Progress and Empire: Enlightened histories, ‘backwardness,’ and colonial rule

Paper presented at the
2004 International meeting of the
Conference for the Study of Political Thought
Colonialism and its Legacies

Jennifer Pitts
Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science
Yale University
(On leave: jpitts@princeton.edu)
I. Introduction

This paper is an effort to explore the implications of what might be called a cognitive development conception of progress for views of Europe’s relation to non-European societies among British thinkers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This was a conception of societal development as, at root, the result of the improved cognitive capacities of individual members of a society: most importantly, an improvement of individuals’ capacity for abstract thought. The model of cognitive development was not the only available conception of societal progress at this time: Adam Smith, for instance, offered a highly sophisticated alternative narrative of societal development, in which interactions among similarly rational and reasonable individual human beings alter in response to changing modes of subsistence and the new experiences and requirements imposed by those new circumstances.¹ I want to suggest that whether thinkers analyzed progress as individual cognitive development or as an irreducibly social phenomenon had important implications for the ways they judged, and conceived European relations with, ostensibly ‘backward’ societies: most important, what sorts of obligations Europeans had to various non-European peoples, and what European imperial rule could be expected to achieve in the imposition of progress on such societies.

The cognitive development conception regarded societal progress as the result of an improvement of individuals’ understanding and, as a result, emphasized the mind, capacities, and beliefs of ‘the savage’ in the singular.²

¹ I have treated Smith’s thought at greater length in A Turn to Empire (Princeton University Press, forthcoming 2005), chapter 2.

² I have not used quotation marks around each use of terms characteristic of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theories of progress, such as backward, savage, and barbarous, but it should be emphasized that they are implied throughout. It should be noted that Scottish stadial, or four-stage, theorists used the terms
analysis maintained that the development of institutions and practices such as property, contracts, and treaties, do not exist in early stages of society because the members of such societies cannot conceive of such abstract ideas, but rather are cognitively limited to the concrete, the immediate, the particular. Related claims were that ‘the savage’ has no conception of the future and is capable of thinking only about his immediate needs and desires; and that the savage is incapable of ‘exerting himself’ in ways crucial for participation in progress or civilized life. This conception of progress tended to literalize the image of the ‘infancy of society’, to suggest that individual members of such societies should themselves be seen as childlike in their capacities, and morally and politically immature; the cognitive development approach thus had a tendency to infantilize and indeed to some degree to dehumanize members of ‘primitive’ societies. In addition, the view that progress is a matter of individual cognitive development underpinned the belief that all forms of progress occur together, so that advancement or backwardness in one realm, such as technological development or aesthetic refinement, was regarded as an index of a society’s condition in all other regards as well, including its moral development and capacity for political independence. Finally, a claim closely associated with the cognitive development model, especially as it was articulated by many nineteenth-century thinkers, was that certain societies are stagnant — whether because their members lack the inclination to exert themselves in pursuit of improvement, or because their minds are held captive by custom — while only a few societies (ancient Greece, Rome, and their European successors) have, as J.S. Mill put it, ‘any spring of

‘savage’ and ‘barbarian’ not only as evaluative terms but also in a more purely taxonomic sense (savage indicating hunting societies and barbarian pastoral societies).
unborrowed progress’ within them. This claim served to justify imperial rule in that it suggested that without outside — European — intervention, stationary societies would never succeed in progressing to higher stages of development.

Common to the prominent Scottish Enlightenment theories of development is the claim that peoples in the earliest stage of society, the ‘savage’ hunting stage, recognize immediate possession as the only form of property and that as societies progress through the pastoral and agricultural stages, they develop systems that recognize more attenuated and abstract forms of property. Smith was one of the first Scottish thinkers to develop such an account, probably first in the public lectures he gave in Edinburgh in 1748-50 on rhetoric and the history of philosophy, and then in the lectures on jurisprudence that he gave at Glasgow between 1752 and 1763. But understandings of what caused this evolution of more abstract forms of property varied subtly but significantly. Many theorists of this period, including theorists such as Kames and Robertson whose theories

---

3 ‘Review of Grote’s History of Greece’, CW XI.313. Henry Maine, similarly, asserted the uniquely progressive nature of European societies and their ancient progenitors and suggested an explanation at the level of individual capacity and motivation (though his analysis in the rest of the work operates more at the level of social interactions): ‘It is indisputable that much the greatest part of mankind has never shown a particle of that its civil institution should be improved’ from their first moment of codification; and ‘progress seems to have been there arrested [in China], because the civil laws are coextensive with all the ideas of which the race is capable’; Ancient Law, 14. Walter Bagehot, in his self-consciously Darwinian account of progress, attributed Europe’s advance to the ‘contest of races’, the ‘conflict of nations, the ‘competitive examination of constant war’ and argued that ‘[t]his principle explains at once why the “protected” regions of the world — the interior of continents like Africa, outlying islands like Australia or New Zealand — are of necessity backward’; Physics and Politics, 76.

4 See Meek, Ignoble Savage, chapter 4; Swingewood, ‘Origins of sociology’; Spadafora notes that for Hume, Ferguson, and Dunbar outlined similar stages but did not envision progress in primarily economic terms, Idea of Progress, 271-2.

5 Ronald Meek has proposed that Smith was the first in Scotland to develop a four-stages theory and that his account greatly influenced the other Scottish historians. While Dalrymple (in 1757) and Kames (in 1758) published versions of such a theory earlier than Smith (who first used stadial arguments in print in Wealth of Nations in 1776), Meek argues that they very likely based their own accounts on Smith’s lectures (Meek, Ignoble Savage, 99-114). Meek emphasizes the similarities and chains of influence between Smith’s theory and the others, rather than the differences I address here.
of development were probably very much influenced by Smith’s argument, asserted that it is cognitive changes in *individuals* in early-stage societies that make possible new modes of property.\(^6\) Thus Kames, for instance, argued that ‘in the progress of nations toward maturity of understanding, abstract ideas become familiar: property is abstracted from possession; and in our conceptions it is now firmly established that the want of possession deprives not a man of his property’.\(^7\) For Smith, in contrast, individuals living at different ‘stages’ of society possess equivalent capacities of reason and employ similar processes of moral reasoning. Moreover, while he believed that systematic variation could be observed from one societal stage to the next in the content of moral views, legal structures, and political institution, Smith did not take this variation to imply that human beings develop new capacities for moral judgment or abstract thought as their societies progress. Of all the Scottish historians, Smith was the most consistently respectful of pre-commercial societies as well as the most consistently skeptical about European claims to superiority and the expansion of European political power around the globe; and I suggest that Smith’s nuanced and non-cognitivist understanding of progress lay behind this respectful posture.

---

\(6\) One of Smith’s students later reported that Smith believed (and others agreed) that Robertson had ‘borrowed the first vol. of his hist[ory] of Cha[rles] 5’ — that is, his ‘View of the Progress of Society in Europe’, his most theoretical account of historical development. Ross notes that Robertson ‘could have heard Smith lecture on law at Edinburgh’ but was unlikely to have heard the Glasgow lectures. On Smith’s apparent worries about the plagiarism of his ideas and his concern to establish the originality of his theory of development, see Ross, *Adam Smith*, 105-6, and Meek, ‘Smith, Turgot’, 147-9.

\(7\) Kames, *Elucidations respecting the Common and Statute Law of Scotland*, 1778, 229; see Berry, *Social Theory*, 98. In the *Sketches of the History of Man* (1774), Kames proposed a ‘sense of property’ as an inherent human sense (along with congruity, symmetry, dignity, and grace) and argued that just as these senses develop in individuals, the sense of property progresses ‘from its infancy among savages to its maturity among polished nations’ (1778 edition, 116-17). As a polygenist who held that Amerindians probably constituted a separate species, Kames had a radically different view of human difference from those of most Scottish Enlightenment thinkers; belief in inherent biological differences among human groups was far rarer among British thinkers in this period than it was to become in the nineteenth century; see Stepan, *Idea of Race*, 29-35 and Wheeler, *Complexion of Race*. 
Smith’s account of development showed how manners, laws, and moral beliefs evolve as modes of subsistence change, and he stressed that most societies’ customs and values are appropriate and reasonable given their circumstances. Despite occasional phrases that suggest the evolution of conceptual abilities from hunting to commercial societies, Smith’s lectures on jurisprudence, as I argue further below, develop an explanation of the evolution of property as a series of social responses to the different demands of new modes of subsistence. He describes, from the earliest stage of society, individuals whose rationality and capacity for moral reasoning are the same as those of individuals at later stages.

Another Scottish Enlightenment historian who offered a strikingly thorough-going critique of many of the assumptions and conclusions of the cognitive development approach to progress was James Dunbar. Although Dunbar’s philosophical anthropology was by no means as original or as sophisticated as Smith’s, and although Dunbar occasionally reverted to claims about members of ‘rude’ societies as ignorant or immature, his effort to analyze societal development without succumbing to the simplistic and denigrating portrait of early-stage societies implied by the cognitive development approach enabled him to offer compelling and perceptive criticisms of many of the assumptions, and presumptions, of European notions of progress in his day.

Some of the central features of Smith’s theory of societal development were shared by others among his contemporaries (particularly Adam Ferguson, whom I do not discuss here), and many, including Robertson and Kames, interlaced cognitive development arguments with more complex social arguments. The cognitive development strand in Scottish historical thought was, however, taken up and made even starker and less
ambivalent by later British thinkers, including James and J.S. Mill. I begin with a discussion of some of the recurrent elements of the cognitive development approach to progress with reference primarily to Robertson. In the following section, I treat more briefly the account of societal development offered by Smith, which, I argue, relies very little on the idea of the improvement of individual capacities; I then turn to Dunbar’s rather less well known account. I close with a brief consideration of James and J.S. Mill’s account of backwardness and progress in order to examine the cognitive development perspective as it developed in the nineteenth century in an especially clearly articulated form. In the stark form that this cognitivist view took in the writings of the Mills, the cognitive incapacities of ‘rude’ nations are attributed to all non-European societies, including, most prominently, India; and claims that such ‘barbarians’ are incapable of certain abstract ideas become the basis for legal and political arguments justifying the imposition of European despotism over such societies. Such arguments are not an extension of Scottish developmental theories as such, I would suggest, but rather of one strand in a family of thought that included far more respectful and morally and politically inclusive approaches to non-European societies.

