

## Review – Violence and Civilization

Written by Bryant William Sculos

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

# Review – Violence and Civilization

<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/12/23/review-violence-and-civilization/>

BRYANT WILLIAM SCULOS, DEC 23 2019

### *Violence and Civilization in the Western States-Systems*

By Andrew Linklater

Cambridge University Press, 2017

Andrew Linklater's most recent contribution to his Harm trilogy, *Violence and Civilization* (2016), which is the second book in the series following from *The Problem of Harm in World Politics* (2007), looks at the historical processes by which modern states drew on historical progenitors to develop their supposedly superior approaches to violence and civilization. As such, it is a work of historical sociology and international relations; but it is much more than just that. This review is motivated by two related concerns that go well-beyond the manifest quality of Linklater's newest work as contributions to the fields of sociology and IR: first, given the ample references to this tradition, and Linklater's intellectual legacy within it, what makes this book a contribution to Critical Theory? And second, what is the ethical argument presented in the book? The answer to the first provides the basis for the answer for the second.

First, if scholarly work in the tradition of Critical Theory does one thing (and it never does just one thing, but if it did) it would be dereification, and *Violence and Civilization* is at its core a work of dereification. Linklater's book dereifies (by historicizing) the development of civilizational narratives in connection to norms of self-restraint and non-violence (as well as their opposites). Though the concept of civilization is itself insufficiently criticized in this book, dereification here is generally carried out successfully to provide a deeper historical contextualization and denaturalization of our present imagination about the differences (and similarities) between various "civilizations" with respect to norms, practices, and beliefs about war and harm.

Linklater's book is also a subtle, if surprising, contribution to debates about the dialectic of enlightenment thesis first formulated by Horkheimer and Adorno. While Linklater fundamentally rejects the thesis, and while perhaps unintentionally so, the book as a whole can be read as an immanent Critical-Theoretical critique of the dialectic of enlightenment thesis. According to Linklater, "The image of a generalized commitment to a totalizing, universal political mission to subject all human relations to the governance of reason is largely a myth that ignores the reality of multiple Enlightenments and the absence of a single unifying 'teleology of civility (cf. Pittcock 2003: 263-3)" (p. 273). Further, he criticizes all narratives of a single, totalizing Enlightenment (pp. 274-275). Linklater doesn't dwell on the interpretive reality of this monograph as a contribution to Critical Theory or more specifically as a rejection of the dialectic of enlightenment thesis, but that it can be read as such requires the inclusion of what Horkheimer and Adorno's likely response would be (if I may be allowed some historical and philosophical license): while there may have been multiple enlightenments, only one version produced the horrors of European colonialism; only one version developed industrial capitalism and its techno-scientific apparatuses, and only one version of the Enlightenment led to the absolutely organized, rationalized depravity of the Holocaust.

There is a dialectical resolution possible however between the two visions. It is only because of the radical, alternative, enlightenments, juxtaposed to those of the eventually-dominant Enlightenment, that the intellectual traditions of Marxism and Critical Theory were thinkable in the first place, traditions without which Linklater's scholarship would likely not exist—which would only be a positive if there were also no need for them. Linklater himself, despite various disagreements with the Adornoian negative dialectic both in this specific text and throughout his oeuvre, characterizes the ethical imperative of his cosmopolitanism in Adornoian terms, writing: "The inescapable

## Review – Violence and Civilization

Written by Bryant William Sculos

vulnerability of people and the precariousness of social and political institutions generated the need for a 'new categorical imperative' that oriented 'thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen' again..." (p. 377).

This leads us directly to the ethical thrust of Linklater's book: to dereify the development and use and misuse of various Western narratives, from ancient through medieval to modern time, regarding the acceptable uses of violence, such that the contemporary reader can draw on a more complex legacy of critiques of violence and exclusion, hopefully leading to a substantively more peaceful world, without reducing peace to domination of the disempowered.

### Material Violence, Idealistic Progress

The brutalities of colonialism and imperialism are laid bare here, as are the internal historical criticisms of these practices that emerged in Europe. And perhaps in Linklater's focus on Western civilization he omits too much of the non-Western resistance that eventually proved decisive in the overthrow of various colonial regimes and the political liberation of countless peoples (many of whom were then, in the aftermath of colonialism, subjected to new subjugation by the capitalist-driven world order that, through often Western-empowered warlords and dictators, took advantage of the instability and resulted in further national oppressions) (p. 234). There is no fetishization of the West nor of the non-Western or indigenous or native (insofar as any attention is paid to the non-West, which is admittedly very little).

What there is—despite Linklater's efforts (and successes) at providing a material-idealist dialectic that describes the power of ideals in practice—is a global system of exploitation, violence, and ecocide that has endured despite everything (and in fact for some intentional reasons in many cases). Maybe sweatshops are less socially-acceptable, but they endure in better and worse forms. That they may be generally slightly improved or forced to hide themselves more fully, surely speaks to a semblance of civilizational progress, but one that is also grotesquely inadequate, quite possibly to the point of irrelevance. That structural violence is still systematically practiced and endorsed by empowered minorities and possibly even majorities around the world speaks to the strength of uncivilized norms dressed-up in idealistic rhetoric and functionally irrelevant international legal restrictions. Linklater's dialectical argument about the co-development of civilizing and decivilizing processes is simply not enough to explain the near-absolute dominance of structural barbarism in the contemporary world, barbarism but with a happy face.

Linklater's acknowledgement and explanation for the endurance of mass violence within the liberal-capitalist world order, direct and structural, is woefully insufficient. This is the real problem of harm: harm has become superficially less acceptable and thus violence has changed its appearance, slipping more clandestinely into common yet illicit practices and processes. So, while Linklater provides ample compelling evidence for the wide-range of claims he discusses in this book and even for his overall argument, what is far less clear to this reader is: so what?

