

# The Status of Women as a Standard of ‘Civilization’

ANN TOWNS  
*University of Delaware, USA*

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This article focuses on the status of women as a standard of civilization by examining its emergence in the 19th-century European ‘society of civilized states.’ More specifically, the article centers on expectations about the proper political role of women and how these operated as a standard to distinguish ‘civilized’ states from other societies. The article shows that the political exclusion of women — not their inclusion — became expected behavior for ‘advanced’ societies at this time. To statesmen and social scientists alike, evidence from ‘savage’ society and an uncivilized European past demonstrated that women could not contribute to human advancement if given a political role. To arrive at this claim, the article examines the understandings that had come into place to make the political exclusion of women possible and reasonable for European and European settler states.

KEY WORDS ♦ civilization ♦ civilized society ♦ gender ♦ international hierarchy ♦ international society ♦ norms ♦ women

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## *Introduction*

There are pervasive presumptions among scholars and practitioners of international relations that the political empowerment of women is a phenomenon of European origin, rooted in Western Enlightenment and liberal traditions. The standard account is generally a more sophisticated variation on the following: for millennia, as a matter of tradition, women around the world were either oblivious to or helpless before their subjugation to men. With the rise of secularism and science, Europeans were not only relieved from previous religious dogma that undergirded such subjugation but they also came to develop law within the constitutional state. The constitutional state

became the blessing of women, as law placed bounds on the legitimacy of physical coercion and provided the tools for women to argue for equality of opportunity, including access to various state organs. The spread of European conceptualizations of women and the state then helped non-European women become aware of their traditional misperceptions about sexual difference and pressured non-European states to take on institutions and adopt laws to halt male oppression.

The political empowerment of women has thus become understood as closely tied to so-called 'Western civilization.' Indeed, few indicators seem more effective in signaling the civilizational standing of a state than the situation of women. In the process of legitimating the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, for instance, Laura Bush pointed to the plight of Afghan women as evidence of the 'barbarism' of Taliban rule. 'Civilized people throughout the world are speaking out in horror — not only because our hearts break for the women and children in Afghanistan, but also because in Afghanistan we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us,' she proclaimed (Office of Mrs Bush, 2001). The intense controversy over the veil across the world likewise reveals just how powerful a symbol of Islam female veiling has become, a practice held by many as antithetical to Western civilization.

This article focuses on the status of women as a standard of civilization by examining the standard's emergence in the 19th-century European 'society of civilized states.' More specifically, the article centers on expectations about the proper relations between women and the political institutions of the state, and how these expectations have operated as a standard to distinguish the so-called 'civilized' from other societies. A number of scholars have shown that the political institutions of the state became inextricably linked to the meaning of civilization in the 19th century (e.g. Bowden, 2004a; Gong, 1984; Mazlish, 2004: 12) 'The presence, or otherwise, of the institutions of society that facilitate governance in accordance with established (Western) European traditions was widely believed to be a hallmark of the makings of, or potential for civilisation,' as Bowden (2004a: 35) argues.

A focus on the 19th century allows a comparison with the present, a comparison which will demonstrate a major disruption in how the political status of women is linked to civilization. This article will show that the *exclusion* of women from the political sphere used to be upheld as indication of a more civilized society. A wide range of European scholars, politicians, and activists came to expect only so-called 'savage' societies to cede political power to women in the 19th century. The understanding today is quite different, as noted above. Women's suffrage and increases in the numbers of women in other forms of formal political decision-making is now held to be indicative not of 'savage' values, but of Western political culture

(e.g. Berkovitch, 1999; Finnemore and Sikkink, 1999; Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Ramirez and Weiss, 1979; Ramirez et al., 1997). The analysis will also show that the full-scale exclusion of women from politics did not become a norm for 'civilized society' until the 19th century, as there was significant diversity across Europe in the preceding centuries.

The article draws upon and speaks to a growing body of scholarship within the field of International Relations (IR) that analyzes the standards of (Western) civilization (e.g. Bowden, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2007a, 2007b; Donnelly, 1998; Fidler, 2000; Gong, 1984; Hall and Jackson, 2007; Keal, 1995, 2003; Keene, 2002; Mazlish, 2004; Suzuki, 2005). I share these scholars' interest in understanding the contextual and historical construction of the meanings of civilization, presuming that meaning systems guide and structure human behavior. Such an approach 'requires us to immerse ourselves in the history of humankind's reflections upon itself and its achievements' (Mazlish, 2004: 4). The article is thus positioned within the genealogical strand of IR, which is interested in the changing knowledges that inform international actors and behaviors (see e.g. Bartelson, 1995; Price, 1995, 1997). I also share the assumption that the standards of civilization are constitutive of difference, drawing bounds between Self and Other and providing criteria 'against which barbarity, or non-civilisation, is judged and condemned' (Starobinski, 1993: 31).

