

# 13. Culture and North-South Narratives of Superiority/Inferiority – Part 2

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### Myths of the West and the North

All peoples, societies, and cultures believe their myths to be true and those of other peoples to be mere myths. It is, indeed, most puzzling that so many people in the South are persuaded, if one is to judge from their attitudes and actions, that Western/Northern myths are true and that their own ancestral myths are false. That astonishing phenomenon appears to be more prevalent in Black diaspora societies than among other societies in the South. An associated phenomenon is the substitution, by certain societies in the South, of Western/Northern myths for their own. Such a remarkable development might well be due to the mesmerizing power of Western/Northern myths or to the gullibility of those peoples in the South who have been taken in by those myths.

Ronald Wright has eloquently described the key role myths play in a culture's (or a society's) creation of its own image and, also, in the image the latter constructs of other cultures, peoples, and societies: **"Most history, when it has been digested by a people, becomes myth. Myth is an arrangement of the past, whether real or imagined, in patterns that resonate with a culture's deepest values and aspirations. Myths create and reinforce archetypes so taken for granted, so seemingly axiomatic, that they go unchallenged. Myths are so fraught with meaning that we live and die by them. They are the maps by which our cultures navigate through time. Those vanquished by our civilization see that its myth of discovery has transformed historical crimes into glittering icons. Yet from the West's vantage point the discovery myth is true."** (Stolen Continents: The Indian Story, p.5, 1992).

Such myths are not new. They are as old as human history itself. Parallel Lives, a series of biographies of famous Greeks and Romans written by Plutarch (46-120 AD), the Greek historian and philosopher, is a source of many of the myths which have stamped a heroic image of Greek and Roman history on the imagination of countless generations of Europeans. Since the Renaissance, they have given rise to a spate of paintings and sculptures and, subsequently, to novels and films that fed the imagination of Europeans avid for any information on Graeco-Roman civilization, which they were persuaded was the cradle of all civilisation, itself a long-enduring myth. One of the lives Plutarch chronicled was that of Alexander the Great, who was one of the heroic figures of that civilization, a figure around which many inspiring myths have been woven. He is arguably the most important historical Graeco-Roman figure around whom modern Europe has woven the myths it used to construct its own idealized, semi-fictional version of Western history. Indeed, the story of Alexander the Great could be considered to be the foundation myth of the West, so important has it been in forging the image the West has constructed of itself which it has succeeded, most incredibly, in foisting on the South and the rest of the world.

Bosworth underlined the "paradox" of the positively-tinted aura that surrounds Alexander, whom he described as the leader of one of the most successful wars of imperial aggrandisement, one that was pursued wholly for gain and glory under the specious pretext of revenge. However, that did not prevent Alexander from being elevated into a symbol of military invincibility and a culture hero with a mission to propagate Hellenic values world-wide. Of Plutarch's life of Alexander, Bosworth had this to say: **"Plutarch's Alexander is a creation of emotive rhetoric, its only contact with attested historical material a list of standard examples, not particularly apt to the theme. None the less there *is* something supremely attractive in Plutarch's portrait, the universal conqueror who is simultaneously the civilizer and benefactor of mankind."**(Alexander and the East: The Tragedy of Triumph), pp.3-4, 1996).

In modern times, the abiding need felt by Western/Northern peoples for culturally-reassuring historical myths, which would validate their own idea of their history, inspired carefully fabricated accounts of that history which were propagated over the generations and centuries from the very beginning of the European Expansion. Such fabricated myths include the British Imperial Mission, the French Civilizing Mission, and the American Manifest Destiny. Like the myth that surrounds

Alexander, those three national myths have little "contact with attested historical material". While other Western countries also possessed their own myths and mythical heroes which are important to their national self-image – King Arthur, El Cid, Jeanne d'Arc – the United States is the only country in the Western world that can lay claim to a comprehensive modern mythology. No other Western country has so detailed, so fully realized, nor so modern a mythology as the American Western. The myths propagated around the "Winning of the West" have helped to mould American identity and, via Hollywood, to fix forever in the minds of generations of young people the world over an overglamorous image of the emblematic characters of that western epic. The credo of the westerner - that of the man of honour and bravery confronted by the savage Indian who was after his scalp and his woman - has endured, becoming the basis on which American notions of manhood have been built. Both the western and the westerner have come to possess a world-wide iconographic symbolism. The image of the anonymous Marlboro cowboy is so evocative of manliness that certain advertisements in which he appeared do not even bother to show him smoking, the message being immediately understood in virtually every society, language, and culture.

Westerns – books and films, alike – have immortalized the valiant white American settler families wending their peaceful way in their wagon-trains along the Oregon trail, the Western "highway" that took them to the virgin lands across the continent, which the Federal government had allocated for white settlement and development. The standard myth depicts besieged wagons forming themselves into a circle to better withstand attack by blood-thirsty Indian savages on their mission to scalp, rape, and murder, thereby making the white settlers' trek across the continent an exceedingly hazardous undertaking. The historical truth is much more prosaic. It is certainly not the stuff from which epic western films could be made. As a result, Hollywood found that reality could not be relied upon to help it feed the avid American imagination, but myth came to its rescue.

Two American historians, John Unruh and Merrill Mattes, have estimated, respectively, that 296,000 and 350,000 settlers travelled along the Oregon trail to Oregon, California, and Utah between 1840 and 1860. The Oregon Trail Interpretive Center of the Bureau of Land Management (U.S. Department of the Interior) has estimated that around 20,000-30,000 white settlers died on the trail, less than 1% (i.e. less than 350 max) at the hands of Indians. The other

settlers died of various diseases, particularly cholera, large scale epidemics of which swept the trail population in 1849, 1850, and 1852. **"Contrary to popular myth, most encounters between Indians and emigrants were peaceful and mutually advantageous. Although popular fiction and movies long portrayed natives in a negative light as stereotypical savages mercilessly victimizing pioneers, historical record presents a different story."** (quoted from the Interpretive Center's website).

Indeed, the victims of savagery during the Winning of the West were the Indians, not the white settlers. In 1890, a Native Indian "messsiah" announced to a receptive audience of culturally disoriented Plains Indians, who had physically survived the encounter with Western civilization, the return of dead Indians and the magical disappearance of the Whites. Most alarmed, the United States Government sent the cavalry to suppress the Ghost Dance, as it was called. While he was being placed under arrest, Chief Sitting Bull was accidentally killed and some 300 Sioux, mostly women and children who were waiting to surrender at Wounded Knee Creek, were massacred by trigger-happy troops. Instead of being recorded as a tragedy and a blot on America's reputation, that sorry episode was woven into the American myth of "Winning the West".

Other national Western myths - novels, adventure stories, and films of both - have thrilled readers and viewers in the West, North, and South for generations. The over-glamorized Foreign Legion which was immortalized in several remakes of "Beau" Geste, the tale of a young English man who ran away from home with his brothers to join the French Foreign Legion, and fought with heroic courage against hordes (a word used only in reference to "natives") of Tuareg rebels in the North African desert; and white adventurers penetrating darkest Africa to seek treasure or to find lost ones, fighting against hostile savage natives whom they subdued either by force or by guile - playing on their child-like gullibility. The white adventurers in King Solomon's Mines, won protection from attacks from African "savages", by employing "white magic". They persuaded the ignorant black natives that they were "white men from the stars" - sorcerer-gods as it were - something they "knew" the superstitious natives would readily understand. Apparently, their "white magic" was not very potent, for it had only a temporary mesmerizing effect on the natives, which resulted in the white adventurers having to regularly provide the African natives with proofs of their divinity. Perhaps "black magic" is more powerful than "white magic". Perhaps "Black" is

simply more powerful than "White".

Adventure films set in colonial India cleverly exploited the immense emotion caused among the English by the Indian rebellion of 1857, during which a number of the hated British colonizers, including a number of women and children, were killed. With bated breath, cinema-goers around the world watched heart-rending filmed scenes of peaceful Europeans and helpless white women and children besieged in some fortress or other by hordes of blood-thirsty Indian natives, only to be rescued at the very last minute by valiant British soldiers making a bugle charge. One could almost hear the collective sigh of relief which went around the world when cinema audiences in every country, perhaps even including India itself, realized that the besieged English women had been saved from a fate worse than death.