II. William Robertson’s ‘history of the human mind’

Cognitive development has been recognized as an important element in Scottish Enlightenment theories of progress. Christopher Berry, for instance, has placed the notion at the center of Scottish stadial theories: ‘The history of property as portrayed in

---

8 For the phrase ‘history of the human mind’, see Robertson: ‘In order to complete the history of the human mind, and attain to a perfect knowledge of its nature and operations, we must contemplate man in all those various situations wherein he has been placed’ (HA, 1803, II.50)
the four stages rests on a model of “natural” development. What develops are the human
cognitive and emotional capacities’.⁹ Some of the important concomitants of the idea of
cognitive development have been noted by Berry and others, including the analogy
between savages and children and the claims that savages have no capacity for abstract
thought and no conception of futurity. But there are important differences among the
Scottish historians’ and later thinkers’ accounts of how cognitive capacities develop:
differences with implications for the political evaluation of various societies and for
judgments about European relations with non-European societies.

William Robertson’s account of the ‘rude nations’ of America in his *History of
America* presents the cognitive development approach with particular clarity, and so
stands in especially striking contrast with Smith’s approach, notwithstanding the probable
influence of Smith’s lectures on Robertson’s theory.¹⁰ Robertson maintained that abstract
reasoning is largely unavailable to human beings in the savage state, and he viewed
individuals’ cognitive limitations as the primary cause of these societies’ simplicity. He
insisted on the limitations not simply of cognitive capacity but also of individuals’
initiative and energy; indeed, their lack of initiative served as an explanation for their
failure to progress to later stages of development. By explaining savage society primarily
in terms of the characteristics of individuals, Robertson conveyed the thought that the

---

⁹ Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 94. Gladys Bryson wrote that the ‘historical method
[of the eighteenth century] is vitiated by a fundamental assumption…that the starting point for all
humanistic study, including history, is man’s nature, his psychology’; *Man and Society*, 109; also 142-4.

¹⁰ Robertson first published the *History of America* in 1777, eight years after publishing his *History of the
Reign of the Emperor Charles V* (1769). For discussions of Robertson’s views on empire and non-European
societies see Smitten, ‘Impartiality’; Duckworth, ‘Robertson on the Indians’; O’Brien’s excellent chapters
on Robertson in *Narratives of Enlightenment*; and the essays in Brown, ed, *Robertson and the expansion of
empire*. Bruce Lenman is particularly critical of Robertson’s account of Amerindians and his ‘ferociously
Eurocentric cosmopolitanism’; ‘From savage to Scot’, 201.
explanation of practices in ‘primitive’ societies is to be sought at the level of individual
cognition or emotion rather than in the complex interactions among members of a society
and between them and their surroundings. Robertson took the idea that the hunting
stage is the ‘infancy of society’ to suggest that individual adults in ‘early ages of society’
are similar to children in their faculties and motivations, with the result that his
characterization of Amerindians was dismissive and even dehumanizing. Indeed, he
also compared ‘the savage’s’ inability to think beyond immediate stimuli to that of ‘a
mere animal’.

In making such arguments, Robertson relied on the Lockean sensationalist
psychology that held that all our ideas can be traced back to sensory impressions. Locke
held that children’s first ideas are always particular and immediate, and that ‘Ideots,
Savages and the grosly Illiterate’, like children, are incapable of forming abstract ideas
and general maxims, which require more mature minds. Robertson, too, argued that just

11 The 1759 review attributed to Robertson of Kames’s Historical Law-Trusts (also 1759), which offers a
brief account of the four stages of society, bears little trace of the cognitive development model but sounds,
instead, much more like Smith’s approach in that it suggests development is a complex social phenomenon;
and while Robertson remarks (as Smith does) that ‘wants, the desires, and the passions of men accustomed
to such various forms of society’ will differ greatly, he maintains that the laws of different stages are
reasonable and appropriate to the mode of subsistence, not (as he argues in the History of America) that
they result from cognitive limitations. See Robertson, Miscellaneous Works and Commentaries, 96. The
review was published anonymously in the Critical Review, vol. 7, April 1759; in the introduction to
Miscellaneous Works, Richard Sher argues for the attribution to Robertson.

12 History of America (London 1803), II.88-89. Ferguson, in contrast, applied the phrase ‘infant state’ to
societies and argued that the human species ‘has a progress as well as the individual’, but he did not
suggest that members of ‘rude’ societies were themselves childlike or immature; Essay on the History of
Civil Society, 74, 10.

13 HA 1803, II.85.

14 For a discussion of the influence of Locke’s epistemology on Robertson and others, see Berry, Social
theory, 91-2.

15 Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Lii.27. He added that ‘[t]heir Notions are few and narrow,
borrowed only from those Objects, they have had most to do with, and which have made upon their Senses
the frequentest and strongest Impressions’.
as individuals first perceive concrete objects and then generalize about them, so members of savage societies can think only about present objects and immediate sensations and do not have fully developed powers of reason.

As the individual advances from the ignorance and imbecility of the infant state to vigour and maturity of understanding, something similar to this may be observed in the progress of the species. With respect to it, too, there is a period of infancy, during which several powers of the mind are not unfolded, and all are feeble and defective in their operation. In the early ages of society, while the condition of man is simple and rude, his reason is but little exercised, and his desires move within a very narrow sphere. Hence arise two remarkable characteristics of the human mind in this state. Its intellectual powers are extremely limited; its emotions and efforts are few and languid. Both these distinctions are conspicuous among the rudest and most unimproved of the American tribes.\(^{16}\)

Robertson’s theory of development thus presumes not just that Amerindians are metaphorically in the ‘infancy’ of human development, but also that they actually share many childish qualities, such as improvidence and the preference for useless ornaments over necessities.

Robertson argues that savage improvidence results from indolence and unruly appetites, as well as from the specifically cognitive inability to conceive the future.\(^{17}\)

Despite his own counsel about the need to remain suspicious of the tales Europeans have reported from America,\(^{18}\) Robertson uncritically presents as evidence for this argument the tale from Labat’s *Voyages* that the ‘Caribbee’ would not for anything part with his

---

\(^{16}\) Robertson, HA 1803, II.88, also see Berry, *Social Theory*, 92.

\(^{17}\) ‘There are several people in America whose limited understandings seem not to be capable of forming an arrangement for futurity; neither their solicitude nor their foresight extend so far. They follow blindly the impulse of the appetite they feel, but are entirely regardless of distant consequences, and even of those removed in the least degree from immediate apprehension’; HA 1803, II.90.

\(^{18}\) He writes, for instance, that information regarding religious rites is flawed and presented with ‘so little fidelity’ because priests and missionaries have been best equipped to carry out this inquiry but are also apt to ‘accommodate [whatever they contemplate] to their own system’; HA 1803, II.189. Also see HA 1803, II.53-4.
‘hammoc’ in the evening, when his need for it presses itself upon his mind, but, as Robertson puts it, ‘in the morning, when he is sallying out to the business or pastime of the day, he will part with it for the slightest toy that catches his fancy’ (the trope of the toy is in keeping with the infantilization of savage peoples).\(^{19}\) Citing Adair, Robertson adds that Amerindians have no permanent houses because they only think to build them at the close of winter, when the immediate memory of cold makes housing occur to them; as summer comes on, savages lose interest in the work, remembering again only when winter strikes and it is too late to build solid housing.\(^{20}\)

Robertson rather casually mingles two very different claims. The first is that given their constant struggle for subsistence, members of societies in early stages lack the means, the leisure, and the physical security to engage in speculations that are not of clear and direct utility for survival.\(^{21}\) The second is that individuals in such societies lack some of the basic elements of human (adult) rationality, such as the ability to distinguish basic needs from frivolous desires, the ability to set aside immediate desires for longer-term interest, the ability to foresee future needs based on past experience, and imagination.

---

19 HA 1803, II.90-1. He adds: ‘If in concerns the most interesting, and seemingly the most simple, the reason of man, while rude and destitute of culture, differs so little from the thoughtless levity of children, or the improvident instinct of animals, its exertions in other directions cannot be very considerable’. Rousseau (though without attribution to Labat) had written similarly of the Carib who ‘sells his cotton bed in the morning and comes weeping to buy it back in the evening’ as evidence that the savage has ‘no idea of the future’ (\textit{Discourse on Inequality}, Pléiade III.144; Gourevitch CUP 143).

20 HA, 1803, II.90 Robertson cites the \textit{Voyages} of Jean-Baptiste Labat (1663-1738) and James Adair’s (ca. 1709-1783) \textit{History of the American Indians}.

