

Group session: Workshop, “Comparative Literature, Europe(s), the World: Legacies and Perspectives”

**European Civilization and Barbarism:
Some Considerations on Historical Categories and Myths.**

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Eloquence and correct speaking, as opposed to ‘barbarism’, have been given throughout history a value that goes well beyond linguistic competence and social skill, and have contributed in significant ways to the idea of Europe and its literary, cultural, and linguistic identity. The status of dominant languages (from Greek to Classical Latin, to Medieval Latin, and more recently to English) and the way the relationship between the hegemonic language and the common language of the people has been constructed at various historical moments adds complexity to this question, as a notion of value based on eloquence and aesthetics as the foundation of civilization (and/or ‘civility’) have had to compete, at different junctures (from Dante to Montaigne, from European Romanticism to Modernism), with the attribution of value to the ideal of the ‘common people’, the ‘noble savage’, and various forms of simplicity and primitivism. These competing but mutually dependent concepts have informed European colonialism, dividing the European from its ‘non-European other’ (the ‘erring barbarian’, as Iago calls Othello), but have also divided Europe along historically changeable boundaries (Barbarians threatening the Roman Empire from the North and East, descriptions of the ‘medieval Balkans’ by nineteenth-century Western European travellers, the primitive South seen from the Protestant North in the writings of Mme de Staël, André Gide, D.H. Lawrence...), while artificially constructed periodizations (e.g., ‘the medieval’) collaborate in defining the ‘true’ nature of Europe (as when Eliot nostalgically praises the undivided medieval ‘mind of Europe’ that can ‘think together’, or politicians want to include references to ‘the Christian roots of Europe’ in the EU Constitution).

My paper will delineate, contextualise and discuss some of the main questions raised by these complex and changing relationships. One of these concerns the possibility of translation across such boundaries: how, for a start, can the complexity of modern European civilization be translated into simpler, primitive language systems and world views, and what are the implications of such supposedly unequal encounter for translation theory itself? (Though the question of translation of the ‘primitive’ into the ‘civilized’ is rarely asked, as such appropriation does not appear to pose the same categorical problem, it also raises significant issues, not least that of a re-assessment of the medieval association of *translatio imperii* with *translatio studii*, i.e. the transferral of power alongside knowledge on clearly identified geo-cultural-political lines). Crucially, how have these notions –the relationship between an ideal of civilization based on eloquence and aesthetics, the ideal of ‘the common people’, and the coincidence between national and literary/cultural identity– informed from its beginnings, and continue to inform, in Europe and globally, the definition and nature of ‘comparative literature’?

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