I suggested earlier that if Critical Theory did one thing it would be dereification; I'll add that if it only did two things they would be dereification and point towards the conditions for full human emancipation. Linklater's dereification is expansive, if still incomplete (especially regarding the non-West). Far worse is where Linklater leaves us on emancipation. While Linklater's book could certainly be of value for scholars and activists struggling for a better world, it is not an explicit part of his project in this book, as far as I can discern—and it is a problem relevant to the evaluation of the contribution of the book as a whole.

Let's take slavery, where the abolitionist movement is treated as an unparalleled, if historically-complicated success, and yet it is quite possible that there remains as many people enslaved today as there has ever been in human history (there is no accurate data available on the current number of slaves, nor agreement on how low a person's relative "wage" must be before it is functional slavery and other issues such as with prostitution, where often women are trafficked and forced into the industry but are also paid – just not enough to get out). The fact I can make this claim with some degree of accuracy (even if it is proven to be somewhat exaggerated) should produce a fair amount of skepticism about just how real the civilizing processes are in practice. As a student of global political, economic, and social problems, I am simply not convinced, taking the first two books in this promised-trilogy together, that

## Review – Violence and Civilization

Written by Bryant William Sculos

Linklater has shown that civilizing and decivilizing processes are close to balancing, never mind the civilizing processes close to winning out. For both me and Linklater however, Benjamin was correct when he said, “there is ‘no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism’” (p. 231). Though Linklater fails to bring us through a deep exegesis of this quote, he claims that it is fundamentally supportive of his overall thesis, that the dialectical inversion of progress (and even its hiddenness) cannot be disentangled from progress itself, even if the question of the hiddenness of (structural) violence is only taken up seriously in the final twenty pages of a more than 500 page book.

It is only in the final ten pages where Linklater, drawing as he does through this book on Norbert Elias’s process-sociology, brings up the idea of a future *planned* global civilizing process. From an ethico-political perspective, given the massive economic inequalities and injustices in the world today, the idea of planning is attractive for many reasons. While it is unlikely that Linklater will address this in more depth in future work, it would be entirely relevant to engage a lost thread in the (non-liberal) cosmopolitan tradition regarding this concept of planning, and that is the tradition of socialist internationalism, which has historically advocated for various kinds of planning, with mixed results to say the least—though Linklater would surely not want us to lose hope. The ethical dimensions of this lineage is an untapped resource for contemporary global ethicists, Critical Theorists, and international activists struggling for a better world, which is certainly a goal consistent with the more radical Enlightenment trends Linklater’s work emphasizes.

There are some readers though who will have different concerns, likely finding the lack of evisceration of the entirety of the Western worldview discomfiting (insofar as such a thing is anything other than Occidentalism, privileging grotesque and empowered Western elites’ perspectives at the expense of various dissenting voices from within the West), but Linklater takes great strides to present the various civilizational narratives in their appropriate historical context and in their fullest, if still incomplete, complexity. One especially powerful example of this is Linklater’s long discussion of the use of pre-Modern European tropes about, put simply, the treatment of others, which were relevantly deployed by those in the global abolitionist movement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (pp. 251-262). These stories are not presented uncritically, but it would be fair to say that the somewhat detached intellectual voice that is part of Linklater’s style could be troubling for some readers, for example those who, not unjustifiably, expect such horrific examples of barbarism, in the name of civilization, to be treated much more harshly and emotively than Linklater’s intellectualism allows.

There are many who have and who will continue to take personal and intellectual offense at some of Linklater’s claims or implications, especially if taken out of context of the 500+ page tome, as they would almost necessarily need to be. Linklater’s difference-sensitive universalism has never been quite as difference-sensitive (or, more accurately, as difference-privileging) as many poststructuralists, postcolonialists, and feminists have called for. Their well-intentioned and politically-important criticisms will hopefully continue in response to this book. Despite the presence of many problematic comments that many are likely to find in *Violence and Civilization* – and I am certainly not suggesting they are or will be wrong when such criticisms are raised – it is important to note that, more than anything, *Violence and Civilization* is a continuation of Linklater’s lifelong trajectory, engaging positively, though hardly ever uncritically, with the Enlightenment tradition that includes Marx, Kant, and Habermas. It would indeed be surprising to find any criticism, excluding perhaps those in the realm of the one’s presented here, that could not also more generally be leveled at previous works by Linklater and the broader second-generation Critical-Theoretical tradition his work is situated in, even though its engagement with this school is far less explicit in this most recent book and previously *The Problem of Harm in World Politics*. The nuance of Linklater’s monographs has always been a magnet for decontextualized (and some overly general) critiques, and *Violence and Civilization* will likely be no different in either respect, which is far from saying there isn’t plenty to immanently criticize in this book, as Critical Theory demands, and as this review attempts an initial example of.

*This review is adapted from comments delivered at the International Studies Association Annual Meeting and Conference in 2019 in Toronto, Ontario, Canada for the International Ethics Section Annual Book Award roundtable, which honored Linklater’s 2016 book.*

## Review – Violence and Civilization

Written by Bryant William Sculos

---

### About the author:

**Dr Bryant William Sculos** is a transdisciplinary international political theorist and currently a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Dept. of History and Political Science at Worcester State University. He is the co-editor (with Prof. Mary Caputi) of, and contributing author to, *Teaching Marx & Critical Theory in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Studies in Critical Social Sciences: Brill 2019/Haymarket 2020). Bryant is also the Politics of Culture section editor for the open-access journal *Class, Race and Corporate Power* and the founding curator and editor of *LeftHooked*, published monthly with the Hampton Institute.