In the many novels and adventure stories which so effectively perpetuated that potent generic myth, several of which were turned into blockbusters by Hollywood, the "natives" were always presented as barbaric, menacing, and dangerous. Those novels, adventure stories and films had a most damaging effect on the minds and psyches of peoples in the South, for we tended to identify with the cowboy pitted against the "scalp"-hunting American Indian rather than with the latter; with Scarlett O'Hara or Rhett Butler (Gone with the Wind) rather than the Black slaves; with the white medieval Crusader struggling to wrest Jerusalem from wicked Muslim rule, not the Palestine Arabs; with the white adventurer fighting off the spear-wielding, half-naked African savage; with the Great White Hunter in Africa in his duels with mighty wild lions and elephants; with the swashbuckling Foreign Legionnaire battling the scimitar-brandishing North African Arab; with the English soldier valiantly striving against the blood-thirsty, sabre-rattling Indian. In effect, we were identifying with the North, *not* with the South. One need look no further for the reason why, in the words of Clive Thomas, **"The EPA was considerably aided by the successful implantation of the EU's world view of the region and its future among significant sections of the region's intellectual and ruling elites, including those holding influential positions in the negotiations."** Although a combination of various contributing reasons are responsible for our distorted world view, the above reason can, by itself alone, explain it.

That world view was implanted in our tender young minds well before the age of reason. We

could not, and did not, analyze what we read and saw. Subconsciously, we believed it all. We had no immune defenses whatsoever against the potent toxic brew on which our young minds were nourished – a brew that slowly and insidiously sowed its deadly poison throughout our entire organism. We can "deprogramme" ourselves only by individual efforts to deconstruct everything we have learnt and been taught in our youth. It is a difficult, if ultimately rewarding, exercise in introspection and personal reconstruction – one that few in the South have attempted and even fewer have successfully accomplished. Until a significant number of Caribbeans, particularly among the intellectual and ruling elites, have undertaken that admittedly difficult exercise, the Caribbean region will be incapable of taking its destiny into its own hands, as Singapore has so successfully done.

We will continue to adopt the trade agreements, to pursue the economic and political policies, and to conduct ourselves on the international scene with a subconscious desire to support the interests and win the favour, not of our own people, but of those of the North. As with the EPA, our intellectual and ruling elites would indignantly deny any such an intention and, in a sense, their denial would be quite genuine, for the process of identification with the North rather than with the South is exactly the same as the process of identification with the cowboy rather than the American Indian; with the white adventurer in Africa rather than the native African; with the British soldier in India rather than the native Indian. It is the same psychological phenomenon – one that occurs at the subliminal level, *without our conscious knowledge*.

The plots of the novels and films now produced in the North have changed. They have become more subtle, more politically correct. The character and personality of the main protagonists are not sketched in black and white, as before – it is more blurred, more nuanced and thus more credible and more sympathetic. An Indiana Jones can more easily win our sympathy than an unreconstructed John Wayne character. However, more or less the same narrative is perpetuated in contemporary films, which is easily discernible if one makes the effort to deconstruct them. Often, it is not even necessary to do so. The petty dealers trafficking drugs on the street in American police films are overwhelmingly Black; his equivalent in French *policiers* are overwhelmingly *Magrebin* (North African Arabs). Both represent the "Other" in their respective societies.

Another enduring, centrally important myth, which the West has successfully foisted on the rest of the world, is the "Discovery" myth. With great fanfare, the Western World celebrated, in 1992, the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the "Discovery" of America. Ronald Wright recalled the very pertinent remark a traditional chief of the Onondaga Iroquois made to him about that astonishing myth. **"You cannot discover an inhabited land. Otherwise I could cross the Atlantic and 'discover' England."** (Wright, p.5). Commenting on the chief's remark, Wright observed that the very fact that such an obvious point has eluded European consciousness for five centuries revealed that the history Europeans have been taught is really myth. **"Conventional history, written by the winners, has always taught that this "discovery" was one of mankind's finest hours. The inhabitants of America saw it differently. Their ancestors had made the same discovery long before. To them, the New world was so old that it was the only world....They had occupied all habitable zones from the Arctic tundra to the Caribbean isles, from the high plateaus (sic) of the Andes to the blustery tip of Cape Horn. They had developed every kind of society: nomadic hunting groups, settled farming communities, and dazzling civilizations with cities as large as any then on earth. By 1492, there were approximately 100 million Native Americans – a fifth, more or less, of the human race."** (Wright, pp.3-4).

The real Discovery of America took place during the first of two migrations (50,000-40,000 B.C.) and (26,000-8,000 B.C.) of peoples from Asia who, profiting from a natural land bridge which had been formed during the Ice Age, crossed the Bering Strait into North America. The second "Discovery" occurred in more recent historical times, evidence of which was found in 1960 by two Norwegian archaeologists who unearthed a Viking-age Norse settlement at *L'Anse aux Meadows* at the northernmost tip of Newfoundland, which radio carbon dating has put at 990 AD, with a margin of error of +30 or -15 years. The site was placed on Unesco's World Heritage list in 1978.

Similar myths have been used to justify empire - the French Civilizing Mission, the American Manifest Destiny, Britain's Imperial Mission - and the subordination of a large part of the world and, more importantly perhaps, a broad gamut of regional cultures to a handful of countries belonging to a single dominant culture. Adam Smith thought of Europe as **"the mighty Mother of men"**, and of the European character, as **"uniquely capable of grand designs."** Such

exceptional European qualities would obviously suffice to justify any grand design – whether it be a Manifest Destiny, an Imperial Mission, or a Civilizing Mission. But if such sterling qualities were found to be unequal to the task, European countries did not hesitate to resort to much less reputable measures. All is fair in war, or in the domination of lesser breeds.

In 1885, thirty-five years after Lower Burma had been pacified with a brutality which was recognized as such, at the time, by Sir Charles Grey, a British governor in Madras, Britain proceeded to annex Upper Burma. V. G. Kiernan has the following comment on it: **"Annexation at this date, and in the face of European rivals, had to be explained and justified rather more carefully than in previous epochs, in fact this culminating stage of imperialism was one of the forcing-houses of modern propaganda, the science of blackening enemies and whitewashing friends, before it reached full growth inside Europe in 1914-18. King Theebaw (Burma) was portrayed, more elaborately than the King of Kandy (Ceylon) in 1815, as a most bloodthirsty and unbearable despot."**(The Lords of Human Kind: European Attitudes to the Outside World in the Imperial Age, pp.78-79, 1969).

### Myths of denial and self-delusion

By exterminating its entire indigenous population, Tasmania became the first overseas settlement of Europeans to "solve" its native problem, thus coming closer than any other country to achieving the "Final Solution" for *their* "native" problem. Tasmania's final solution was not 100% perfect because a number of Tasmanian children, who were fathered by white sealers, survived. Their living descendants have constituted an embarrassment to the Tasmanian government ever since. **"Many whites on the Australian mainland envied the thoroughness of the Tasmanian solution and wanted to imitate it, but they also learned from it. The extermination of the settlers had been carried out in settled areas in full view of the urban press, and had attracted negative comments. The extermination of the much more numerous mainland Aborigines was instead effected at or beyond the frontier, far from urban centres."** (Jared Diamond, The Rise and Fall of the Third Chimpanzee, p.254, 1991). Nonetheless, white Australians, like White Americans and all the colonial powers, continue to delude themselves that their actions and attitudes towards their native populations were kind and charitable. In 1982, The

Bulletin, one of Australia's leading news magazines, published a letter by a Patricia Coburn, who indignantly denied that white settlers had exterminated the Tasmanians. She claimed that the settlers were peace-loving and of high moral character while the Tasmanians were treacherous, murderous, war-like, filthy, gluttonous, vermin-infested and disfigured by syphilis. They had died out because of those poor health practices plus a death wish and lack of religious beliefs. (Diamond, p.255).

In America, those Cherokee who refused removal from their ancestral lands east of the Mississippi were hunted down by squads of soldiers under General Winfield Scott and marched at bayonet point to "concentration camps" from where they set off on a forced 1000-mile march westwards, under conditions that could not be less similar than those of the white settlers who also went west. **"Torn from their homes with all the despatch and efficiency the Nazis displayed under similar circumstances, the families had no time to prepare for the arduous trip ahead of them."** At the very moment that Cherokee were dying in droves, President Van Buren reported to Congress that the government's handling of the Indian problem had been **"just and friendly throughout; its efforts for their civilization constant, and directed by the best feelings of humanity; its watchfulness in protecting them from individual frauds unremitting."** (Peter Farb, Man's Rise to Civilization, p.253, 1969 – both quotations).