21 ‘What, among polished nations, is called speculative reasoning or research, is altogether unknown in the rude state of society, and never becomes the occupation or amusement of the human faculties, until man be so far improved as to have secured, with certainty, the means of subsistence, as well as the possession of leisure and tranquillity’; HA 1803, II.89; also see 94. Smith had made a similar claim in his \textit{History of Astronomy} (see \textit{Essays on Philosophical Subjects}, 48-49), an early essay that Smith himself later characterized as a ‘fragment of an intended juvenile work’ (in a 1773 letter to Hume); Ross, \textit{Adam Smith}, 101.
curiosity.\textsuperscript{22} When analyzing social phenomena, Robertson resorted in the first instance to explanations at the level of individual cognition. He was explicit in according theoretical priority to the individual and argued that in the case of ‘rude nations’ in particular it was necessary to regard actions and practices as the result of the ‘sentiments or feelings’ of individuals: the ‘natural order of inquiry’, he maintained, should lead one to study first the ‘bodily constitution of the Americans’ and then the ‘powers of their minds’ before ‘consider[ing] them as united together in society’.\textsuperscript{23} ‘The character of a savage’, he argued, ‘results almost entirely from his sentiments or feelings as an individual’.\textsuperscript{24} Where Smith analyzed institutions of societies at early stages by asking what social practices would result from the judgments of a group of rational individuals under a certain set of environmental constraints, Robertson began his explanations with the individual temperament he considered peculiar to savages.\textsuperscript{25} Savages ‘waste their life in listless indolence’ because of an ‘aversion to labor’. They fail to make provision for future needs because ‘they either want sagacity to proportion this provision to their consumption, or are…incapable of any command over their appetites’; they regard others with a ‘careless

\textsuperscript{22} The savage has ‘as little inclination as capacity for useless speculation’ (HA 1803, II.94). Also see Robertson’s treatment of religion in early societies: ‘when the faculties of the mind are so limited, as not to have formed abstract or general ideas…it is preposterous to expect that man should be capable of tracing with accuracy the relation between cause and effect, or to suppose that he should rise from the contemplation of the one to the knowledge of the other, and form just conceptions of a Deity, as the Creator and Governor of the universe’ (HA 1803.192-3).

\textsuperscript{23} HA 1803, II.100.

\textsuperscript{24} HA 1803, II.56; also see 59-60. Robertson’s order of inquiry follows the approach Kames had taken in the Sketches of the History of Man (1774), which began with the ‘Progress of men independent of society’ (book I) before addressing the ‘Progress of men in society’ (Book II) and then the ‘Progress of sciences’ (book III). Compare Ferguson’s insistence that ‘[m]ankind are to be taken in groupes, as they have always subsisted. The history of the individual is but a detail of the sentiments and thoughts he has entertained in the view of his species; and every experiment relative to this subject should be make with entire societies, not with single men’; Essay on the History of Civil Society, 10.

\textsuperscript{25} HA 1803, II.97, 100.
indifference’. Robertson’s account of the simplicity of governmental arrangements in savage society, accordingly, proceeds from a claim about the immature faculties of the individual members: ‘Where individuals are so thoughtless and improvident as seldom to take effectual precautions for self-preservation, it is vain to expect that public measures and deliberations will be regulated by the contemplation of remote events. They have neither foresight nor temper to form complicated arrangements with respect to their future conduct’.

Robertson’s treatment of other non-European peoples was characterized by greater respect and subtlety, and he seems to have restricted his reliance on cognitivist explanation to his treatment of ‘savages’: in the *History of America*, his discussions of the Mexican and Peruvian ‘empires’, whom he regarded as considerably advanced, do not rely on individual-level or cognitive explanations. In his analysis of societal development, Robertson seems to have presumed, as Smith did not, a stark division between savage society and all later stages. This is apparent as well in the account of India in his *Historical disquisition concerning the knowledge which the Ancients had of India* (1791), where Robertson displays some of the subtlety of Smith’s cross-cultural comparisons, as well as a similarly critical posture toward European pretensions of moral

---

26 HA 1803, II.226; The savage ‘pursues his own career, and indulges his own fancy, without inquiring or regarding whether what he does be agreeable or offensive to others’.

27 HA 1803, II.224. Compare Smith’s account of the adjudication of disputes in a ‘nation of hunters’ as a social phenomenon: ‘The society consists of a few independent families, who live in the same village and speak the same language, and have agreed among themselves to keep together for mutual safety. But they have no authority over one another. The whole society interests itself in any offence. If possible they make it up between the parties, if not they banish from their society, kill, or deliver up to the resentment of the injured, him who has committed the crime’; LJ(B) 19; also see 27-8.
and cultural superiority over other societies.\textsuperscript{28} Robertson dedicates the long appendix to the \textit{Disquisition} to arguing that the ‘genius, manners, and institutions’ of India show it to have been a highly advanced society from the time of the earliest European (ancient Greek and Roman) accounts of India.\textsuperscript{29} He argues that certain Indian institutions, which Europeans might imagine would thwart societal improvement or the development of the mind, are in fact reasonable social arrangements. The caste system, for instance, was intended by early legislators to provide for the ‘subsistence, the security, and the happiness of all the members of the community’, and though it may be ‘repugnant’ to Europeans, it ‘will be found, upon attentive inspection, better adapted to attain the end in view, than a careless observer is, on a first view, apt to imagine’.\textsuperscript{30} Robertson’s interpretive generosity toward the caste system — his effort to overcome the dismissal of the unfamiliar as irrational (which he regards as lamentably typical of European judgments) — is characteristic of his account of India.\textsuperscript{31} Notably, in his analysis of India, while he certainly addresses the consequences of institutions for the ideas and habits of

\begin{quote}
\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{28} Stewart Brown suggests that Robertson ‘was growing in cultural sensitivity and toleration’; the India work, his last, was published in 1791, two years before his death; Brown, ‘Introduction’ to \textit{Robertson and the Expansion of Empire}, 6.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Geoffrey Carnall proposes based on manuscript evidence that ‘the appendix may have been written first, with the narrative as an afterthought’; Carnall, ‘Contemporary images of India’, 211.
\item \textsuperscript{30} \textit{Disquisition}, 1804, 201. Robertson credits the caste system with promoting both the abundance and high quality of India’s manufactures and the ‘immutability in the manners of its inhabitants’ (202).
\item \textsuperscript{31} Robertson remarks upon the complexity and sophistication of Indian jurisprudence (217), the magnificence and relative elegance of Indian architecture (220-21), ‘their genius in fine arts’ including poetry and drama, which demonstrate their ‘polished manners and delicate sentiments’ (231ff), and their achievements in science, logic and metaphysics, ethics, and astronomy and mathematics (240ff). As O’Brien writes, the account ‘does not escape the Eurocentrism of Robertson’s earlier works’, since he measures each of these achievements against a European standard; O’Brien, \textit{Narratives of Enlightenment}, 165. While Robertson, a clergyman, is critical of Hindu religion, he presents it as characteristic of the theology of any ‘enlightened nation’, in its mixture of ignorance and error: for ‘the limited powers of the human mind [are unable] to form an adequate idea of the perfections and operations of the Supreme Being’. He warns that Christians are ‘extremely apt to err’ in the judgment of religious opinions that ‘differ widely from our own’; \textit{Disquisition}, 1804, 279, 269.
\end{itemize}
\end{quote}
individuals, Robertson never resorts to individual cognitive capacities to explain practices and institutions, as he does consistently for savage society in the History of America.\textsuperscript{32} In contrast, as I discuss below, James and J.S. Mill were to adopt the cognitivist model, and at the same time to collapse all non-European societies into a single category of ‘rudeness’. Their explanations of the laws and institutions of India, consequently, rely regularly on claims about individual cognition and the barbarian ‘mind’.\textsuperscript{33}

The eloquent conclusion to the Disquisition makes clear Robertson’s own understanding that accounts of progress were fundamental to the politics of empire. Here Robertson contends that the European conquest of India has been particularly cruel because the conquerors fail to understand that Indian society is a highly developed one. He expresses the hope that better historical analysis might stem the depredations, by engendering respect among Europeans for a sophisticated and complex society.

I own...that I have all along kept in view an object more interesting, as well as of greater importance [than mere description of Indian society and institutions], and entertain hopes, that if the account which I have given of the early and high civilization of India, and of the wonderful progress of its inhabitants in elegant arts and useful science, shall be received as just and well-established, it may have some influence upon the behaviour of Europeans towards that people.\textsuperscript{34}

Even in the History of America, despite his often uncritical reliance on his European sources, Robertson indicated the pitfalls of using travelers’ and missionaries’ reports as

\textsuperscript{32} He argues, for instance, that because of the caste system, every Indian knows from birth ‘the station allotted to him’ and so accommodates himself ‘with ease and pleasure’ to his destined function.

\textsuperscript{33} James Mill’s History of British India is, as Geoffrey Carnall has aptly noted, ‘a remorselessly detailed demolition of everything that Robertson claimed in the Disquisition’, and Mill at several moments cites Robertson’s arguments about rude nations in the History of America against his claims for Indian civilization in the Disquisition — ‘Robertson sober, as it were, contrasted with Robertson drunk’; Carnall, ‘Robertson and Contemporary Images of India’, 221. Martti Koskenniemi’s survey of international lawyers’ views of non-European societies makes clear how widespread the stark dichotomy of barbarous versus civilized became in the nineteenth century; Koskenniemi, Gentle Civilizer of Nations, 103 ff.

\textsuperscript{34} Robertson, Disquisition, 1804, 285.
evidence, observing that those who wrote such reports, especially among the Spanish, were led by either economic interest or religious zeal to exaggerate the characteristics of foreign peoples that best served their own agenda to enslave or convert the people they encountered. Like Smith and Ferguson, Robertson noted that partiality in favor of one’s own social practices is a general human vice, one that often leads writers to describe as degenerate or irrational what are merely unfamiliar practices, and one against which he believed the historian must constantly struggle.

It is extremely difficult to procure satisfying and authentic information concerning nations while they remain uncivilized. To discover their true character under this rude form, and to select the features by which they are distinguished, requires an observer possessed of no less impartiality than discernment. For, in every stage of society, the faculties, the sentiments and desires of men are so accommodated to their own state, that they become standards of excellence to themselves, they affix the idea of perfection and happiness to those attainments which resemble their own, and wherever the objects and enjoyments to which they have been accustomed are wanting, confidently pronounce a people to be barbarous and miserable. Hence the mutual contempt with which the members of communities, unequal in their degrees of improvement, regard each other.

