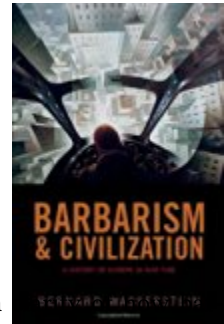


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Bernard Wasserstein. *Barbarism and Civilization: A History of Europe in Our Time*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. xxiii + 901 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-873074-3.

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Civilization vs. Barbarism: A Dialectic in Modern Times?

In the final chapter of Harry Mulisch's powerful and pithy 1982 novel *The Assault (De Aanslag)*, the protagonist Anton Steenwijk finds himself caught up in a massive antiwar demonstration in Amsterdam.[1] Anton witnesses the scene of thousands of people flooding the city in 1981 to express their opposition to the installation of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe, but he is unsure if he really belongs in the crowd. For Anton, this event and many other post-World War II political developments intrude on his otherwise apolitical existence, and yet, all of these events inform his own understanding of the unclear events of his youth, when his family was killed mercilessly by German soldiers. While Anton comes to terms with the horrors of World War II as it affected him, he also searches for meaning in post-WWII consumer society as he confronts different political viewpoints on civilization. In this particular instance, Anton sees the idealism of some people, who believed in the possibility of a nuclear-free world, and the realism of others, who simply did not want the potential barbarism of a nuclear Armageddon settled in their own backyards.

What does this literary piece have to do with Bernard Wasserstein's mammoth history of twentieth-century Europe? Mulisch's novel offers a glimpse into the rich possibilities of writing the history of Europe based on the themes of barbarism and civilization, while illustrating the limits of Wasserstein's approach. In Anton, it is clear how the individual is shaped by larger events, even if the character is never fully aware of this fact or simply represses it. Likewise, through Anton's own life experiences, barbarism and civilization are intertwined in complex ways into a single—but by no means

linear or cohesive—narrative. Such barbarism and civilization relate or do not relate is missing in Wasserstein's work. Finally, as a jewel of European literature, *The Assault* contrasts with the sparse overview of twentieth-century European culture covered in *Barbarism and Civilization*, as Wasserstein readily concedes in his preface.

Wasserstein starts his opus with a poignant quote by one of Weimar Germany's most original thinkers Walter Benjamin: "There is no document of civilization that is not simultaneously a document of barbarism" (p. vii). From the first sentence, the author frames his task in a plausible and promising way. However, no discussion or analysis follows of what makes Europe's twentieth century typify these two themes beyond a brief overview of societal and technological changes juxtaposed to the "savage episodes of collective violence" (p. vii). The reader is left guessing if these two themes are, as Benjamin's quote states, interrelated. Nor is it considered that such a framework might or might not be appropriate for another century or time period (perhaps classical Athens or Han China). Wasserstein leaves unexplained and unexplored the terms themselves; he does not address the possibility of competing and coexisting notions of civilization or varying degrees of barbarism (hence the historical firestorm created when German historian Ernst Nolte asserted linkages between the barbarism of Nazi Germany and Communist Russia).[2] As in the example of Mulisch's novel, the way European artists and intellectuals understood, represented, articulated, and critiqued those notions is largely absent. With the notable exceptions of a paragraph each on Sigmund Freud's work *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) and Herbert Marcuse's political philosophy, Wasserstein overlooks the views and attitudes of individuals like Oswald Spengler,

Norbert Elias, anti-utopian writers Aldous Huxley and George Orwell, and others.

Wasserstein is clear about his goal “to fashion a narrative of the main contours of the political, diplomatic, and military history of Europe in this period as well as to describe and account for the most striking features of demographic, economic and social change” (p. vii). Measured solely in terms of his stated objective, the merits of the book are indeed considerable. The author achieves clarity of narrative for complex political events with a strong focus on political leaders and their decisions. With fifteen of twenty chapters on politics, the organization of the book makes sense and reflects its overwhelming emphasis. Wasserstein concentrates mainly on the political and diplomatic history of England, Germany, and Russia/Soviet Union, but Europe’s smaller countries and regions are skillfully integrated into the tapestry of European political history as well. Several pivotal events are masterfully explained: the Munich conference of 1938, Prague Spring, the nature of resistance and collaboration during World War II, and the disintegration of Yugoslavia and ethnic conflict. Capturing the complexity of the characters in Mulisch’s novel, Wasserstein notes that “the borderline between resistance and collaboration was often far from clear-cut. In a sense, successful resistance almost always involved some degree of at least token collaboration” (p. 355). Pertaining to Yugoslavia, the author perceptively writes: “The war brutally exposed the limitations of the European diplomatic system and its inability to resolve conflict arising from profound ethno-religious cleavages” (p. 733).