After the Second World War, General de Gaulle and other French military and political leaders were anxious to disguise the fact that more than half (114,000 out of 214,000) of the troops in General de Lattre's First Army, and almost half (7,000 out of 18,000) of those in General Leclerc's Second Armoured Division that helped liberate southern France were "*indigènes*" – troops from North, West, and Central Africa, including the famous *tirailleurs Sénégalais*. A post-war French Admiral, Admiral Sanguinetti, once remarked: **"Les Arabes ont libéré la France."** ("It was the Arabs who liberated France"). But the French myth, which was widely propagated, and believed by the French people, after the liberation, completely omitted the central role played by the *indigènes*, even from the history text books from which French school children learnt about the war and the valorous fight the French army had waged against the German invaders. The first inkling French people had of that important role was through a film that was made on the subject three years ago with the simple title, *indigènes*. It so astonished the French public, who

were taken completely unawares, that the image of North African immigrants improved, albeit only temporarily. Unsurprisingly, the film was financed and produced by a group of wealthy French North African immigrants, not by "*des français de souche*" ("persons of French stock") - a term regularly employed by French racists to distinguish "white" Frenchmen from "other" Frenchmen.

Observing that the haughtiest conqueror has moods that he is not loved, the British were jubilant when they annexed Upper Burma to take control of the whole country, for they regarded Burma as a consolation for India, where they definitely felt unloved. An enthusiastic Briton wrote at the time: **"This absolute conviction that the Burmans are eager to be annexed is exhilarating....at last we have discovered a reasonable and reasoning population which has an enlightened sense of their own interests."** (Kiernan, p.79). When American troops landed in Haiti in 1994 "to restore democracy" after the military overthrow of the Aristide government, they came face to face with the daunting Haitian tradition of *dechoukaj*, which is a political uprooting that is traditionally accompanied by a ferocious settling of political scores. Hundreds of Haitians demonstrated from the piers of Port-au-Prince with many of them waving palm branches, the traditional symbol of *dechoukaj*. That symbolic act was misunderstood by the American soldiers and Western reporters who thought it was a sign of welcome for the soldiers. One British newspaper described it as the waving of symbolic peace leaves. That redoubtable Haitian tradition is anything but peaceful or welcoming. It expresses the desire to get rid of the existing power structure and it usually heralds the wreaking of a terrible popular vengeance.

Such fantasies and self-delusion are nourished by European peoples' general ignorance of non-Europeans, of their culture and their customs. Like the slave master who knew much less about his slaves – what they thought or felt - than the latter knew about the slave master, non-Europeans know more much more about Whites, how and what they think and how they feel, than the latter know about them. James Baldwin recalled how astonished he was, when his play, Blues for Mr. Charlie, was on Broadway, that no White person had the remotest idea who Mr. Charlie was. "Mr. Charlie" was a phrase Baldwin had known all his life, and he thought that everybody else had got to know it by that time. **"But no white person did. It was extraordinary to watch that....It's very sinister that nobody knows what Ray Charles is singing about."** (Rap on Race, p.73, 1971).

History is always written by the winner, and that history is invariably written in a way that either excludes or demonizes the losers and their cultures, or minimizes their role. Often, the latter simply disappears from the historical record altogether, as occurred with the *indigènes*. Sometimes, such peoples and their cultures are so forgotten that knowledge that they still exist surprises us. They are like once famous film stars who, superannuated many years ago, have totally disappeared from the silver screen and whom we discover, much to our great surprise, were alive all these years only when we learn of their death, following which some of their old films may be replayed on television to permit us to indulge in some nostalgia. Underlining the fact that the indigenous population of the Americas have not disappeared and that many survive, with their cultures, within settler states "**built on their lands and their backs**", Ronald Wright reminds us that, in the Andes, 12 million people still speak the language of the Incas; that Central America has six million speakers of Maya (as many as speak French in Canada); and that if Guatemala really had majority rule, it would be a Maya republic. "**If these facts surprise us, it is because for five centuries we have listened only to the history of the winners. We have been talking to ourselves.**" (Wright, p.4).

### Bringing Civilization to the "Natives"

One of the most potent and enduring of Western myths, which is of great actuality since it is still used to justify the imposition, on the South, of Western/Northern culture and modes of thought, governance, and development, is the myth of bringing civilization to native peoples who were innocent of all civilization before the advent of the White man. That myth is as old as the West itself. It dates from the birth of Western civilization. In his biography of Alexander the Great, Plutarch painted the portrait of a philosopher under arms, with a mission to impose civilization – on the Greek model – on lesser breeds who knew no law: "**He sowed all Asia with Greek magistracies and so overcame its uncivilized and brutish manner of living.**" (Bosworth, p.2). Basil Davidson has an altogether different view: "**Europe triumphed over Africa and India**"

and came in time to believe that it had always enjoyed a higher civilization than Indians or Africans. They forgot the past, but the civilizations of India could not be effaced, their monuments were too many and their prestige too great and widely recorded. The coastal civilizations of Africa, less imposing, less wealthy, less deeply rooted in the hinterland, met with a different fate." (Old Africa Rediscovered, 1959).

Unfortunately for Plutarch's reputation, the historical record invalidates his claim, precisely because Indian monuments which disprove it could not be effaced, as Davidson perceptively observed. Rock pillars on which the Edicts of Emperor Ashoka, the third monarch of the Indian Maurya Dynasty (323-185 B.C.) were inscribed were discovered, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in several parts of India and deciphered. They show Asoka's edicts to be mainly concerned with the reforms he instituted and the moral principles he proclaimed in his efforts to create a just and humane society. With respect to the law, of which Plutarch made special mention, the edicts reveal that Ashoka reformed the judicial system in ways that gave it a surprisingly modern aspect. It was made more fair, less harsh and less open to abuse, with persons sentenced to death given a stay of execution to allow them to prepare appeals. Regular amnesties were also given to prisoners. Because of the Edicts and other historical evidence, Asoka has come to be regarded as one of the most exemplary rulers in world history. H.G. Wells has written of him : "**Amidst the tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history....the name of Asoka shines, and shines almost alone, a star.**" (Short History of the World,1922).

Underlying that principal myth is a subsidiary one – that progress and modernization can only be achieved through Westernization. Like most long-enduring myths, that subsidiary myth remains impervious to lived reality. Japan is "modern", a fact that none would deny. But Japan can by no means be considered Westernized. As Edwin Reischauer has emphasized, "**Japan has not been Westernized as commonly asserted...Japan has more significantly become modernized, not Westernized, and the process of modernization has taken place on the basis of Japan's own traditional culture, just as happened in the West, with the same sort of resulting contrasts and strains.**" (The Japanese, pp.239-240, 1977). Paul Borel has described how Japan accomplished that feat. It should, serve as a model for all countries in the South, whatever their culture or particular history. "**Structural changes did, indeed, occur, but they were inspired by Japan's traditional manner of dealing with such problems; the**

content was new but the receptacle remained the same - the permanent base of the culture did shift but did not disappear - modernity was either invented within the society or assimilated, if it came from without, by a tradition which retained its absorptive power and its capacity for assimilation. (*Les Problèmes du Japon, Développement et Civilisations*, No.38, June 1969).

Ronald Wright has scathingly "deconstructed" that much abused, and misused, term, "civilization". " **'Civilization' is a word that kills....**[in its literal sense it is] **shorthand for a settled way of life. If the word means anything at all it means only this. The moral values commonly attached to it are nonsense. Civilized peoples have practised the Roman circus, the Aztec sacrifice, the Spanish Inquisition, the burning of witches, the gassing of Jews. Uncivilized ones have behaved no worse.**" (Wright, p.100). One of the most important civilized values is good manners. "Manners maketh man" is one of the adages that was incessantly drummed into young heads in England, as it was in the colonies. In his autobiography, *A Life in the Twentieth Century: Innocent Beginnings 1917-50*, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. recounts an experience his mother had in India in the early 1930s. Having been befriended by an Indian and wishing to express her gratitude, she asked a British official how to say "thank you" in Hindustani. He refused to tell her, with the comment: **"No white person ever thanks an Indian for anything."** If one wishes to bring civilization to others one needs to be civilized oneself, but perhaps the English official considered his government's propaganda to be quite unnecessary and decided not to participate in the hypocrisy.

Royally ignoring the discoveries made in the past half a century of the exceptional attainments of Inca civilization when Europe was still in the Dark Ages, Mario Vargas Llosa, the Peruvian novelist and former presidential candidate, published an article in a well-known American magazine in 1990 in which he repeated the hoary myth that the Spanish conquerors brought progress and modernization to the indigenous peoples of Peru who had previously lived a primitive existence. Equating progress with the assimilation of Western culture and taking absolutely no account of the fact that the indigenous peoples of Peru constitute almost half of the country's population, Vargas stated that their culture must be swept away in the name of progress **for "complete assimilation is only possible with the sacrifice of the Indian cultures."** (*Harper's*, December 1990).