And yet Robertson himself appears curiously blind to his own counsel throughout much of his account of Amerindians. Bruce Lenman has answered the question ‘what lies behind the sustained prejudice which Robertson displayed in dealing with Amerindian and creole?’ with the observation that ‘Robertson was not trying to invent modern

35 HA 1803, II.54-6. Bruce Lenman notes that Robertson was one of the few Scottish historians to be well acquainted with the Spanish sources, most of them relying heavily on French sources, especially Lafitau and Charlevoix; Lenman, ‘From savage to Scot’, 198.

36 HA 1803, II.53-4. Jeffrey Smitten maintains that despite Robertson’s often denigrating portrait of Amerindians, even Book IV of the History of America, like Book VII comparing the Mexican and Peruvian empires and Robertson’s treatment of the Spanish, lived up to Robertson’s ‘long-standing commitment to impartiality’, in that Robertson alludes to some (few) virtues of savage life and resists ‘closure of final judgment’; Smitten, ‘Impartiality in Robertson’, 57-59. But Robertson’s use of sources on Amerindians is perhaps more tendentious than Smitten’s article suggests; Robertson draws on evidence from Charlevoix, for instance, to support a far more dismissive portrait than Charlevoix’s own (and compare Smith’s use of Charlevoix in the Lectures on Jurisprudence at LJ(A) i.47 and ii.96).
historical anthropology and failing’. Rather, he writes, the *History of America* ‘can only be understood in the light of the concept of the historian as moral legislator’. But even if Lenman is right to assert that Robertson’s *own* conception of the ‘historian as moral legislator’ led him to support Spanish governance in South America as the likeliest avenue for Amerindian progress, alternative understandings were available in Robertson’s day, both of what constituted responsible anthropology, and of the moral and political contributions historians could make in the context of European expansion. Adam Smith and James Dunbar offer two such alternatives.

**III. Smith’s alternative to the cognitive development approach**

Contrary to what a number of scholars have argued or assumed, I want to suggest that Smith’s account of societal development did not center, as Robertson’s did, on the development of individuals’ capacities. Rather, Smith’s was a narrative of the evolution of social interactions among human beings he assumed to be fully rational, mature, capable of abstract thought, and equipped with capacities for moral reasoning much like those in more complex societies. He presumed that the *process* of moral reasoning (though not the content of moral beliefs) is similar in all human societies. Smith’s argument about development, consequently, takes place not at the level of individuals, but at the level of social interactions: he asks how rational individuals would respond to

---

37 Lenman, ‘From savage to Scot’, 205-7. Lenman adds: ‘there was only one way forward for North American Indians. It was a path of unconditional assimilation conceived as stadial progression, and if they did not take it the fault was theirs’ (209).

38 For the view that Smith’s theory was, like others, a theory of cognitive development, see Berry, *Social Theory*, 96-98; Nicholas Phillipson, similarly, claims that Smith’s ‘was a theory which showed that people who lived in civilisations different from our own not only possessed different manners and opinions but different minds and different selves’; Phillipson, ‘Providence and Progress’, 59. J.G.A. Pocock has argued that Smith’s ‘narrative shows the mind as itself developing’; *Barbarism and Religion*, II.315.
the conditions and incentives typical of a given mode of subsistence, and he argues that as the mode of subsistence alters under the pressures of population growth, societies respond by developing structures of organization and authority, norms to govern property and punishment, and values and manners to accommodate their new conditions.

Two prominent elements of the cognitive development approach are notably absent in Smith’s theory of development: the notion that ‘savages’ are childlike or immature in their mental capacities, and the claim that they are incapable of envisioning or planning for the future. Smith’s avoidance in his major works of the savage-child analogy is particularly striking, for in the early and fragmentary essay on the ‘History of Astronomy’, he had described the ‘impotence of mind’ displayed by people in ‘savage ages’ and written that a ‘child caresses the fruit that is agreeable, as it beats the stone that hurts it. The notions of a savage are not very different’. Yet when Smith returned in the _Theory of Moral Sentiments_ to the same example of a child beating a stone, he compared him to a dog and a choleric man, but, significantly, abandoned the reference to the savage. To my knowledge, Smith never repeated the suggestion that the individual members of early-stage societies are themselves mentally immature or childlike. Also absent from the _Lectures on Jurisprudence_ and the _Theory of Moral Sentiments_ are claims that such individuals cannot conceive of futurity.

Similarly, Smith did not regard savages as incapable of forming the abstract ideas necessary to the institution of property; he argued rather that they had not yet experienced the needs that would lead them to institute extended property rights. In discussing the

---

39 III.2, EPS 49. Rousseau argued in the _Second Discourse_ that savages ‘did not even dream of vengeance except perhaps mechanically and on the spot like the dog that bites the stone thrown at him’ (CUP, 154).
40 TMS II.iii.1.1.
development of property as an institution, Smith does assert that people ‘at first ...
conceived’ of property as immediate possession only. Yet in Smith’s account this is not
because of their limited imagination. His analysis of the evolution of property and
government in the Lectures on Jurisprudence suggests, rather, that members of societies
of all stages of development make moral judgments by the same process: that is, by an
implicit appeal to the judgment of an impartial spectator. When the spectator method is
used in the context of a hunting society to determine rightful possession (to ask what
actions would provoke appropriate resentment), Smith argues, it produces the view that
that only direct possession constitutes legitimate possession. Smith’s narrative of the
‘progress’ by which this notion of property, natural to hunting societies, gradually gives
way to one that recognizes ownership even when an owner is absent does not rely on
changes in the very mental structures and capacities of the people involved, but rather in
the emergence of new kinds of valuable possessions thanks to the natural development of
a new mode of subsistence. Smith’s theory of the history of property is thus one of
structural societal change in response to the evolution in mode of subsistence, not
individual cognitive advancement.

Smith’s account of a property dispute in an indigenous Canadian society, drawn from
the Jesuit missionary Charlevoix, exemplifies his approach to hunting societies and his
ideas about how they might conceive property rights and moral obligations, and how they
might make moral judgments. He describes a case in which members of a hunting society

41 Note, however, that particular word choices in the Lectures on Jurisprudence do not have the definitive character they might in published works.

42 LJ(A) i.36–44; after ‘applying’ the method of the impartial spectator ‘to the case of hunters’, Smith concludes: ‘In this age of society therefore property would extend no farther than possession’ (44).
recognize direct possession alone as legally authoritative but are also able to imagine and acknowledge more extended forms of property. He tells of a woman of a Canadian hunting society who left a string of wampum, which was clearly precious to her, in the field of another woman, who then took it. When the first woman appealed to one of the chief men of the village, he told her that ‘in strict law’ she no longer had a right to the wampum. The chief added, however, that the second woman ought to give back the beads, or she would risk a scandalous reputation for avarice; recognizing the force of his argument, it seems, she returned the beads. The anecdote, as Smith has told it, neatly suggests that although a certain institution of property, even the simplest form of direct possession, may be appropriate to a given stage of society, there is no reason to assume that the society’s members are therefore incapable of imagining more abstract forms of property. The story also suggests a possible mechanism for the evolution of abstract property rights, in people’s natural moral reactions to new situations, and in the exercise of an equity that, it seems, is accessible to members of any society.

Smith discusses the evolution of contracts in similar terms, showing that oral and then written contracts emerge only in later stages of society not because individuals in earlier stages are incapable of understanding contractual obligations, but rather because the

43 LJ(A) i.47. Smith argues that the nomadism of hunting societies naturally leads them to recognize property in only the things one has ‘about ones person’.

44 LJ(A) i.47. The much briefer treatment at LJ(B) 150 sounds more like cognitive development accounts: ‘Among savages property begins and ends with possession, and they seem scarce to have any idea of any thing as their own which is not about their bodies’. It is impossible to know how close the language here came to Smith’s lecture, but the differences between this and the LJ(A) passage suggest that to read it as a description of savages’ cognitive limitations may be misleading. It is worth noting that in the LJ(B) passage, too, Smith suggests that members of hunting societies use a spectator method to arrive at their notion of legitimate possession.
material and social conditions for securing obligation do not obtain. For Smith, what makes a contract binding lies not in the intention of the promiser in making a promise, but rather in the relation between the promiser and the person promised to: the obligation to fulfill a promise stems from ‘the reasonable expectation produced by a promise’. If an impartial spectator — as always, someone taking account of the social circumstances — judged the non-performance of a promise or contract worthy of resentment, then it would constitute a breach of obligation. The objects of greatest value in a hunting society, for instance, are not worth the trouble of enforcing contracts. Another reason contracts emerge only in later stages is the ‘difficulty and inconvenience of obtaining a trial’ in early, typically egalitarian societies, which convene the whole body of the people for trials. Such societies, Smith proposes, would naturally reserve judicial proceedings for cases that severely disrupt the social order, such as murder and robbery.

Societal adjudication of nonviolent breaches of contract must await the development of a more extensive judicial system, which itself requires an expansion of government that occurs only in wealthy pastoral or agricultural societies. Smith notes that societies in early stages, if they do not recognize contracts, certainly acknowledge related values such as...
as a ‘sense of honor or veracity’, and they often have analogous means of providing the clarity necessary to make promises binding. Smith thus sought to show that all human beings employ the same faculties in responding to certain persistent dilemmas of social interaction, and that the complexity of the solutions they develop will depend not on individual capacities but on a range of material and social factors. This complex social explanation differs starkly from the view that the absence of formal contracts in early stages of society indicates an incapacity on the part of ‘savages’, as individuals, to conceive of obligation in sufficiently abstract terms, as in J.S. Mill’s claim, discussed below, that ‘barbarians will not reciprocate. They cannot be depended on for observing any rules. Their minds are not capable of so great an effort’.  

