailingly escapes recognition by that apparatus or machine we call civilization that works assiduously to demarcate states of exception and institute the lethal distinctions that have shaped and scarred human history.

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