Referring to the arguments of Western historians that the absence of the wheel and the plough in Pre-Columbian America was proof that it was not civilized, Wright makes the telling point that Western historians should have marvelled, instead, that civilization actually arose there despite such formidable "handicaps". In the North, just as Ancient Romans had done with Queen Boadicea in England, Americans came to regard the Native Indian as a stubborn animal who refused to acknowledge the obvious blessings of White civilization, which reinforced the idea of the Bloodthirsty Savage incapable of being uplifted and led John Adams to write in 1990: **"I am not of Rousseau's Opinions. His Notions of the purity of Morals in savage nations and the earliest Ages of civilized Nations are mere Chimeras."** (Farb, p.248).

A similar claim has been made in respect of India. In his Preface to a history of India, H.M. Elliot took great pains to show how barbarous and bloodstained Indian history was and how fortunate were Indians to have been the recipients of the civilization brought to them by the British. (J. Dowson (ed), India's history as told by by its own Historians, vol; 1, 1867). Discussing the efforts in Borneo of Rupert Brooke, a 19<sup>th</sup> century English adventurer who was one of the rare Europeans to be genuinely attracted to Asian culture, an English contemporary of his wrote: **"[What a] crown of glory to carry the blessings of civilization and religion to barbarous, yet at the same time beautiful and romantic land."**(Cited in Kiernan, p.86).

Kiernan ironically noted that, in North Africa during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, even "ramshackle Spain", which was looked down on by Europe for its backwardness, could pretend to a civilizing mission. (Kienan, p.121). Ditto with the no less backward Portugal, which went so far as to inscribe the myth of its civilizing mission in its constitution. Article 133 of Portugal's constitution states: **"It is of the organic essence of the Portugese Nation to carry out the historic function of colonizing the land of the Discoveries under its sovereignty, and to communicate and spread among the populations existing there the benefits of its civilization."** The reality of that "civilizing" mission was unwittingly revealed by Portugal's own official statistics, which showed that in 1959, after several hundred years of Portugal communicating and spreading "the benefits of its civilization", the illiteracy rate was 97.8% in Mozambique; 96.74% in Angola; 98.85% in Guinea; and 78.5% in Cape Verde. (Barry Munslow, Mozambique: The Revolution and

its Origins, pp.7-8, 1983). Perhaps Portugal did indeed communicate and spread the "benefits" it actually possessed. After all, one cannot possibly expect it to communicate and spread what it did not have. At the time, Portugal was by far the most underdeveloped of European countries.

European colonialism is also justified in terms of both the civilization it brings to the inferior races and to humanity in general and, also, because it is in accord with the Divine order of things. According to that particular narrative, European national self-interest is little present in that noble enterprise. Ernest Renan, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century French philosopher and writer, illustrated those lofty European motives by reference to the actions of another European country, not those of France – his own country, which was doubtlessly intended to underline the altruistic character of such colonialist endeavours: **"The conquest of a country of inferior race by a superior race which establishes itself in it to govern it is not at all strange. England practices this type of colonialism in India, with great profit to India, to humanity in general, and to herself. Just as conquests between equal races ought to be criticized, the regeneration of inferior or debased races by superior races is situated, on the contrary, in the providential order of things.....*Regere imperio populos is our vocation*"** (Cited in Raymond Aron, *Dimensions de la Conciencia Historica*, p.145, 1961).

In asserting that English rule in India was of great benefit to that country, Renan revealed his utter ignorance of the true nature of that rule. He was either unaware of John Stuart Mill's savage condemnation of English rule in that country and his rejection of the spurious claim that it had been beneficial to India (discussed in an earlier article) or he deliberately decided to ignore it. Perhaps Renan was unacquainted with the English language and thus could not read Mill's earlier *History of India*. In the one case, he stands guilty of culpable ignorance; in the other, of intellectual dishonesty. One 19<sup>th</sup>-century English historian introduced a discordant note in European self-congratulatory narratives about the civilization Europe allegedly brought to indigenous populations everywhere. **"We demoralize and we extirpate, but we never really civilize."** (A.R. Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago*, 1869, p.197). Gandhi, whose own civilization is older than that of the West by 2,700 years (Indian civilization dates back to 3,200 B.C.), was unsurprisingly not at all impressed by Western civilization. When asked by a British journalist what he thought of Western civilization, Gandhi famously replied: **"It would be a good idea."** Western civilization might, indeed, be a good idea but there is little doubt that it is an oversold

one. If it were a commercial product, it would certainly fall foul of laws ensuring truth in advertising.

A most curious European narrative claims that the hypothetical benefits non-European peoples received from European civilization were to the detriment of the West. Royally ignoring all the evidence to the contrary, particularly his own country's reversion of the people of South West Africa to a Stone Age existence, Oswald Spengler, the German historian and philosopher, deplored the sharing of European knowledge with non-European peoples: **"Instead of keeping technical knowledge secret, the greatest treasures possessed by the 'white' peoples, it has been proudly offered to the whole world....All men of color penetrated our power, understood it and profited by it. The irreplaceable privileges of the white peoples have been dilapidated, wasted, betrayed."** (Decline of the West, 1918).

### The White's Man's Burden

A subset, or rather a basic aspect, of the civilization myth is the myth of the White Man's Burden. In 1899, Rudyard Kipling published "The White Man's Burden". It was a poetic appeal to the American president, Theodore Roosevelt, to assume the burden of bringing civilization to the Philippines, a country it had recently won in the Spanish-American War: **"Take up the White Man's burden / In patience to abide / To veil the threat of terror / And check the show of pride....."** The burden turned out to be one which the Filipinos, not the Americans, bore. A similar "White Man's Burden" was assumed two decades later by T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) in respect of another people, the Arabs, whom he arrogantly assumed were in need of it. Lawrence had a condescending affection for the Arabs but he considered them incapable of taking their destiny into their own hands. So he decided that it was a burden he, himself, should shoulder: **"I meant to take a new nation, to restore a lost influence, to give twenty million Semites the foundations on which to build an inspired dream-palace of their national thought."** (Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph, p.29, 1935). Lawrence did not think it prudent to add that that very noble, apparently altruistic, planned endeavour of his was purely intended to serve Britain's imperial interests, not those of the Arabs.

An illustrated book of the Prince of Wales' tour of West Africa, which was undertaken shortly after the First World War, informed its British readers of **"the indescribably abhorrent condition of Kumasi"**, the Ashanti capital. The book then presented King Prempeh, the Ashanti king, to the British public, who was informed that Prempeh had been permitted to return home from his British imposed exile because he had seen the light (the benefits of British rule). Moreover, he had become a good Christian and **"an active participant in church and municipal work."** However, the book was careful to explain to its British readers that, while the **"white man's burden in West Africa"** included the duty of training its people for self-government, that goal was still far off. West Africans had **"accepted the superficial attributes of civilization, but would straightaway shed them and relapse and revert to primitive savagery if their white mentors withdrew."** (A. St.J. Adcock, the Prince of Wales' African Book, 1926). Basil Davidson, the foremost English historian of Africa, was not impressed by such crude imperialist propaganda. Far from considering European colonial rule in Africa to be a noble assumption of the White Man's Burden, he has described it as the Black Man's Burden. (The Black Man's Burden, 1992).

Perhaps the most striking example of the great gap which exists between Western/ Northern myths and reality is the myth the United States has propagated from the time of the Cold War right up to the present time – the myth of bringing freedom and democracy to non-European peoples, who happen, overwhelmingly, to be in the South. Harold Pinter, the Nobel Laureate for Literature in 2005, was so incensed by the cynical hypocrisy of the most powerful country in the world destroying nascent democracies whose policies do not coincide with American interests, and toppling regimes the world over, causing death and mayhem in those societies, and justifying its actions on the grounds that it is bringing freedom and democracy to the countries concerned that he made it the subject of his Nobel Prize acceptance speech.

The following excerpts from Pinter's powerful, eloquent diatribe speak for themselves: **"Direct invasion of a sovereign state has never in fact been America's favoured method. In the main, it has preferred what it has described as 'low intensity conflict'. Low intensity conflict means that thousands of people die but slower than if you dropped a bomb on them in one fell swoop. It means that you infect the heart of the country, that you establish a malignant growth and watch the gangrene bloom. When the populace has been subdued**

- or beaten to death - the same thing - and your own friends, the military and the great corporations, sit comfortably in power, you go before the camera and say that democracy has prevailed. This was a commonplace in US foreign policy in the years to which I refer."