A wide range of values and customs may be shown to be reasonable or understandable given the situation of the agents, according to Smith. Diverse customs and practices have developed as appropriate responses to circumstances —including climate, geography, and mode of subsistence. It makes little sense, then, to rank virtues on any universal scale, for many virtues are appropriate to some but not all social stages. Both firmness and gentleness are virtues; each is suited to certain circumstances and yet under others proves less praiseworthy: that is, less deserving of approbation by an appropriately situated impartial spectator. ‘In general,’ Smith argued, ‘the style of manners which takes

49 He offers as an example rituals of ‘stipulation’ or ‘solemnities’ such as the Armenian custom, reported by Tacitus, in which parties to an agreement suck a bit of blood from one another’s thumbs; Smith suggests that even such ‘horrid ceremonies’, rather than illustrating the ‘fear and terror’ or superstition of the people, make sense as a means of establishing certainty and thus obligation at a time when language alone cannot do so (LJ(A) ii.70).


51 We should note that Smith uses the term ‘humanity’ in two distinct ways: sometimes it serves as a category of general morality, as when he calls infanticide ‘so dreadful a violation of humanity’; more often, however, the term has the less universal connotation of gentleness or ‘sensibility’; see TMS V.2.15 and V.2.13.
place in any nation, may commonly upon the whole be said to be that which is most suitable to its situation. Hardiness is the character most suitable to the circumstances of a savage; sensibility to those of one who lives in a very civilized society. Even here, therefore, we cannot complain that the morals sentiments of men are very grossly perverted’. By no means will every custom or quality lauded by a society will be truly praiseworthy even in context, but Smith approaches unfamiliar practices with the presumption that they are appropriate to their circumstances and attempts to understand why they might have come to be valued, before criticizing some practices as infringements of such universal values as equity or humanity.

Smith’s discussion of infanticide in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* illustrates a similar approach to the judgment of social practices. He seeks to understand a seemingly appalling practice in its social context while also using a notion of equity to make moral judgments across cultural and historical boundaries. Even infanticide may be excused in some societies, Smith maintains, for the ‘extreme indigence of a savage’ makes it reasonable for such a parent to abandon a child rather than to condemn him- or herself to die with it. ‘That in this state of society, therefore, a parent should be allowed to judge whether he can bring up his child, ought not to surprise us so greatly’. The impartial spectator, whose moral sentiments might normally be expected to find such a practice

52 TMS V.2.13. Smith’s faith in the uniformity and basic rectitude of human nature led him to believe that however misguided particular practices might be, people of all societies were able and generally likely to make decent moral decisions. He contrasts systems of natural philosophy, which ordinary people may be unequipped to judge and which therefore may persist without ‘any sort of resemblance to the truth’, with systems of moral philosophy, which must soon perish if too far from the truth; see TMS VII.ii.4.14.
outrageous, can in this case enter imaginatively into the situation of the burdened parent and concur with a judgment that abandoning the child is preferable to dying with it.\(^{53}\)

Finally, while Smith undoubtedly believed that commercial society made possible legal and moral refinements, he was at the same time conscious that such a view could be an all too easy self-deception.\(^{54}\) He noted that all societies from the rudest to the most polished are biased in favor of their own way of life. While judgments of value and virtues vary with the ‘different situations of different ages and countries’, each flatters itself a universal standard and believes that each quality or ideal habitual among themselves represents the ‘golden mean of that particular talent or virtue’.\(^{55}\)

Drawing on a theory of development that emphasized the role of accident in history, Smith, in the *Wealth of Nations*, suggested both the precariousness of Europe’s superior force and its irrelevance from a moral point of view. Europe’s strength was not the result even of any durable, not to mention innate, superiority. Whatever advances in moral refinement Europe could boast, these neither justified international preeminence, nor ensured that Europeans would treat more vulnerable others with the justice and humanity to which they were entitled. Smith argued that all peoples’ rights should be respected, but that this only happens when countries are forced to respect each other by a more equal

\(^{53}\) Compare Robertson’s more judgmental and character-based assessment of the supposed tendency of savage societies to kill elderly members: ‘incapable of attending to the wants or weaknesses of others, their impatience under an additional burden prompts them to extinguish that life which they find it difficult to sustain’; HA 1803, II.220.

\(^{54}\) In producing opulence and leisure, commercial society allows greater concern for the welfare of others than is possible in poorer and rougher societies; it promotes the establishment and continual refinement of rules of social engagement; and it is most hospitable to the development of what Smith called natural justice; see TMS V.2.9 and II.i.1.5.

\(^{55}\) TMS V.2.7.
balance of power than then existed. ‘To the natives…both of the East and West Indies’, he wrote,

these misfortunes…seem to have arisen rather from accident than from any thing in the nature of these events themselves. At the particular time when these discoveries were made, the superiority of force happened to be so great on the side of the Europeans, that they were enabled to commit with impunity every sort of injustice in those remote countries. Hereafter, perhaps, the natives of those countries may grow stronger, or those of Europe may grow weaker, and the inhabitants of all the quarters of the world may arrive at that equality of courage and force which, by inspiring mutual fear, can alone overawe the injustice of independent nations into some sort of respect for the rights of one another.  

The language of abstract rights is rare in Smith’s work, and he does not specify what rights nations should be understood to have: whether rights not to be interfered with, or perhaps simply not to be robbed and destroyed. It would seem that the particular content of the rights of nations can only be worked out in practice, like systems of morality more generally, and that something close to parity of power is necessary for such rights to be fairly specified and respected.

IV. James Dunbar: the ‘too general terms of barbarous and civilized’

James Dunbar’s account of societal development and his approach to cross-cultural judgment in his *Essays on the history of mankind in rude and cultivated ages* shares many features that render Smith’s account relatively respectful of precommercial societies and critical of European presumptuousness.  

First, he maintains that human societies are far more similar to one another than European observers have been inclined
to imagine. Second, he insists that the various elements generally thought of as composing ‘civilization’ do not necessarily occur together historically; the categories barbarous and civilized, he argues, are both empirically unhelpful and normatively problematic in their suggestion that some peoples unite all the advantages and virtues and others all the miseries and vices to which human life is subject. Third, Dunbar emphasizes that the development of human societies toward ‘civilization’ is at once natural and universal, and a process fraught with accident and contingency, so that the apparent backwardness of a society cannot be assumed to reflect the talents or capacities of its members. Fourth, he notes the human tendency to regard one’s own culture as the height of intellectual and moral attainment, and he warns Europeans against this trap of bias and the injustices it licenses.

Dunbar’s account of societal development is less detailed and sophisticated than Smith’s, and it does not draw on such a powerful or well developed theory of moral judgment. His arguments are often derivative of Smith as well as of other sources, including Rousseau and Raynal; his account of the earliest stage of human development is particularly indebted to Rousseau’s Discourse on Inequality in its identification of a moment at which humanity, by supplementing instinct with imagination, breaks decisively from the animal world. But Dunbar’s essays are striking for their perceptive

58 Dunbar, partly because of his interest in the origin of language and his positing of a prelinguistic stage of human history, tends to emphasize the similarities among all currently known human societies and their shared state of great advancement beyond the earliest stage. Thinkers who posited hunting societies such as native Americans as the earliest stage tended, by contrast, to emphasize the distance between hunting and commercial societies rather than their shared features of imagination and culture. On Dunbar’s views about language, see Berry, ‘Dunbar and the Enlightenment Debate on Language’.

59 ‘The springs of ingenuity are put into motion….The acquisitions of industry, or invention, confer a right which suggests the idea of property; and the distinctions of natural talents lay a foundation for corresponding distinctions in society’. Dunbar also follows Rousseau in questioning whether progress in arts and sciences entails moral progress, but the question is not central to his enterprise at it is to
criticism of the self-congratulatory strain in European theories of progress. Indeed Dunbar was among the most explicit authors of the period in drawing connections between theories of progress, the dangers of European presumptuousness, and the injustices of European commercial and imperial expansion. Dunbar’s Essays thus indicate one strand of criticism both of European notion of progress and of their connection to empire that was possible even within the paradigm of stadial theory.

Dunbar insists on the unity of humanity and the similarity of human societies, not simply as a matter of biology and nature, but also in terms of virtues and aptitudes. Dunbar does seem primarily concerned to refute the various arguments about natural differences among human groups that were gaining in importance at this time — whether the polygenism of Kames, claims made by Buffon and his followers (and endorsed by Robertson) about the physical degeneracy of Amerindians, or assertions of the natural inferiority of Africans. Although it may be possible to identify certain ‘national characteristics’, he argues, these are ‘consistent with a common nature’ and ought not ‘to create antipathies, or unhinge, or even relax the social ties’. He warns that such

Rousseau’s. He writes, for instance, that while the ‘inventions and improvements’ thus introduced do ‘honor to our nature’, ‘it may be questioned, whether the enlargement of our faculties, and all the advantages from arts, counterbalance the feuds and animosities which they soon introduced into the world’ (Essay I).

In his published writings on Dunbar, Berry has pointed out Dunbar’s ‘moralism’ and ‘high-mindedness’ in his views on slavery and the war with America, but not Dunbar’s broader critique of European expansionism and the presumptuousness behind it. I have not yet seen Berry’s unpublished PhD dissertation on Dunbar. Both Bryson and Meek dismiss Dunbar’s Essays in just a few sentences; Bryson, Man and Society, 80-81; Meek, Ignoble Savage, 190-91.

Dunbar, like Smith, largely avoided the claim that individuals in early-stage societies are themselves mentally immature, but he did write that the Tahitian Omiah was as ‘circumscribed as a child in the number of his ideas’, perhaps the only such instance in his text; Essay II, note E.