Civilization is clearly not a static concept, and its meanings have been both contested and plural (see particularly Bowden, 2007a; Mazlish, 2004). The intersection with numerous sets of ideas and social practices has been examined, most notably how civilization takes on meaning with reference to religion, law, and socio-political organization, rationality and science, and modernity and progress. What has not been noted in IR scholarship — feminist IR included — is the intersection with gender and the operation of the status of women as a standard of civilization. Given the pervasiveness of the idea, this omission is curious. It is even more curious when considering that many of these scholars mention the importance of the position of women. For instance, Mazlish (2004: 157) states that 'in almost all discussions of civilization since its conceptualization by Mirabeau [in the 18th century], the status of women has been mooted as the measure of the level of civilization.' These claims have so far been made in passing and have not yet been backed by an actual analysis of the standard as such.

A number of feminist studies outside the field of IR have looked at the contextual interpretations of gender and civilization in particular national or sub-national environments, especially around the issues of sexuality, veiling, and marriage practices (e.g. Clancy-Smith and Gouda, 1998; Göle, 1996; Jeffrey, 2002; Moran, 1988; Pollard, 2005; Poovey, 1988). Feminist historians of colonialism and empire have likewise implicated European

feminists in the discourse of civilization, showing their participation in and grappling with the assumptions of Western superiority in their interactions with women in colonized territories (e.g. Burton, 1990; Ramusack, 1990; Strobel, 1991). However, this literature has not yet addressed the intersection of the political exclusion of women and the meaning of civilization. Nor have these scholars focused on the status of women as an international standard among states. This article hopes to contribute to a greater understanding of the political status of women as an international standard of civilization.

The standards of civilization that inform state behavior are thoroughly gendered. A more complete and comprehensive understanding of the standards of civilization demands that we address in what ways this is so. Given that the standard has changed from the exclusion to the inclusion of women, we cannot take as given or obvious the link between the situation of women and the civilizational rank of a state. This article thus probes the question of what understandings came into place to make the exclusion possible and reasonable for European and European settler states. What were civilized states understood to be so that it made sense to bar women from their institutions? Likewise, what were women understood to be — what sorts of beings, with what characteristics and capacities for action — so that their exclusion seemed sensible? The article points to the centrality of the simultaneous formation of three entities — the state, woman, and civilization — and how the regulation of their relations changed between the era of absolutism to that of the ‘civilized’ constitutional state. Although such an analysis cannot be exhaustive, the article brings to light some of the understandings that came to be shared and necessary for the full-scale removal of women from formal politics in the society of civilized states.

A focus on civilization and the status of women also underscores how malleable the understandings of civilization really are. This is not an entirely new argument — prior scholarship has pointed to a number of changes in the standards of civilization between the 19th century and the present. Many of the formal criteria for membership in what used to be called the society of civilized states no longer hold (e.g. Gong, 1984). Adherence to human rights (Donnelly, 1998) and market principles (Bowden and Seabrooke, 2007; Fidler, 2000) have emerged as contemporary standards of civilization, requiring states to conform in order to participate as full and legitimate members of international society. The status of women is peculiar in this respect. The situation of women has remained a measuring rod since the 19th century. What has changed — dramatically — is the understanding of what sort of political status women should have to indicate advancement. I wish to highlight that standards of civilization may appear constant in the abstract while exhibiting remarkable transformations in the concrete interpretations that give the standards meaning.

The remainder of the article proceeds in three sections. It begins by presenting evidence to support the claim that the political exclusion of women had become a standard of the society of civilized states by the end of the 19th century. The following two sections attempt to make sense of this development. They begin with a focus on shifts in how sexual difference was understood between the absolutist era and the 19th century. A two-sex model (with woman and man as different in essence) developed in the 18th and 19th centuries, which made it possible to speak about women as a collective. This also made it possible to ban 'woman' *as such* from the state polity, based on her distinctive characteristics. Here, I follow feminist IR scholars such as Elshtain (1987) and Peterson (1992) who bring the work of feminist political theorists and historians into conversation with the conventional IR treatments of the state.

The third section then shows how the new sexual category woman also took on meaning with reference to the civilizing process, with implications for her political status. This section examines central social scientific works on woman and civilization, as well as the treatment of the topic by public officials, to show how it could appear reasonable and necessary for civilized states to keep women away from the affairs of state. In looking at the emerging social sciences, I follow a tradition among scholars of the international standards of civilization (on this point, see particularly Gong, 1984: 47–53; Hall and Jackson, 2007; Mazlish, 2004). The analysis shows that evidence from 'savage' society and an uncivilized European past emerged that indicated that woman could not contribute to human advancement if given a political role. This section is given most elaboration, since it brings in 'civilization' as a crucial element for understanding the political exclusion of woman.