"I spoke earlier about 'a tapestry of lies' which surrounds us. President Reagan commonly described Nicaragua as a 'totalitarian dungeon'. This was taken generally by the media, and certainly by the British government, as accurate and fair comment. But there was in fact no record of death squads under the Sandinista government. There was no record of torture. There was no record of systematic or official military brutality. No priests were ever murdered in Nicaragua. There were in fact three priests in the government, two Jesuits and a Maryknoll missionary. The totalitarian dungeons were actually next door, in El Salvador and Guatemala. The United States had brought down the democratically elected government of Guatemala in 1954 and it is estimated that over 200,000 people had been victims of successive military dictatorships."

"The United States finally brought down the Sandinista government. It took some years and considerable resistance but relentless economic persecution and 30,000 dead finally undermined the spirit of the Nicaraguan people. They were exhausted and poverty stricken once again. The casinos moved back into the country. Free health and free education were over. Big business returned with a vengeance. 'Democracy' had prevailed. But this 'policy' was by no means restricted to Central America. It was conducted throughout the world. It was never-ending. And it is as if it never happened."

"I should remind you that at the time President Reagan made the following statement: 'The Contras are the moral equivalent of our Founding Fathers.' "

"The United States supported and in many cases engendered every right wing military dictatorship in the world after the end of the Second World War. I refer to Indonesia, Greece, Uruguay, Brazil, Paraguay, Haiti, Turkey, the Philippines, Guatemala, El Salvador, and, of course, Chile. The horror the United States inflicted upon Chile in 1973 can never

**be purged and can never be forgiven. We have brought torture, cluster bombs, depleted uranium, innumerable acts of random murder, misery, degradation and death to the Iraqi people and call it 'bringing freedom and democracy to the Middle East'."**

In the Encounter of Europeans and non-European Peoples, which were more Civilized?

Gordon Childe, the eminent historian, summed up European prehistory as being the story of "**the irradiation of European barbarism by oriental civilizaation**" (*Antiquity*, No. 32 1958). Martin Bernal affirmed that it was in Mesopotamia that what we call "civilization" was first assembled. With the possible exception of writing, he explains, all the component elements of civilization – cities, agricultural irrigation, metalworking, stone architecture and wheels for both vehicles and potmaking – had existed before and elsewhere. **"But this assemblage, when capped by writing, allowed a great economic and political accumulation that can be seen as the beginning of civilization."** (Black Athena: the Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, 1987). Writing was invented in Mesopotamia.

By their cultural achievements, by their friendliness, by their generally unwarlike behaviour, by their courteous manner, by their magnanimity, by their unflinching hospitality, by the spontaneous welcome virtually every indigenous people gave to European interlopers and invaders who were so strange-looking they must have appeared to have come from another planet, the indigenous peoples Europeans encountered during the European Expansion were, in many respects, more "civilized", more imbued with "humanity", and more "well-bred" than the Europeans who considered them inferior beings. Eye-witness reports and descriptions by an albeit small number of contemporary European travellers, in the Age of European Expansion, certainly confirm that.

**"For the people of South West Africa the war had involved the most dramatic assertion of their rights and qualities as human beings. By their actions – their civilized treatment of the innocent, their tactical competence, not to mention their courage – they had blurred the racial distinctions which the colonists had so cherished and which had formed the basis of their imperial ideology. Almost as if shattered by such an assault on their *Weltanschauung*, the Germans reacted with a policy of rigid segregation once victory was**

**secured.**" (Mark Cocker, Rivers of Blood, Rivers of Gold: Europe's Conflict with Tribal Peoples, p.353, 1998).

Charles Anderson, a Swedish explorer and trader in pre-colonial Africa, described the Ovambo people of Namibia as **"an exceedingly fine race of men...Their features are, besides good and regular and many might serve as perfect models of the human figure. Their air and carriage, moreover, is very graceful and expressive."** Anderson also described a group of Herero (South West Africa) whom he met or saw accompanying an important chief as **"the finest body of men I have ever seen before or since."** (Lake Ngami, pp.49, 143, 1967). That was exceptional praise for two African peoples who were subsequently described in the most degrading terms by their German colonial masters. Sometime in the very distant future, when racism would have disappeared from the consciousness of mankind, posterity would surely accord greater credit to the Swede's account than to those of the German colonizers. It would be considered a more objective, more accurate, and more reliable one because Anderson did not come from a colonizing nation and thus would have had no need to fabricate reasons to justify what would otherwise be totally unjustifiable.

However, the most extensive records, available to posterity, of unbiased white or European descriptions of non-European peoples subjected to European rule, concern Amerindians. The first recorded description of Amerindians is by Columbus, himself. He described the Arawak Indians in the Caribbean islands as **"a loving people, without covetousness....their speech is the sweetest and gentlest in the world."** Bressani, a French Jesuit missionary who spent four years in Canada in the late 1640s, reported that indigenous Canadians **"are hardly barbarous, save in name"**. He commented on their prodigious memory, their **"marvelous faculty for remembering places, and for describing them to one another,"** and for recalling things that a White **"could not rehearse without writing."** A contemporary French Jesuit corroborates Bressani's description in declaring that Indians **"nearly all show more intelligence in their business, speeches, courtesies, intercourse, tricks and subtleties, than do the shrewdest citizens and merchants in France."** (All three statements cited in Farb, pp.335, 346).

After meeting and conversing with three Indians who had been brought as curiosities to the Court of Versailles, Montaigne, the 16<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher, had nothing but praise for their personal character: **"The very words that import a lie, falsehood, treason, covetousness, envy, detraction, were not heard among them."** (On Cannibals, Ch.31). When, in 1832, Chief Black Hawk, the Indian commander of a joint tribal force, finally surrendered to the forces of white interlopers who had decided that the lands his people had lived on from time immemorial were theirs, not the Indians', he offered a grave warning to the victors: **"The changes of fortune and vicissitudes of war made you my conqueror....I am now an obscure member of a nation that formerly honored and respected my opinions. The pathway to glory is rough, and many gloomy hours obscure it. May the Great Spirit shed light on yours, and that you may never experience the humiliation that the power of the American government has reduced me to, is the wish of him who, in his native forests, was once as proud as you."** (Quoted in M. Astrov, American Indian Prose and Poetry, p.142, 1962). It would be difficult to find more graciousness, wisdom, dignity, solemnness and lack of rancour in the recorded words of any defeated European leader in history.

### The Cherokee

William Bartram, an American naturalist and explorer who had met Attakullakulla, the legendary Cherokee Chief, in the 1770s near the end of his life and spent some time with the Cherokee people, has left a detailed description of the latter. Bartram found them dignified and circumspect in their deportment; rather slow and reserved in conversation; yet frank, cheerful, and humane; tenacious of the liberties and natural rights of man; secret, deliberate, and determined in their councils; honest, just and liberal, and ready always to sacrifice every pleasure and gratification, even their blood, and life itself, to defend their territory and maintain their rights. (The Travels of William Bartram, p.381, 1955).

The very "modern" manner in which the Cherokee treated their women was almost two centuries in advance of Europe and America. Cherokee women enjoyed a high status and could even become warriors if they wished – an indication of gender equality which "civilized" European peoples did not accord to their women until well into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Attakullakulla must have unwittingly embarrassed a British governor when he told the latter: **"It is**

**customary among [us] to admit women to our councils....[Since] the white people, as well as the red, are born of women, is not that the custom among them also?"** (Grace Woodward, The Cherokees, p.43, 1963). If admitting women to Cherokee councils is considered the equivalent of becoming a member of the cabinet in Britain, the Cherokee would have been in advance of that "civilized" country by more than two hundred years. That was the period of time which elapsed between Attakullakulla's conversation with the British governor and the appointment of the first cabinet minister in British history - Margaret Thatcher, who became Secretary of State for Education and Science In 1970. If it is taken to be election to parliament, the time that would have elapsed between the two historic events would be just short of 200 years. The first female Member of Parliament was Lady Astor who, significantly, achieved that first by winning a bye-election in 1919 to take her husband's place which was vacated when he went to the House of Lords.

Lady Astor's election appear to have inaugurated a long-lasting tradition of women making political breakthroughs only by succeeding, or having the way paved by, their husbands or fathers. The tradition was first confirmed by Mrs. Bandanaraike (Sri Lanka) and was perpetuated by Indira Gandhi (India); Khaleda Zia (Bangladesh); Hasina Wazed (Bangladesh); Benazir Bhutto (Pakistan); Cristina Kirchner, (Argentina); and, very nearly, by Hillary Clinton.