Dunbar maintains, for instance, that the great diversity of physical qualities within peoples, and the lack of correspondence between people’s physical attributes and their ‘endowments and accomplishments’, mean that physical qualities of different groups offer ‘no criterion by which to ascertain the endowments of the understanding among tribes or nations’; Essay IX. He later denounces physiognomy as a ‘delusive art’; Essay XII.
exaggeration of differences among human societies licenses the Europeans tendency to set themselves apart from the rest of humanity, to restrict their sense of moral and political obligation to themselves alone, and to accept without horror the oppression and even extermination of other ‘lesser’ peoples. Dunbar similarly criticizes Europeans for overstating cultural differences among societies and especially to mistake ‘a few frivolous, or at best ornamental distinctions…for real differences’.

The very analytic categories upon which theories of progress such as Robertson’s are based are, here, called into question: the undifferentiated classifications rude and cultivated are, Dunbar suggests, empirically useless and normatively pernicious. He is unusually self-conscious about the use of such terms as at once ostensibly descriptive and also evaluative, and he proposes that these ‘names implying almost unlimited censure or applause’ should be discarded in favor of more precise and limited terms. He cautions: ‘Perhaps, on examination, it will not appear that any simple criterion, of civilization and barbarity, taken either from laws, or manners, or any other circumstance in human affairs, can be fixed upon, as corresponding to the general use which is made of these terms, and fitted to explain their application in particular cases’.

Were it not then better to set aside from correct reasoning the too general terms of barbarous and civilized, substituting in their room expressions of more definite censure and approbation? Indeed the common acceptation of

---

63 ‘According to this theory, the oppression or extermination of a meaner race, will no longer be so shocking to humanity. Their distresses will not call upon us so loudly for relief. And public morality, and the laws of nations, will be confined to a few regions peopled with this more exalted species of mankind’; Essay V.

64 Essay V.

65 Dunbar was similarly alert to linguistic distortions when, arguing that the relation of metropole to colony should be one of ‘perfect equality’, he wrote that ‘the terms which denote parental and filial relation…are metaphors extremely liable to abuse. The one country is no more the mother than the daughter’; see Berry, ‘American War’, 261, quoting Dunbar’s De Primordiis Civitatus oratio in qua agitur de Bello Civili inter M. Britannium et Colonias nunc flagrante, (London, Strahan: 1779).
these words is founded upon a very general, but very false and partial opinion of the state of mankind. It supposes that the difference between one nation and another may be prodigiously great; and some happy and distinguished tribes of men are, in all respects, generous, liberal, refined, and humane; while others, from their hard fate, or their perverseness, remain in all respects illiberal, mischievous, and rude.66

Dunbar himself does propose a tentative enumeration of ‘civilized’ qualities, including steady private affections, fidelity to engagements, order of internal laws, equity and humanity in conduct toward foreigners, sciences and fine arts, and commerce (though he qualifies the last three in a Rousseauian vein). And yet no nation, he argues, has possessed all of them fully, nor has any people survived (except during brief periods of ‘convulsion and anarchy’) without the most important of them. Dunbar thus denies that all aspects of progress occur in lockstep, observes that technological (economic or scientific) progress does not necessarily entail moral progress, and observes that even apparently ‘rude’ nations possess attributes reserved by most theories for commercial nations.67

Given the ‘mixed and complicated nature’ of what is called civilization, Dunbar argues, historical arguments ought to be made about the development of particular institutions and practices, not about an imagined whole called ‘civilization’. The historiographic error is also a moral one, since the label of backwardness is not simply a descriptive category but a moral judgment about whole peoples.

Dunbar rebukes those who assume that ‘savage’ societies are either uniform in their characteristics or altogether vicious. In an extended denunciation of Josiah Tucker’s judgments of Amerindians, Dunbar quotes Tucker as claiming ‘without one exception,

66 Essay IV.

67 The ‘the truest politeness of mind’ exists in nations without developed commerce, he maintains; Smith, for whom commercial society underpins polite manners, would not go so far.
that the savages, in general, are very cruel, and vindictive, full of spite and malice’. Dunbar suggests that Tucker’s empirical claims are vitiated by a pernicious normative project, perhaps religiously inspired: ‘Who, that avows such sentiments, will usurp the name of an historian? The original of this picture is to be found only in the registers of the damned. All historians agree, that the character of rude tribes is various and dissimilar, like that of more enlightened nations’.68 Dunbar insists that there is cultural diversity even among ‘rude’ societies; and the reason he gives is not Robertson’s, the diversity of climates in the Americas, but rather the operation of imagination, ‘caprice’, and ‘fashion’ that he maintains occurs in all human societies.

The account of the role of custom in Dunbar’s Essays closely follows Smith’s argument in Theory of Moral Sentiments, and he draws similar conclusions about the variability of standards of beauty, the reasonableness of many unfamiliar customs, and also the need to turn criticism on many European practices.69 In his discussion of customs of adornment in savage societies, Dunbar argues that the practice of body painting, nearly universal in early societies, originated for practical reasons such as protection from sun, cold, or insects, but soon evolved into a form of cultural expression and ‘became subject to the caprice and vicissitude of fashion’.70 In some societies, he argues, fashion led from

---

68 Dunbar and Tucker engaged in mutual recriminations over these claims. Dunbar added in later editions: ‘When the benevolence of this writer is exalted into charity, when the spirit of his religion corrects the rancour of his philosophy, he will learn a little more reverence for the system to which he belongs, and acknowledge, in the most untutored tribes, some glimmerings of humanity, and some decisive indications of a moral nature’ (Essay V, note H).

69 Dunbar seems to follow Smith in his discussion of the variability of standards and practices of human beauty, treating, like Smith, ideas among different races, and bodily deformation including Chinese foot-binding and European corsets. Though Dunbar does not mention Smith in this section, elsewhere he praises TMS and cites it at length; see, for instance, Essay II notes A and G (the latter citing Smith’s ‘Considerations concerning the first formation of language’, which was first published as an appendix to the third edition (1767) of TMS; see Berry, ‘Smith’s Considerations’.

70 Essay XI.
painting to scarring: ‘Thus a practice, at first innocent or salutary, became, by degrees, pernicious; and while it aimed at farther decoration, or at emblematical expression, tended in reality to deform the species’.\(^{71}\) While Dunbar asserts that it is the ‘progress of society’ that has made such practices obsolete in Europe, he notes (like Smith) that custom has introduced new and perhaps equally destructive and unquestioned practices in Europe: ‘the swarthing of infants, the confinement of dress, and other absurd practices in our oeconomy, unprecedented among Barbarians, might be mentioned as counterparts of the same violence among polished nations’. He argues, further, that if ‘untutored’ tribes have been led, by evolutions of fashion, to deform the bodies of their children, they do not do so with the ‘avowed purpose of deranging the intellectuals of man’, which Dunbar describes as ‘a conduct so flagitious and enormous as has never stained the manners of savage and untutored tribes’. Yet this is precisely the turn that practices of disfigurement took in Europe: ‘not many ages ago, even this enormity existed in the manners of Europe, where, in various instances, the forming of fools for the entertainment of the great, was the ultimate end proposed in mutilating the human figure’.\(^{72}\) Dunbar maintains that all such practices are unnatural and that they ‘degrade the dignity of our species’; but his argument, consistently, is that all human societies have proven themselves capable of such degradation; advances in politeness and civility are no proof against inhumane custom.\(^{73}\) Conversely, just as all societies, at any stage of advancement, are capable of

\(^{71}\) Dunbar does remark that in Africa, ‘the art of disfiguring the human person, is almost the only art which has made such progress among the rude inhabitants, as to mark their departure from a state of nature’; Essay XI.

\(^{72}\) Essay XI.

\(^{73}\) Dunbar suggests that moral comparisons of different stages of society — ‘running the parallel of public manners in different periods of civil progress’ — are pointless; Essay XI.
making inhumanity customary, all codes of law evince a combination of wisdom and credulity. Codes of law and religion ‘which afford, in one view, so striking examples of credulity and fanaticism, may be regarded, in another, as monuments of human sagacity’.

Dunbar echoes Raynal’s *Histoire des Deux Indes* (which he cites elsewhere) in observing the paradoxical nature of global commerce. Commerce, in bringing together distant peoples, offers the possibility of enlarging their understandings and increasing their commitment to the idea of human equality. But its effect has too often been the reverse: to encourage the presumptuousness of the more opulent and powerful.

Commerce, the boast of modern policy, by enlarging the sphere of observation and experience, promised to undeceive the world, and to diffuse more liberal and equal sentiments through the several parts of an extended system. But commerce, it is to be feared, has, in some instances, been productive of the very contrary effects; and by exposing, if I may say so, the nakedness of society, and uniting, in one prospect, its most distant extremes, has heightened the insolence of nations, and rendered their original and natural equality, to a superficial observer, more incredible.74 Dunbar offers his essays as a corrective to the false and pernicious belief in their own moral superiority that Europeans have drawn from their commercial and political power.75 In his concluding essay, Dunbar observes that ‘cultivated and polished’ nations often behave exactly like aristocrats toward their ‘supposed inferiors’: ‘Both carry themselves with equal insolence, and seem alike to forget or to deny the inherent and unalienable rights of the species’.76 Like Smith, he suggests that Europeans’ recent military advantage, which has made possible the astonishingly rapid conquests of vast territories by a ‘few adventurers’, will be temporary and that the natural and moral

74 Essay V. Europe, he writes, ‘affects to move in another orbit from the rest of the species’.
75 Dunbar declines to ‘decide on [the] comparative perfections’ of nations at different stages of development: ‘The manners, the crimes of illiterate savage tribes, are apt enough to appear to us in their full dimension and deformity; but the violations of natural law among civilized nations have a solemn varnish of policy, which disguises the enormity of guilt’; Essay VIII.
76 Essay XIII.
equality of all people will eventually come to be respected, when the natural course of progress has better balanced nations’ relative strength.\textsuperscript{77}

\textbf{V. James and J.S. Mill: the cognitive development model extended}

While Europeans in the late eighteenth century undoubtedly were becoming increasingly secure in their sense of superiority — intellectual, moral, political, economic, and technological — over the rest of the world, we nonetheless find among a number of eighteenth-century thinkers, as Smith and Dunbar attest, a continued sense of the fragility of their own civilization’s achievements, persistent doubts about the justice of European political and social orders, and respect for the achievements, and the reasonableness, of other societies. Nineteenth-century liberals shared with the broader political and intellectual climate, especially in Britain, a civilizational self-confidence not yet presumed by their predecessors in the late eighteenth century, and an increasing sense that profound differences in individual mentality and character distinguished Europeans from the rest of the world.

