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## AT ISSUE

### *A Civilizing Mission?*

**I**t's at least something to think about, now that the 20th century is behind us, a century that, by historian John Lukacs's reckoning, began in 1914 and ended in 1989. That most vertiginous of centuries began with a resounding bang, one that dealt a near-mortal blow to all the big ideals and to all the gods.

In fact, the only god that came through the horrors of Verdun and the Somme unscathed was irony. Not merely unscathed, it rose within the pantheon. After World War I, as Paul Fussell relates, irony became the only attitude that a thinking person could assume. But it was even more than an attitude. It was a deeply rooted orientation toward the world, marked by doubt, skepticism, and uncertainty. And on no ideal did it focus with more exquisite ferocity than on the ideal of civilization, by which was meant, of course, Western civilization.

That ideal was a blend, perhaps unholy, of legacies as diverse as the Jewish and Christian religions, Roman and Germanic law, Hellenic rationalism, Renaissance individualism, Enlightenment progressivism, assorted democratic and parliamentary traditions, and, not least, scientific, technological, and industrial know-how. Whatever can be said for or against this amalgam, it proved so dynamic a force that it compelled Europeans to venture beyond the boundaries of their continent to the four corners of the earth, giving rise to vast colonial and imperial projects.

Irony of ironies, though, these projects, which were carried out by the more powerful European nations under the name of what the French called *la mission civilisatrice*, may well have planted the seeds of future doubts about the meaning, direction, and value of civilization. For one, they exposed Europeans to other civilizations, and though the usual response was to view the other forms as deficient, primitive, and therefore deserving of condescension or eradication, some Europeans recognized

the value—and often the superiority—of what they encountered. Colonialism had another equally doubt-inducing effect. Because it encouraged brutal forms of exploitation, including slavery, it was not long before the civilizing mission seemed to have no greater effect than that of barbarizing the civilizers.

The quest for empire was not the only thing to bring out the contradictions of Western civilization. The West has had no shortage of in-house critics to point out its failings. Karl Marx was only the most influential of the modern age. And what he and others said about the pathologies of our civilization seemed to many to be borne out by the Great War—a war that not only confirmed people's worst suspicions, but helped bring into being a would-be utopian alternative, the Soviet Union.

During the "century" that saw the birth, life, and death of the Soviet Union, a complicated argument over the question of civilization took place. One could say that this argument was the subtext of that century's history. The question itself consisted of many subquestions: Was there really something called civilization worth preserving, or was it just one of the "big words" in the great game, another weapon of "power politics" (that wonderful 20th-century redundancy)? Was it a mixed legacy, whose bad could be separated from its good, or was the whole package rotten, an "old bitch gone in the teeth," as Ezra Pound put it? Was it fatally Eurocentric, or did it contain universal, even eternal, truths? Indeed, could civilization be defined as an ever more capacious ideal, one that slowly, progressively comprehends the best that is thought and felt in all the world's cultures? And, not least, was civilization, however defined, worth fighting and dying for? At times, many people—among them the most intelligent and well-meaning of people—thought not.

When we look back upon the abysmal

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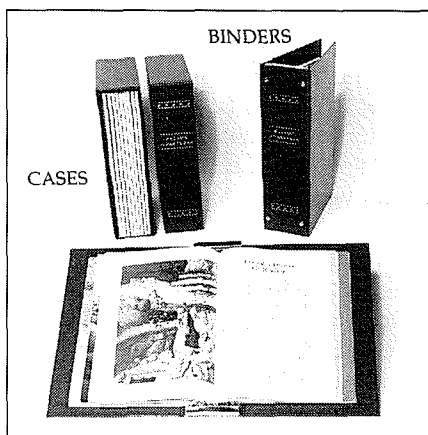
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record of the 20th century, what emerges as perhaps its most remarkable aspect is that, somehow, the defenders of an ideal of civilization not only managed to keep the faith but also to prevail. So much of the intellectual energy of the 20th century was devoted to debunking and unmasking, so much to exposing the feet of clay, that relatively little serious attention was given to discerning what should be preserved. Morality was aestheticized, with high culture embodying the Nietzschean principle that life was justifiable only as an aesthetic experience. Character went the way of so many other ideals. According to intellectuals, there were no heroes. Great men or women mattered little in the tide of human events; the "forces" of history made history. Yet history showed otherwise. Individuals of the stature of Churchill and Walesa turned historical tides. And fortunately the common people proved wiser, finally, than most intellectuals. Even as high culture explored new reaches of relativism and pushed irony to its limits—and how Hitler loved the Weimar ironists for preparing the way for his ascent!—popular culture in the West preserved a core of simpler sanity. The films of Humphrey Bogart upheld a notion of character and virtue that no Sartrean treatise on "bad faith" could effectively, much less popularly, cancel.