Oratory was so highly esteemed among the Cherokee, who were not a warlike people, that a person could rise to the chieftainship on the strength of it. Political decision was by consensus, not by majority vote. People would debate for days in the town house on issues of public concern until harmony – the ideal of Cherokee society was achieved. "Civilized" white America later borrowed, for their own political system, the townhouse meeting of the "uncivilized" Cherokee, renaming it a "townhall" meeting. Imitation is not only the best form of flattery but it also speaks louder than words. **"In short, the Cherokee were a civilized people, perhaps more so than the settlers who would one day drive them from their homes."** (Wright, p.100).

The Iroquois

Sometime around 1000 AD (two centuries before England's much heralded *Magna Carta*, five Cherokee "nations" got together to form a remarkable union known as the Iroquois Confederacy or League. At its most powerful, in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, it was the greatest political entity in North America, its influence stretching 1000 miles from Quebec to Kentucky and from Pennsylvania to Illinois. Around 1720, a sixth nation joined the League. All six nations have survived to the present day. When they decided to form a union, the settler colonies in America decided to adopt the model of the Iroquois Confederacy. It is most ironic that not only did America adopt a constitution modelled on that of a people it later came to consider "uncivilized" and unworthy to live in "civilized" white society but, also, that the idea itself came from an Iroquois chief. It was during the 1744 negotiations between the Iroquois and representatives of the colonies of Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania, which culminated in the signing of the Treaty of Lancaster, by which the colonies' representatives formally recognized Iroquois "preeminence over all the northern Indians" and the Iroquois agreed to cede to Virginia their title to ownership of West Virginia, which they would vacate and move westwards.

Frustrated by the bickering between the colonies' representatives, Conasetego, one of the Iroquois chiefs who had signed the treaty of Lancaster, offered them the following advice: **"We heartily recommend Union and a good agreement between you, our [English] bretheren....Our wise forefathers established union and amity between the Five Nations; this has made us formidable; this has given us great weight and authority with our neighbouring nations. We are a powerful Confederacy; and, by your observing the same methods our wise forefathers have taken, you will acquire fresh strength and power."** (cited in Wright, p.116). Benjamin Franklin, who was present at the treaty negotiations and who subsequently co-authored the American Constitution, considered Conasetego's proposal a good idea, which he promptly borrowed. Not only did the American colonies adopt the Iroquois confederal constitution but they also borrowed the Iroquois eagle and the bundle of arrows in its grasp for their own shield. The only basic change they made was in the number of arrows, which were five for the Iroquois eagle (representing the original Five Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy). The American eagle on the United States Coat of Arms holds a bundle of thirteen arrows in his left talon, representing the thirteen colonies which formed the original Confederation in 1781. It was the first time that all the colonies had come together – thanks to the Iroquois chief, Conasetego, although he did not receive any from them. It would have been much too humiliating for "civilized" white Americans to acknowledge such a fundamentally important cultural debt to a

"barbaric", "uncivilized" people, like the Iroquois. One can hardly blame them. They were human after all – although they unhumanly refused to accord Red men *their* humanity.

Benjamin Franklin, who was granted the privilege of attending an Iroquois meeting, has left a detailed description of it in which he underlined the order that characterized such meetings and the great courtesy extended to all who spoke: **"He that would speak, rises. The rest observe a profound silence. When he has finished and sits down, they leave him 5 or 6 minutes to recollect, that, if he has omitted anything he intended to say, or has anything to add, he may rise again and deliver it. To interrupt another, even in common conversation, is reckoned highly indecent. How different this from the conduct of a polite British House of Commons, where scarce a day passes without some confusion, that makes the speaker hoarse in calling to order; and how different from the mode of conversation in many polite companies of Europe, where, if you do not deliver your sentence with great rapidity, you are cut off in the middle of it by the impatient loquacity of those you converse with, and never suffered to finish it. The politeness of these savages in conversation is indeed carried to excess, since it does not permit them to contradict or deny the truth of what is asserted in their presence. By this means they indeed avoid disputes."** (Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America, 1784). Despite his open recognition that the Iroquois conducted themselves in a more civilized manner than "many polite companies of Europe", Franklin could not bring himself to stop calling them savages. Like old habits, racial prejudices die hard. They are perpetuated by people who prefer to rearrange reality to suit their preconceptions rather than face an inconvenient truth.

Franklin was not the only famous personality who recognized the great merit of the Iroquois constitution. Several other eminent persons also did, when they got to know about it. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were among those who enthused over it. **"This gentle constitution is wonderful! There can be no poor and needy.....All are free and equal – including the women."** (Engels, The Origin of the Family [1884], 1972). At the Albany Congress, a meeting of representatives of seven American colonies in 1754, Benjamin Franklin proposed a plan for uniting the seven colonies which was based on the Iroquois constitution. It passed unanimously, with certain amendments but was rejected by both King George 11 and the legislatures of the individual seven colonies because it would have removed some of their existing powers. Some

elements of the Albany Plan were incorporated in the Articles of Confederation, which kept the States together from 1781 until the present Constitution was adopted in 1787.

**"The new Americans gave little credit to the "ignorant savages" from whom they learned. They adorned Washington, their ceremonial center, with the icons of Greece and Rome and put Latin – *E PLURIBUS UNUM* – in the eagle's mouth. Their historians have even tried to deny or diminish the iroquois precedent, but the truth is that the settler republic took Indian ideas as well as indian land." (Wright, p.116).** It is not the only gift of civilization which the whites, who took their land, received from the Amerindians. Within a century or so after the "discovery", more than fifty new foods had been carried back to the Old World, including maize, turkey, white potato, pumpkin, squash, artichoke, avocado, chocolate, and several kinds of beans. The Europeans have found relief in drugs and pharmaceuticals the Amerindians discovered: quinine, ephedrine, novocaine, curare, ipecac, and witch hazel. Moccasin-style shoes are patterned after Amerindian footwear; canoes, after their birchbark; apparel worn at ski resorts is copied from Eskimo clothing. The noted psychonanalyst Carl Jung once stated that he discerned an Indian component in the character of some of his White American patients, **"If true, a demonstration of how subtly the culture of the conquered can invade the very personalities of the conquerors."** (Farb, p.261).

White America has tried to bury all memory of an American Indian past. It attempted to remove all evidence of that past from the physical landscape, by superimposing on it place names from a classical Graeco-Roman past in the mistaken belief that the latter civilization is the source of all civilization. Although Iroquois places have been renamed Syracuse, Rome, Ithaca, Sparta, Penelope, Homer, Ovid, Corinth, Achilles, Apollo, Cassandra, troy, Parthenon etc., of an estimated total number of 2,200 such classical place names, the attempt has generally failed. The early Virginians changed the name of the *Powhatan* to the *James*, and the first settlers in New York changed the name of *Horicon* to *Lake George*. In the same way the present name of the *White Mountains* displaced *Agiochook* and *New Amsterdam* and, later, *New York* displaced *Manhattan* which was subsequently revived.

Like the historical monuments of India which, built in stone, have survived the ravages of time to bear mute testimony to a glorious Indian past, the ubiquitous American Indian place names that have survived White America's cultural iconoclasm testify that the American past is not Graeco-Roman or post-medieval European, or any other. It is unmistakably American Indian. The second city of the United States (Chicago) bears an Indian name, and so do the largest American river, and the greatest American water-fall, and four of the five Great Lakes. **"There is no part of the world,"** enthused Robert Louis Stevenson, **"where nomenclature is so rich, poetical, humorous and picturesque as in the United States of America"**. About half the states in America have Indian names, and so do thousands of cities, towns, rivers, lakes, and mountains. There are many Spanish, French, Italian and, of course, Graeco-Roman place names in the U.S. but it is surely the Indian place names which must have inspired Stevenson's remark. If there is any doubt at all on that score, it is immediately dispersed by Walt Whitman, the most original of America's poets, a veritable American icon who, in the preface to the *Leaves of Grass* (1855), exhorted America **"not to repel the past or what it has produced under its forms."** For Whitman, that past was indisputably American Indian, not Graeco-Roman, as he eloquently illustrated in another of his writings: **"'Mississippi!', the word winds with chutes—it rolls a stream three thousand miles long.....Monongahela! it rolls with venison richness upon the palate....Yonnonديو, a song, a poem of itself...a dirge....Aboriginal names always tell finely....All classic names are objectionable. How much better Ohio, Oregon, Missouri, Milwaukee & Iowa than New York, Ithaca, Naples..."**

Place names are cultural artifacts which tell us as much about how people lived as do relics dug from the ground, writes Virgil Vogel, an authority on place names and author of Indian place name books for Iowa, Illinois, and Michigan. Kentucky comes from an Iroquoian word (*Kentahthen*), which means "land of tomorrow"; Connecticut's name comes from the Mohican word (*Quinnehtukqut*); Arizona, from the Indian "*Arizonac*," meaning "little spring" or "young spring"; Massachusetts, from the Massachusett people, meaning "at or about the great hill"; Illinois is an Algonquin word meaning "tribe of superior men." Utah, from the Ute tribe, meaning "people of the mountains"; Oklahoma, from two Choctaw Indian words meaning "red people"; Wyoming, from the Delaware Indian word, meaning "mountains and valleys alternating"; Niagara is named after an Iroquoian town, "*Ongiaahra*"; Michigan, from the Indian word "*Michigana*" meaning "great or large lake." Indiana means "land of Indians"; Chicago is an Algonquin word meaning "garlic field." Minnesota, from a Dakota Indian word meaning "sky-tinted water." Missouri is named after the

Missouri, is the name of an Indian tribe; (Lake) Tahoe is the Washo Indian word for "big water"; Mississippi is a Caddo Indian word meaning "Father of Waters; Arkansas, a word from the Quapaw Indian language; Alabama is named after the Alabama or Alibamon people, who were members of the Creek Confederacy; Malibu, from the Chumash Indians. Milwaukee is an Algonquian word meaning "a good spot or place." Iowa, named after the Iowa people, means "this is the place" or "the Beautiful Land."