Wasserstein, furthermore, demonstrates his mastery of Europe’s political, military, and diplomatic history by peppering his overview with an array of eclectic tidbits. For example, writing on the construction of the Bosphorus suspension bridge in the 1980s, Wasserstein tells us that it “was the first fixed link between Europe and Asia since the pontoon bridge constructed by Mandrocles of Samos for the Persian Emperor Darius in 490 BC” (p. 776). Aside from politics, the author includes five strong chapters mainly on demographic, economic, and, to a lesser extent, social (including class and gender) changes. His coverage of European society and culture on the eve of World War I is brief, as is the social, cultural, and psychological impact of the Great War itself. By comparison, the author devotes more space to Prague Spring than to the human side of Europe’s first great episode of barbarism in the twentieth century. A lesser theme the author develops well throughout the book is the increasing secularization of Europe (the last section is titled “Values in

a post-Christian era”), but he does not explain how this trend might connect to the themes of barbarism and civilization. Has Europe become more or less civilized and barbaric as the strength of religion has waned? The last chapter comparing European society in 1914 and 2007 is most insightful. Reminiscent of the title of Felix Gilbert and David Clay Large’s still classic survey (and competitor textbook) *The End of the European Era: 1890 to the Present*, Wasserstein states succinctly “Europe has gone down in the world over the past century” and elegantly demonstrates this fact (p. 750). Of note is the high quality of writing and proofreading of the book.

For historians interested in the history of twentieth-century European warfare, the book is commendable. For historians interested in peace initiatives, conflict resolution, and popular movements fighting for social justice, the book has much less to offer. Methodologically, Wasserstein approaches the topic from the perspective of politicians, diplomats, and generals, not from the vantage point of grassroots activists, trench soldiers, war widows, or shop floor stewards. In terms of content, there is only brief or no mention of antiwar activism or the role of the masses in resisting militarism, even if such efforts were unsuccessful. Thus, the myth of war celebration in WWI is largely sustained.[3] Wasserstein barely mentions the European peace and environmental movements after World War II. He devotes less than one paragraph to the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) in the 1950s or, as in the case of the fictional character Anton, the massive European-wide 1981 protest campaign against U.S. nuclear weapons. Not only does Wasserstein indicate that such campaigns were the activism of mainly “leftists” with “some support across society,” but he also curiously includes the detail that the women’s 1981-2000 protest camp at Greenham Common “received some secret financial support from Communist countries” (pp. 613, 614). What is the implication of this detail? Would not a sentence explaining the Greenham Common peace agenda or a direct quotation from one of the activists be more pertinent?

Wasserstein comes full circle in the last paragraph of his survey. He writes: “Civilization and barbarism walked hand in hand in Europe in the course of the past century. They were not polar opposites but, as Walter Benjamin maintained, locked together in a dialectical relationship” (p. 793). Alas, the author suggests the two themes are inextricably intertwined, but how and why? No answers are forthcoming. Reference to Max Horkheimer’s and Theodor W. Adorno’s theory of the “dialectic of Enlightenment” might be appropriate

here.[4] One might also consider how the themes of barbarism and civilization reflect twentieth-century utopianism, whether to explain the atrocities of the Third Reich and Stalinism or the unfulfilled aspirations of European idealists.[5] Or, one might simply give more attention to how Europeans understood, explained, or chose not to ponder these complex realities. To Wasserstein's immense credit, he acknowledges the Herculean task of any synthetic history. Perhaps, the publisher persuaded the author to come up with its catchy and insightful title in the later stages of the book's completion for marketing purposes, not at the point of conception. If the book is stripped of its title and its implied thesis, it offers an erudite and well-written synthesis of European political, diplomatic, and military history in the twentieth century. Though one should not judge a book solely by its cover, it should not be ignored either.

Notes

[1]. Harry Mulisch, *The Assault* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986). I would like to thank Dennis Barone for bringing this fiction classic to my attention.

[2]. Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*, 2d ed. (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), 168-191.

[3]. Kevin J. Callahan, "The International Socialist Peace Movement on the Eve of World War I Revisited: The Campaign of 'War against War!' and the Basle International Socialist Congress in 1912," *Peace and Change* 29 (April 2004): 147-176.

[4]. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum Pub, 1976). The authors establish their task as "nothing less than the discovery of why mankind, instead of entering into a truly human condition, is sinking into a new barbarism." (xi.)

[5]. On utopianism and barbarism, see Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Ippermann, *The Racial State: Germany, 1933-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). For a cultural history of twentieth-century utopian thought, see Jay M. Winter, *Dreams of Peace and Freedom: Utopian Moments in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

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