### *Political Exclusion of Women as a Standard of Civilization*

There were no standard behavioral expectations for all European states with regard to the political status of women prior to the 19th century. As will be elaborated in the following section of the article, a number of absolutist states in pre-19th-century Europe made some room for both female sovereigns and female state officials, whereas others forbade female succession to the throne and were more restrictive about women serving as state functionaries. In short, there was significant diversity across Europe in terms of the relation between gender and political power.

The diverse practices then gave way to more standardized behavior. Women became banned from the formal channels of political influence and public office in the constitutional states that developed across Europe and among European settler states. Explicit and full-scale bans were formalized into law starting in the late 18th and accelerating in the second half of the

19th century. In 1778, the English House of Commons prohibited women from attending and listening to its debates from the floor or gallery of the house (Styrkársdóttir, 1998: 48). In 1832, women were expressly prohibited from voting in the House of Commons through the introduction of the language of 'male person' instead of the previous 'person' in suffrage law (Reuterskiöld, 1911: 70). In France, women's political organizations were dissolved and prohibited from re-forming in 1793 and new laws prohibited women from creating or belonging to political clubs and associations in 1848 (Reuterskiöld, 1911: 79). In Colombia, a European settler state, citizenship was similarly defined as exclusively for 'men of means' in 1843 (Gonzalez, 2000: 690). An 1851 Prussian law stripped women of all political rights and disallowed them from attending political meetings, the 1868 14th amendment to the US constitution specified suffrage for the 'male citizen' for the first time, and the reformed electoral law in New Jersey also disenfranchised all women (Styrkársdóttir, 1998: 48). Similar legal changes explicitly barring women from participation in the state polity were made in the Netherlands (1887), Germany (1900), Austria (1907), Italy (1912), and Portugal (1913) (Bock, 2002: 133).

The political exclusion of women had not only become standard policy in Europe, this article contends, it had become a conscious if informal standard of civilization. The reaction to those whose arguments or behavior challenged this norm is illuminating. The movement for women's suffrage began to gather force in many parts of the society of civilized states by the end of the 19th century. To be persuasive in this context, suffragists often contended that allowing women to vote would be beneficial for the civilizational advancement of a state (Towns, forthcoming). Opponents could respond that 'the propaganda of woman suffrage is part and parcel of the world-wide movement for the overthrow of the present order of civilized society' (Illinois Association Opposed to the Extension of Suffrage to Women, 1900: 2).

By the 1910s, three states on the outskirts of civilized society had defied expected behavior and enfranchised women: New Zealand (1893), Australia (1902), and Finland (1906). Although the implications had to be pondered, this behavior was widely rejected as irrelevant for the old core of the 'truly civilized' world (see e.g. Dalziel, 1994). These states were shunned as not entirely civilized in deliberations on suffrage and the significance of these states' behavior (Towns, forthcoming). For instance, in an 1897 debate in the British House of Commons, Conservative member C.W. Radcliffe Cooke argued that 'When other civilized nations begin to grant the franchise to women, it might be time for the most civilized nation in the world to see whether it would be well to follow their example' (as quoted in Dalziel, 1994: 42–3). A 1911 Swedish government report, *On the Development*

*and Application in Foreign Lands of the Idea of Women's Political Suffrage*, likewise concluded that:

... in these New countries, the 'state' is in reality not an independent being, since, on the one hand, a large portion of public office is filled by elected officials and the remaining offices lack the independent and traditional power that is enjoyed by the public organs of Old civilized states, and, since on the other, the government itself is hardly anything other than an executive organ of the electing citizenry. It should be clear that what in these New countries is a necessity in order to avoid the oppression of women and which may lead to the development of a true *state* could be the very thing that undermines the independence of state authority in the Old states.... There is a significant difference between the application of the principle in a state-in-the-making and a fully grown state. (Reuterskiöld, 1911: 76; italics in original, my translation)

The report spells it out quite clearly: suffrage was not a standard of behavior for the old civilized world. These new and less civilized states' experiments with women's suffrage simply had 'neither applicability nor importance for fully sovereign states of old European civilization with developed political institutions and traditions' (Reuterskiöld, 1911: 110; my translation). Expected behavior for civilized states was to bar women from formal politics and the affairs of state. Legal changes explicitly barring women from participation in the state polity became customary and expected in the society of civilized states.

If developments within Europe bear testimony to the emergence of this standard, another telling indicator is the legal shifts in states formally entering the 'society of civilized states.' Concurrent with formal entry into civilized society at the end of the 19th century, Japan codified a total ban on women's political activities for the first time (Mackie, 1997). The Chinese Constitution of 1912 likewise attempted to introduce Anglo-Saxon democratic practice into this first but short-lived Asian republic. This constitution also explicitly excluded women from participating in electoral politics, using Europe and North America as the model (Edwards, 2000: 622).