Robertson, as I have noted, restricted the claim that certain peoples lack intellectual maturity to the earliest stages of societies: to hunting societies without developed agriculture, cities, or money. One of the striking aspects of James Mill’s adoption of some of the language and premises of Scottish historical theories is his collapsing of the

\textsuperscript{77} ‘[T]he diffusion of knowledge gradually tends to reduce mankind more nearly to a level in the enterprizes of peace and war’; Essay VII. He adds that the ‘fall of Europe will mark, perhaps, at some future aera, the enterprize of the species at large’, or, perhaps, that Europe will only lose its relative political advantage while both Europe and the rest of the world gain in well being in absolute terms.
series of stages into a dichotomy of barbarous and civilized.\textsuperscript{78} Claims that thinkers such as Kames and Robertson had (however wrongly) made of hunting societies were applied by James Mill to Asian civilizations that the earlier thinkers had regarded as highly advanced.\textsuperscript{79} The elder Mill’s \textit{History of British India} (1817), contemptuous of Indian society as barbaric and the Indian population as incapable of participation in their own governance, guided not only his own views about what was desirable and possible for the British to do in India, but also those of a generation of policy-makers, including J.S. Mill — though the intolerance and inadequacy of his portrait of Indian society was also criticized by Orientalist scholars.\textsuperscript{80} James Mill, and through him his son, though deeply influenced by Scottish theories of societal development, in drawing on the language of cognitive development, adopted and extended one of that tradition’s most politically and

\textsuperscript{78} Duncan Forbes too closely associated James Mill’s argument with that of all Scottish philosophical history of earlier generations, arguing that Mill was ‘wholly in the tradition of the philosophical history of the eighteenth century’, and that ‘Mill’s approach to India was unsympathetic not simply because he was a disciple of Bentham, but because he brought with him from Scotland a conception of progress which was lacking in Bentham’s thought’; Forbes, ‘James Mill and India’, 23-24. In contrast, Knud Haakonsen has rightly distinguished Mill from the pluralist approaches of Smith and Millar and observed that a key difference is Mill’s recourse to the action of individuals to explain historical change, and his lack of any ‘theoretical conception of social and institutional change’; ‘James Mill and Scottish Moral Philosophy’.

\textsuperscript{79} For Mill, all non-Europeans, from South Sea islanders to the peoples of the Chinese empire, were essentially ‘rude’ or ‘barbarous’, whatever might be said about their particular means of subsistence, forms of government, or arts and practices. He wrote as if every aspect of these cultures that might show them to be inferior to European civilization was telling (such as the lack of taste in the shapes of Chinese vases), whereas anything that might suggest refinement was either trivial or misleading. To claims for the beauty of Chinese porcelain, he responded that their lack of refinement in glass-making, so similar to porcelain, only proved their incapacity to innovate; to the idea that they had inventing the printing press, he replied, ‘what an abuse of terms! Because the Chinese cut out words on blocks of wood, and sometimes, for particular purposes, stamp them on paper...’; ‘Review of De Guignes’, 425, 427.

\textsuperscript{80} H.H. Wilson, editor of several editions (with harshly critical footnotes) of the \textit{History}, attributed the ‘harsh and illiberal spirit’ of civil servants in India to the influence of Mill’s work; see Majeed, \textit{Ungoverned Imaginings}, 129. Also see Makdisi \textit{Romantic imperialism}; and Thomas, \textit{Philosophic Radicals}, 98-119, which astutely points out the ‘puritanism’ of Mill’s interpretation of India, as well as his reliance on missionary sources for ‘detailed accounts the grosser customs of a people he had placed so low in his scale of civilization’ (108). Uday Mehta has aptly noted that ‘Mill’s views regarding India, its past and its present’ were ‘pathetically foolish in their lack of nuance’; \textit{Liberalism and Empire}, 90. J.H Burns offers a concise and often searing critique of James Mill’s method and judgments; he concludes that ‘the almost blood-curdling arrogance of Mill’s cultural chauvinism’ is unredeemed by either felicity of language or ‘any clearly articulated method’; Burns, ‘The Light of Reason’, 18.
morally exclusive strands.\textsuperscript{81} And while James Mill’s account of India was unusually
disparaging, his premise that the minds of Asians in backward and stagnant societies
differed significantly from those of Europeans was more widely shared in the nineteenth
century.

For the elder Mill, barbarous reason is obscured by caprice, a flaw to be found in
Indian rulers and nomadic hunters as much as in children.\textsuperscript{82} Thus he maintained that the
practices of rude peoples, including Indians and the Chinese (the societies he wrote about
in greatest detail) illustrated the debility of their minds, their inability to recognize their
interests, and the enslavement of their reason to whim or passion.\textsuperscript{83}

A civilized government, when it is strongly its interest to be at peace with you,
will, you may calculate with considerable certainty, remain at peace. On a
barbarous, or semicivilized government, its view of its true interests is so
feeble and indistinct, and its caprices and passions are so numerous and
violent, that you can never count for a day. From its hatred of all restraint, and
its love of depredation, it is naturally and essentially at war with all around it.
The government of India, therefore, is not to be preserved with less than a
perpetual war expenditure.\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{81} James Mill’s unusual and extreme animus against everything Indian cannot, indeed, be attributed to any
single sociological commitment, but his adherence to the idea of cognitive development plays an important
role in his articulation of the causes and symptoms of Indian backwardness.

\textsuperscript{82} ‘Among children, and among rude people, little accustomed to take their decisions upon full and mature
consideration, nothing is more common than to repent of their bargains, and wish to revoke them’ (\textit{History}
I.161).

\textsuperscript{83} In his 1809 article about China, Mill allied himself with the work of Millar, and yet, characteristically, he
transformed a theory of multiple stages of historical development into a dichotomous and judgmental gauge
of progress. Mill writes, ‘Since the philosophical inquiry into the condition of the weaker sex, in the
different stages of society, published by Millar, it has been universally considered as an infallible criterion
of barbarous society, to find the women in a state of great degradation’; he goes on to claim that the
Chinese treatment of women demonstrates that China is on a par with ‘savages’. ‘Review of de Guignes’,
428.

\textsuperscript{84} ‘Affairs of India’, 147-48. Similar examples abound in the \textit{History of British India}, where Mill describes
the ‘the suspicious tempers and narrow views of a rude period’ (I.145) and ‘the ignorant and depraved
people, of whose depravity we have so many proofs’ (V. 449). ‘The Hindus have, through all the ages,
remained in a state of society too near the simplicity and rudeness of the most ancient times, to have
stretched their ideas of property so far’ (I.173). Also see I. 192-93, I. 232, II. 147.
While Mill’s language in the foregoing passage might suggest that he attributed irrationality to the structures of barbarous governments, elsewhere he asserts that individual members of semicivilized societies suffer from inferior mental capacities. He criticizes William Jones for entrusting to Indians the complex task of writing code of Indian law: ‘as if one of the most difficult tasks to which the human mind can be applied, a work to which the highest measure of European intelligence is not more than equal, could be expected to be tolerably performed by the unenlightened and perverted intellects of a few Indian pundits’.  

James Mill saw himself at once as a utilitarian and as an heir to the philosophical history of the Scottish Enlightenment. What emerged was a problematic fusion: an index of progress in which utility is the sole standard against which any nation can be measured. As Mill wrote in the History, ‘exactly in proportion as Utility is the object of every pursuit may we regard a nation as civilized. Exactly in proportion as its ingenuity is wasted on contemptible or mischievous objects...The nation may safely be denominated barbarous’. Such a conclusion did justice to neither tradition. James Mill’s conviction that utilitarian theory and its own legal distinctions and categories offered the only benchmark of rationality, illustrates a limited imagination about the possible diversity of human institutions that bears little resemblance either to the sociological sensitivity of the Scottish historians, or to Bentham.

__________________________

85 With no sanction of reason could anything better be expected than that which was in reality produced; a disorderly compilation of loose, vague, stupid, or unintelligible quotations and maxims, selected arbitrarily...attended with a commentary, which only adds to the mass of absurdity and darkness: a farrago, by which nothing is defined, nothing established’. History V. 426.

86 History, II.105. Javed Majeed has aptly noted that Mill’s tone of definitiveness — his ‘pseudo-deductive style of argument which stresses the certainty of conclusions derived from unassailable premisses’ owed as much to Mill’s puritanical spirit as to his utilitarianism (Majeed, Ungoverned Imaginings, 186-7).
J.S. Mill, who called his father ‘the last survivor of this great school’ of Scottish moral philosophy, and who largely adopted his father’s view of Indian society, also took up the notion that societal development is a matter of the improvement of individuals’ cognitive capacity. The younger Mill directly linked such claims to a justification for despotic colonial rule over backward peoples by more advanced nations. Mill’s conceptions of ‘civilization’ and barbarism seem to have altered little from his fullest statement of his conception of progress, in the early essay ‘Civilization’, through late works such as *On Liberty*, *Considerations on Representative Government*, and ‘A Few Thoughts on Non-Intervention’, in which he elaborates the political implications of that view of progress.