**B**ut a civilization cannot fare well for long when its head is severed from its body. Popular culture ran on borrowed time and dwindling spiritual and intellectual capital for most of the 20th century. That Ronald Reagan, a Hollywood actor, should have been one of the stronger supporters of the ideal of civilization in the closing decade of the 20th century says a great deal about how precarious the situation had become (which is neither to forgive his excesses nor to devalue his accomplishments). We must remember that Reagan was the product of an earlier popular culture, one that began to die in the 1960s. The ethos of that earlier culture helped shape his resolve to wage a determined struggle against a demoralized but still powerful Soviet empire; that determination was essential in convincing Soviet lead-

ers that no easy solution to their problems was at hand. Given his achievement, it hardly matters that many of Reagan's beliefs were derived from a highly sentimentalized popular-culture version of civilized values: They gave him the strength and vision to hold fast and finally to triumph.

**B**ut the popular culture that Reagan derived sustenance and direction from is now largely dead. What we see in its stead, in the United States and throughout the West, is a frightening thing. Dominating films, TV shows, and music is the old ironic mode of 20th-century high culture, now cheapened into a feckless cynicism that comports extremely well with what has become popular culture's main function: advertisement. Serving now primarily as an advertising medium to drive manic consumption, popular culture projects an endless procession of fashionable styles and attitudes while suggesting the toys and accoutrements to go along with them. It does this, moreover, even while mocking itself and its own devious ploys. It invites everyone in on the lie of false happiness, creating a kind of fellowship of hip and cheerful nihilism. The priests of this cult will come and go; for the moment, though, we have the likes of David Letterman, Rush Limbaugh, and two entirely charming fellows named Beavis and Butt-head.

We have come to a peculiar pass. Civilization, thought to be on its last legs, staggers through the last round of a long and bloody fight and unexpectedly—*mirabile dictu*—KO's its biggest challenger. Stunned, punch-drunk, and lurching back to its corner, victorious civilization stares into the crowd of its screaming fans and recognizes . . . almost no one. Shaking its head in disbelief, it is not even sure what *it* is any more, much less what the stakes of the fight were or what the prize is. The fans don't seem to care, either. They're having fun, though it looks like a violent, savage sort of fun.

This, then, is where we stand: in the parking lot outside the arena where civilization scored its last-round stunner, uncertain where to go next.

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But history abhors a vacuum as much as nature does. There are already those opportunists around the world who have taken decisive advantage of civilization's self-doubts—one might even say its identity crisis—to pursue their own dubious ambitions. One such miscreant, Saddam Hussein, was scolded back into line, though so far his people have suffered far more than he has. Others have carried out their misdeeds with complete impunity.

Is there reason to hope that civilization can snap out of its postvictory doldrums? There is. That hope resides in what some people call the culture wars. This argument among intellectuals, mainly American so far but, increasingly, others from around the world, is important less for what it has yet accomplished than for the questions it raises. First, it focuses attention on the crucial issue, on culture, provoking needed debate on what the term itself means. It presses us to consider such conflicts as the particular and the relative versus the universal and eternal; it raises the question of

whether or not the teaching of values should be returned to the center of education; it asks probing questions about both high culture and popular culture, what shapes them and how they shape us.

Such questions must be asked. The responses they elicit may well become the substance of the civilizing process in the 21st century. We will hear many shrill answers, of course, and many narrowly partisan or provincial views, but even these will be preferable, as part of an argument (a truly multinational argument) over values and ideas, to the nihilism of the international popular-culture machine, which preaches only the maximization of pleasure and selfishness under the false dispensation that nothing else matters. The argument is essential if civilization is to recover a backbone and a firm sense of itself. One could even say that it is the essential condition of any true global security.

—J.T.