The Iroquois year was a round of feasts and festivals, held in thankful celebration of the beneficence of their Creator and the bountiful harvests provided by Nature. Families gathered at the sugar groves in spring to celebrate Thanks-to-the-Maple feast. In May or June, came the Corn Planting which was followed by the Strawberry Festival when the first wild fruit was sampled. The most important of such festivities was the Green Corn Dance, when the first maize had ripened. Finally, in October, when the crops were harvested and stored, the Iroquois honored the Creator with their Thanksgiving festival. **"The loan went unacknowledged. At white Thanksgivings, the thanks, if there are any, go to a white god who helped his faithful survive in a supposed wilderness. The diners then sit down to eat turkey, pumpkin, maize, beans, and potatoes, none of which was known to pre-Columbian Europe. It was the heathen savage, not the Christian god, who fed them."** (Wright, p.121).

#### National Differences in European Attitudes towards Non-Europeans

The way in which non-Europeans were treated by Europeans in both the colonial and the pre-colonial periods varied significantly, reflecting, as it did, national cultural attitudes, prejudices, and character. The English have an ethnic conception of national identity which necessarily excludes anyone who is not English born. The French, on the other hand, conceive their identity in more cultural terms which made it possible for individuals, who are not ethnically French but who have acquired sufficient French culture, to assume a French identity. Until well into the 1990's, second and third generation Black British nationals living in England were never described as "English". They were referred to as Britishers of Jamaican, Trinidadian, Nigerian, Ghanaian (etc.) ancestry. Where the English could not possibly conceive of an Englishman with a black skin, the French conception of national identity readily accommodated the idea of a Frenchman with black skin. In

the pre-Le Pen (the French ultra-nationalist who subsequently stamped French society with his racist ideology) period, White Frenchmen felt a closer affinity to their Black fellow nationals than they did to other Europeans. The first five athletes to reach the finishing line in the 100 metre race at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics were all Blacks, one of whom was a French national, the others being American. The following day, half of the front page of the French newspaper, *France Soir*, was taken up by a picture of the photo finish of the five athletes, with the caption "**Quatre noirs et un Français**" ("Four Blacks and a Frenchman").

That particular French conception of identity is a culture trait with deep historical roots. V.G. Kiernan reasoned that Frenchmen were the leading spirits in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, one feature of which was a willingness to recognize civilizations outside Europe as fellow-members of a human family, which were equal or even superior to Europe in some of their attainments. Discussing the general attitude of the *Philosophes*, he remarked: "**What these intellectuals of an aristocratic society were predisposed to look for and to admire was something resembling themselves, a class of men of enlarged minds and sympathies benevolently guiding ordinary mankind.**" (Kiernan, p.20).

The Germans also have an ethnic conception of national identity, a cultural trait that is so deeply rooted in their history that it was noted by Tacitus, the Roman historian of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. In *Germania*, his book on the German peoples, Tacitus said that Germans were averse to marrying outside their ethnic group. That strong cultural trait is reflected in current German legislation which makes it extremely difficult for non-European immigrants to acquire German nationality. There are, and were, much more unfortunate consequences of that particular German predisposition. It fertilized the ground for the planting of the seeds of racial prejudice in German society, which began to flower in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the proliferation of racist theories of supremacy. Those theories found their first concrete expression in German South West Africa – a territory which was chosen as the scene for a full dress rehearsal of the Final Solution that was attempted during the Second World War.

The different attitudes of Germans and France to national and racial identity are perfectly illustrated by a comparison of the respective experiences of two of their recent tennis champions.

Yannick Noah, a black Frenchman whose father is a Camerounian, won the 1983 tournament at Roland-Garros (one of the world's four grand slam tournaments) and was fêted as a national hero. He later married a white French woman, a sister of one of his tennis colleagues. In subsequent annual surveys of public opinion, Noah has always figured among the top four or five French nationals who are most admired by the French. Boris Becker won Wimbledon in 1985, which made him into a German national hero overnight. However, Becker made the "mistake" of marrying a black woman after becoming a national icon. He received so much racist hate mail and death threats that he decided to emigrate for his own safety, and that of his family.

The differences in attitude towards national identity, on the part of the French and the British, resulted in each acting very differently towards Africans and other non-European peoples in the pre-colonial, colonial, and early post-colonial periods. The English established clubs which excluded all Africans from membership, even the most cultivated and sophisticated. In their ethnically pure clubs, English judges, doctors, and senior civil servants would rub shoulders with uncultured English plumbers, foremen, and similarly skilled workers rather than with Africans of their own cultural and intellectual level. French professionals, on the other hand, would rather mix socially with educated, cultivated Africans in the colonies than with the "*petits blancs*", their uncultured countrymen of inferior social status with whom they felt they had little in common.

Those different choices also reflected differences in national character and disposition. The English tend to be suspicious of learning and intellectual ability and would often comment dismissively about anyone who publicly displayed such despised qualities. The French could not be more different. French people of all social levels admire intellectual attainment and brilliance and, as such, they could not possibly conceive of electing to high office a John Major, who dropped out of school at age 16, or a Ronald Reagan or a George Bush. All leading political and business personalities in France made sure to acquire the highest educational and intellectual qualifications before embarking on their careers, knowing fully well that that was the only path to a successful career. The average American's notion of an ideal president - one for whom he would readily vote - is someone with whom he would like to have a drink in a bar. That peculiarly American cultural trait had Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama fervently competing with each other, during the primaries, to demonstrate to voters that *they* were very comfortable drinking in a bar with ordinary Americans. It is not quite certain that either candidate succeeded in doing so.

The general lack of respect for intellectuals in small-town America was held to be the principal reason the intellectual Adlai Stevenson failed to beat Eisenhower (whom Gordon Lewis once described in an article as being "intellectually weak") in the 1952 presidential elections. After one of his campaign speeches, a female voter rushed up to Stevenson to inform him proudly: **"Mr Stevenson, you have captured the vote of every thinking American."** Without thinking (no pun intended), Stevenson replied despondently: **"Ma'am, we need a majority."** One can easily appreciate what a very difficult task Obama, an intellectual himself, faces in a society where thinking people are in a minority - perhaps even a small one.

France is a meritocratic society, *par excellence*, where one's life is punctuated with numerous *concours* (competitive exams) for places in higher education, jobs, etc. *Concours*, on the results of which the best individuals are chosen for the jobs, courses, higher education places, on the basis only of their marks, are imposed for everything imaginable. One has to pass a *concours* in order to become a postman, or to be able to begin training as a hairdresser or a butcher and, it has even been said that certain business firms demand that cleaning women pass a *concours*. Apart from the aristocracy, which is no importance to anyone in France but themselves, social class in France is determined by one's own achievements. The graduates of the handful of elite French educational institutions which accept only a small number of students each year (the most elite one, *Ecole Nationale d'Administration*, accepts only 100 students annually), and which provide a highway to the best jobs in the society, almost automatically become members of the highest social class. Aristocracy is so little considered that a noble title is regarded as a handicap in political, public, or business life. Virtually all aristocrats never use their titles in any professional activity in which they might be engaged.