‘Civilization’, published in 1836, proposes a simple and unified developmental scale, one in which the ‘ingredients of civilization...begin together, always co-exist, and accompany each other in their growth’. Almost any institution, practice, or art will bear the mark of a society’s place in the scale of civilization, high or low: and Mill often writes as though these were the only two relevant categories. He thus, like James Mill, flattens the relatively complex series of stages employed by Scottish historians to a simple dichotomy of civilized and barbarous. Mill repeatedly describes the differences between civilized and savage or barbarous societies as differences between the characters, psychological attributes, and mental capacities of their members. One does not find collective action in savage societies, he argues in ‘Civilization’, because ‘[i]t is only civilized beings who can combine. All combination is compromise: it is the sacrifice

---

87 see Ball, ‘Introduction’ to James Mill, *Political Writings*, xiv
88 ‘Civilization’ (1836), CW XVIII.120
of some portion of individual will, for a common purpose. The savage cannot bear to sacrifice, for any purpose, the satisfaction of his individual will. His social cannot even temporarily prevail over his selfish feelings, nor his impulses bend to his calculations’.  

Mill suggests that what is lacking is not cognitive ability itself, for the savage ‘is often not without intelligence’, but willpower, or the control of reason over the appetites; the failing, still, is one of individual capacities.

The slave, whom Mill here treats as an extreme variant of the savage, cannot subject his will to ‘a superior purpose of his own. He is wanting in intelligence to form such a purpose; above all, he cannot frame to himself to conception of a fixed rule: nor if he could, has he the capacity to adhere to it’.  

After characterizing the failings of savages and slaves in their extreme forms, Mill extends the argument to peoples who ‘approach to the conditions of savages or of slaves’ to explain, for instance, why civilized belligerents usually defeat their less civilized foes. Because ‘discipline...is an attribute of civilization’, ‘none but civilized states have ever been capable of forming an alliance. The native states of India have been conquered by the English one by one’.  

Mill argues that the reason for such patterns is that cooperation, like other attributes of civilization, ‘can be learnt only by practice’, and he describes this learning process as one undergone by individuals.

---

89 ‘Civilization’, CW CVIII.122.
90 ‘Civilization’, CW XVIII.122. The ‘ignorant labourer’ in a ‘rude state of society’ cooperates with no one outside his family; such people he ‘practical lesson of submitting themselves to guidance’ in order to acquire ‘habits of discipline’ (123-4).
91 ‘Civilization’, CW XVIII.122-23.
92 ‘Civilization’, CW XVIII.123;
Mill’s primary concern in ‘Civilization’ is the political and moral effects of civilization in its most developed form in Britain, and here he deploys the ‘savage’ primarily to foreground the key characteristics of civilized society: ‘the diffusion of property and intelligence, and the power of cooperation’ (124). If Mill’s category of savage society appeared only in ‘Civilization’, it might be thought to be a literary device, a rough but effective means of highlighting what was most significant about British society and assisting the case, made at the end of the essay, for a Millian reform of British universities. But far from serving simply as a foil for civilization, such an account of the barbarous and semi-civilized as deficient in powers of mind and will recurs throughout Mill’s career to justify imperial rule and a suspension of international norms in European relations with non-European societies.

In ‘A few words on non-intervention’ of 1859, for instance, Mill uses the category to argue for a strict distinction between the legal and political standards applied within Europe and those reserved for the treatment of barbarian societies. Reciprocity, mutual respect for sovereignty, and the law of nations, he argues, should govern relations among civilized nations. Relations between civilized nations and ‘barbarians’ cannot, properly speaking, be considered political relations at all. One of the reasons he offers, in a passage that recalls the account in ‘Civilization’ of Indians’ failure to ally against the British, is the incapacity of barbarians to abide by treaties and agreements: ‘barbarians will not reciprocate. They cannot be depended on for observing any rules. Their minds

93 Alexander Brady, for instance, remarks in his introduction to the volume of Mill’s essays on politics and society that ‘whatever its deficiency’ as anthropology, Mill’s definitions of civilized and savage life ‘in no way hampered Mill in discussing that in which he was principally interested—certain aspects of contemporary Britain on which he had strong opinions’ (CW XVIII.xxv).
are not capable of so great an effort'. 94 ‘Non-Intervention’ is striking in its use of a philosophical anthropology, at best speculative, to justify the exercise of vast coercive political and military power:

To characterize any conduct whatever towards a barbarous people as a violation of the law of nations, only shows that he who so speaks has never considered the subject. A violation of great principles of morality it may easily be; but barbarians have no rights as a nation, except a right to such treatment as may, at the earliest possible period, fit them for becoming one. The only moral laws for the relation between a civilized and a barbarous government, are the universal rules of morality between man and man. 95

Mill’s argument for the political and legal exclusion rested on the assumption by European states of the authority to judge what was in the best interests of backward peoples, an authority stemming from just the sort of sure knowledge about how to bring about progress that Smith’s more chastened approach to societal development denied was possible.

Mill’s adherence to an implicit cognitive development approach to progress also underlies his famous qualification of his argument in On Liberty with the proviso that the case for minimal interference in individuals’ lives by the state or by other people did not apply to children or young persons, but

only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties…. Those who are still in a state to require being taken care of by others, must be protected against their own actions as well as against external injury. For the same reason, we may leave out of consideration those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage. The early difficulties in the way of spontaneous progress are so great, that there is seldom any choice of means for overcoming them; and a ruler full of the spirit of improvement is

94 CW XXI.118. In ‘Civilization’, Mill argued similarly that the answers to the ‘great questions in government… vary indefinitely, according to the degree and kind of civilization and cultivation already attained by a people, and their peculiar aptitudes for receiving more’ (CW X.106).

95 ‘Non-intervention’, CW XXI.119. Mill adds, ‘Nations which are still barbarous 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’.
warranted in the use of any expedients that will attain an end, perhaps otherwise unattainable.\textsuperscript{96}

It should be emphasized that J.S. Mill justified civilizing despotism not simply on the grounds that such rule was necessary to undermine the power of entrenched and oppressive political structures and social hierarchies. Rather, his claim was that the rational capacities of \textit{individuals} in such societies were so immature that they were incapable of being ‘guided to their improvement by conviction or persuasion’.\textsuperscript{97} Here, as in ‘Non-intervention’, Mill grounds — on weakly theorized anthropological assertions and on the tendentious metaphor of the infancy of society — a claim for Europeans’ moral authority to exercise despotic power over societies they deem backward and stagnant.

\textbf{\textit{~~~}}

It may be tempting to regard the very idea of societal development or progress as imperialist in character, given the central justificatory role that theories of progress have played in European imperial expansion, particularly in the nineteenth century. A dominant form that such theories took in the nineteenth century depicted progress as a matter of increasing rationality and cognitive capacity, so that members of societies regarded as being at ‘earlier’ stages of development are described not simply as rational human beings acting within different contexts of social organization but rather as

\textsuperscript{96} \textit{On Liberty}, CW XVIII.224.

\textsuperscript{97} \textit{On Liberty}, CW XVIII.224. Also see \textit{Considerations on Representative Government}; CW XIX. 567. Uday Mehta has argued that liberal universalism, notably in Locke and Mill, distinguishes ‘between anthropological capacities and the necessary conditions for their actualization’; while the capacities are acknowledged to be universal, various peoples are politically disenfranchised as not being in a position to realize those capacities; Mehta, \textit{Liberalism and Empire}. 47.
themselves cognitively limited: mired in error or enslaved to superstition, incapable of the abstract thought necessary for abiding by contracts or treaties, ‘untrustworthy’ and lacking in ‘character’, and incapable of participating in their own governance not simply because of illiteracy or lack of education but because of civilizational deficiencies deeply rooted in individuals’ minds and characters.\textsuperscript{98} And yet within the family of eighteenth-century understandings of historical progress were accounts that could be developmental while resisting the implication that non-Europeans ought to be excluded from ordinary standards of political respect, inclusion, or reciprocity, as the work of Adam Smith and James Dunbar, among others, demonstrates.\textsuperscript{99} Later thinkers such as James and J.S. Mill who adopted a cognitive development approach to the study of human history, and extended to all non-Europeans the diagnosis of individual immaturity, abandoned this more complex view of societal development, and the more chastened approach to cross-cultural judgment that it generated. Such nineteenth-century liberals bore out, with disastrous consequences, Dunbar’s apprehension that Europeans were as yet incapable of responding with ‘liberal and equal sentiments’ to radical cultural diversity and global inequalities.

\textsuperscript{98} Martti Koskenniemi’s discussion of international lawyers’ views on empire shows how commonly claims about backward peoples’ immaturity or lack of certain legal concepts were used in the nineteenth century to justify their exclusion from the ordinary standards of international law. John Westlake, for instance, argued in 1891 that sovereignty could not be attributed to African chiefs, nor could they transfer sovereignty, because they lacked the concept; in 1894, he wrote that ‘[I]nternational law has to treat natives as uncivilised’. Joseph Hornung wrote of ‘barbarians’: ‘They are children, of course, but then, let us treat them as one treats children, through gentleness and persuasion’. Westlake, ‘Le conflit Anglo-Portugais’ (1891) and Chapters on the principles of international law (1894); Joseph Hornung, ‘Civilisés et barbares’ (Part 4, 1886), cited by Koskenniemi, Gentle Civilizer, 127 and 130; see also chapter 2 throughout.

\textsuperscript{99} A similar case could be made for Adam Ferguson’s writings.
Works Cited


Robertson, William. *An Historical Disquisition Concerning the Knowledge Which the Ancients Had of India.* London, 1791.

———. *History of America.* II vols. London, 1803. [Cited as HA]


———. *The Discourses and other early political writings.* Edited by Philip Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).