It would be impossible to translate into French the English put-down expression "too clever by half" in any way that would be comprehensible to a French person. Indeed, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for any French person to conceive that anyone could be considered "too clever". The French language would be incapable of accommodating such a strange expression, and so would the French. Intellectuals, who are dismissed as "eggheads" in America and who enjoy little status in England, are literally worshiped in France. The highest compliment a person can receive in France is to be considered *"très cultivé"*. It is reported that half of France attended Victor Hugo's funeral in 1885, which might not be too much of an exaggeration. Perhaps half of Paris

did attend that of Sartre in 1980. Ever since Emile Zola and his *J'accuse* (the newspaper article he wrote in defense of Dreyfus, the French Army captain wrongly accused of selling military secrets to the Germans at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), the French intellectual has become perhaps the single most influential figure in French society. His company is sought, and his opinion listened to, by all figures of public importance, including French prime ministers and presidents. Zola's letter has been compared to Voltaire's pamphlet *Traité sur la tolérance à l'occasion de la mort de Jean Calas*, which he published in 1763 in defense of a small shop owner who had been wrongly condemned to death in 1761. Voltaire, like Zola was to do later in the Dréyfus case, succeeded in obtaining a revision of Calas' trial and, also, his subsequent acquittal.

The French tradition of the intellectual *engagé* fighting for a social, judicial, or political cause has continued. Sartre was an outstanding example of that quintessentially French institution. When General de Gaulle's government made the radical newspaper, *La Cause du Peuple*, illegal, with imprisonment as the statutory penalty for violating the law either by publishing or selling it, Sartre placed himself at a street corner in the heart of the Latin Quarter in Paris, offering the paper for sale in full public view. He was arrested by the police together with his associates but de Gaulle ordered his immediate release with the comment: **"One ne peut pas mettre Voltaire en prison."** ("One cannot put Voltaire in prison"). Jorge Luis Borges once observed that the French are an intellectual people and J. K Galbraith has called Paris the intellectual salon of Europe, a reputation it has enjoyed for more than 200 years. After paying a brief visit to Paris in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Dr Samuel Johnson, the English lexicographer, declared that he had heard more conversation worth remembering during his stay there than he had heard in an entire season in London.

It was thus most natural that the educated French colonial in Africa would prefer the more stimulating company of his African intellectual peers than that of uncultured *"petits blancs"*. It was very different with the English colonial who, completely uninterested in intelligent discourse, could freely indulge his racial prejudices in rejecting the company of his African peers without denying himself anything he considered worthwhile. The Italian writer, Luigi Barzini, has noted that most peculiar English anti-intellectual disposition: **"The British code of behaviour made it almost impossible for any well-mannered person to seem intelligent or well informed, even at an**

**informal dinner or in a casual conversation. As they were forbidden to talk about themselves, their families, personalities, children, servants, the things they did, the things they knew best, religion and politics, they were therefore limited to non-committal generic statements and vague banalities. To fill the silence, they were trained to ask bland questions and make other people talk." (The Europeans, 1983, p.51).** Despite his many attempts to do so, Barzini found it impossible to persuade an Englishman to engage in intelligent conversation, an experience that led him to conclude that **"there was no sure way to ascertain if an Englishman was intelligent or stupid."**(p.50).

Another important French tradition is the *soirée* where participants engage in intelligent conversation. It is a tradition which dates back to at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Marc Fumaroli has examined the equalizing role conversation played under France's *ancien régime*. In that pre-democratic era, the art of conversation, as it was practised in Parisian private circles on the fringe of the Court and its institutions, was a veritable institution with its own rules, ethic, rites, and style. It was a counterpoint to the rigidly-hierarchical, autocratic power structure of the time. The "institution" of the conversation was egalitarian, in the sense that rank, titles, fortune, or power counted for little. Personal merit, as displayed in that competitive intellectual game of words, wit, and wisdom, was the sole criterion for establishing each person's social credentials as well as the pecking order. (Preface to *L'Art de La Conversation*, J. Hellegouarc'h (ed), 1997). That uniquely French social institution was also egalitarian in terms of gender. Indeed, in the heyday of the French salon it was French women who ruled the roost. The most famous Parisian salons in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were those held by a number of very gifted women who more than held their own with the men, whose respect and admiration for their wit and intelligence was well earned. In a way, the institution of the conversation presaged the later institutionalized mechanism – the *concours* – as an effective method of establishing the pecking order in France's modern meritocracy.

Kant believed that the French penchant for conversation offered a model for other countries. He thought that the conversation in Parisian salons had, or would, become the common form of language everywhere and that, in time, it was bound to promote a spirit of mutual aid and universal philosophy, while Theodore Zeldin, in remarking that conversation is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits, has suggested that conversation changes the way one

sees the world, **“for when minds meet they don’t just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought. Conversation doesn’t just reshuffle the cards: it creates new cards.”** (Conversation: How Talk Can Change Your Life, p.14, 1998).

For his part, Michael Oakeshott, has suggested that, in conversation, different universes of discourse meet and, to be sustained, conversation requires a diversity of voices and opinions, an acknowledgement on the part of the participants of the existence of other points of view, and a willingness to listen to them. The mere act of engaging in conversation, by denying a hierarchical order among the different individuals involved, establishes a kind of equality among the participants. (The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind, 1969). Sport appears to be the most popular pastime in America and, probably, the second most popular pastime is talking about it. A British journalist, who was posted to the U.S. in the late 1990s, found that sport was the only subject of conversation on which he could engage male Americans whom he met in bars. He therefore decided that he had to bone up on the ball game if he wished to establish contact with ordinary Americans, which was professionally important for him. Intellectual France presents a stark contrast to sporting America. Sport has been tacitly banished from conversation in polite French society, as being an unworthy subject for intelligent discussion. One could spend an entire lifetime in France without once personally hearing a conversation on sport.

As far back as the 18th century, Alexis de Tocqueville was quite struck by the great difference between the French and the English in their attitudes to social class. He noted that while the concern of the French is to avoid having any superior, that of the British is to want to have inferiors. **"The result is that, while the Frenchman never ceases to cast his eyes above with great anxiety, the Englishman derives pleasure in casting his eyes on those beneath him."** The English preoccupation with accent is a function of their preoccupation with class, which makes it virtually compulsory for newspapers and the electronic media to always indicate, for the information of their readers, audience, or viewers, the exact social status of every person mentioned in their news reports. For the English upper classes, the school (not the university) the person attended suffices. For the "other" classes, it is the occupation of the father which fulfils that necessary function. In contrast, most French people are unaware of, and uninterested in, the

occupation of the fathers of the leading figures in public life. What they consider important is what the individual concerned has achieved in his life.

Where the English judge a person's social class and status by his accent, because of their intellectual disposition the French judge a person's worth by his mastery of the French language, not by the accent which is considered superficial. France's excellent state school system (at the primary and secondary levels), which is incomparably better than the private school system and, as such, carefully avoided by any French parent who wants the best education for his child, produces school graduates with a uniform accent. There are French regional accents, particularly that of southern France which is regarded in the same way as the English regard a Scottish accent – carrying no social stigma whatsoever. In a country where intellectual attainment and intelligent conversation are considered so important, the quality of the language used in expressing one's thought is of the utmost importance. Since French grammar is very complex, a mastery of the language must necessarily include a mastery of the difficult grammar, which a surprising number of French people are said not to possess, as revealed in their written expression. In France a grammatical solecism can have social consequences that are similar to those engendered in England by a non-public school accent, so a significant number of business executives are reported to take private tutoring to improve their grammar in order to avoid being socially stigmatized, or made fun of, by colleagues and business associates.

Commenting on how fixated the English are on accent as an indication of a person's social class and a criterion of acceptability, Bernard Shaw once remarked that no Englishman could ever open his mouth without having another Englishman look down on him. Stephen Spender, the English poet, recalled, in an article in Encounter, having met Siegfried Sassoon as a young undergraduate. Having heard that Sassoon had personally known Wilfred Owen, the leading English poet of the First World War, Spender asked him what Owen was like. Sassoon responded: **"He was embarrassing. He had a grammar school accent."**

The criterion of accent, rather than the actual content of what is said, to judge a person's class was applied by the British in their colonies with just as much relish as it was at home. Having had to master several local languages, Indians, unlike Britons, tend to be rather good linguists, but

"few had the opportunity to gain a colloquial, as they did a literary, mastery, of English and their way of talking sounded comical to Englishmen. England was a country where the educated classes derived perennial entertainment from the faulty speech of the uneducated. *'Babu Jabberjee'* became a stock figure of fun."(Kiernan, p.49). Discussing the subject of British racial snobbery in the colonies, the English 19<sup>th</sup>-century historian, G.O. Trevelyan, deeply regretted that **"the habit of sneering at our dark fellow-subjects is so confirmed in some people that they lose sight of sense and logic."** (Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay, p.49, 1876).