The practices of European colonial powers in Africa and Asia are also revealing. Pre-colonial Africa saw a wide span of relations between women and politics, ranging from severely constrained to empowering. Under colonial rule, however, matrilineal kinship systems and female political authority were eliminated in the name of 'progress' all over the continent (e.g. Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1997; Parpart, 1988; Sacks, 1982). Women were excluded from the colonial state structures, even in systems of indirect colonial rule which recognized the authority of male chiefs at the local level. In cases such as Yorubaland of western Africa, female chiefs were bypassed and disempowered (Awe, 1977; Oyèwùmí, 1997). The British regulated and

codified politics as an exclusively non-female sphere upon conquering the Sudan in 1899. Reflecting the chauvinism of ‘European civilization,’ el-Bakri et al. (1987: 177) argues, the British ‘regarded those areas where relations between the sexes were relatively egalitarian as “uncivilized”.... In situations where women shared relatively equal status with men, they lost this status under the pretext of “civilization”.’ The construction of colonial political institutions systematically enshrined their exclusion of women, displacing prior forms of institutionalized female political authority (e.g. Awe, 1977; Hale, 1996; Hoffer, 1972; el-Bakri et al., 1987; Okonjo, 1994; Oyèwùmí, 1997).

There is substantial evidence that the political exclusion of women had indeed become a standard of civilization by the mid- to late 19th century. The analytical task for the remainder of the article is to examine some of the understandings that made this exclusion possible and reasonable. One crucial development was the shift to a two-sex model of sexual being and the implications of that in the constitutional state. The following section will begin by looking at pre-19th-century ‘one-sex’ models and female rule, to then turn to the emergence of the two-sex model and the implications for women in formal politics in the 19th century.

### *From a One-Sex to a Two-Sex Model*

The total exclusion of women from state institutions across Europe in the 19th century was not preceded by any standard behavior towards women. Landed women of the estates had access to the state apparatus in many cases. More importantly, as will be developed below, a number of states had queen rulers, no small thing at a time when the powers of the state were concentrated in the sovereign. This access was importantly enabled by the unitary ideal of being and rule characterizing not only the state but also sex/gender conceptualizations during the era of absolutism.

One-sex models of sexual being were pervasive throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, reviving and reinterpreting ancient Greek teachings which conceived of all humans as of one shared essence and variations of a single sex (e.g. Bock, 2002; Laqueur, 1990; Riley, 1988). Rather than a distinctive sex and being, woman was generally seen as a lesser man, an inferior variant of a single anatomy.<sup>1</sup> Female genitalia were seen as an inverted version of the male sexual organ, exhibiting on the inside what men carried without. There were thus no categorical biological boundaries productive of sexual difference, and all human beings contained both ‘male’ and ‘female’ elements but to a varying degree. The male elements were generative (e.g. semen which infused new individuals with a soul), and involved vigor, physical strength, courage, and thus a predisposition for creation and domination. The female elements, unsurprisingly, were inert and involved gentility, physical weakness,



cowardice, and thus a tendency for submission. It was the 'predominance, rather than the exclusion, of one or the other ... [that] helped to determine sexual identity,' as Greenblatt argues (1986: 35). Woman may have been an imperfect man, but she was not fully distinguishable from man. And some women exhibited more male traits and were thus more developed and closer to perfection than others.

Even though male attributes were valued over female and the male elements lead to rule, this did not necessarily preclude women as such from political rule in the absolutist era. In many cases, someone identified as a woman could also rule, generally in the absence of a man alternative and if she exhibited appropriate male characteristics. A capable ruler, male or female, was expected to evince manliness. It is indeed telling that queens often were depicted in masculine terms. For instance, Queen Elizabeth I of England and Ireland (1558–1603) was described by contemporaries as 'our Adam and sovereign lord or lordly lady of this land,' and as a ruler with 'many princely virtues' (John Stubbs in 1579 and John Clapham in 1603, as quoted in Saco, 1997: 304). Likewise, the male characteristics of Queen Kristina of Sweden (1626–89) were hailed by her contemporary admirers. 'There is nothing feminine about her, despite her sex. Her voice is manly as well as her way of speaking, her movements and gestures,' as one devotee proclaimed (quote from Lekeby, 2000: 33; my translation). Another stated that she 'was by nature meant to be a man, but became woman, showing traits from both the one and the other sex in her spiritual faculty as well as way of life' (quote from Lekeby, 2000: 33; my translation). In many though not all parts of Europe, and generally in the absence of suitable male alternatives, women rulers were acceptable (Richards, 1997: 119).

Although the one-sex models were pervasive around Europe, they offered a range of routes for conceiving the relationship between ruler and polity. Women's position in the relationship between the ruler and state–society complexes, while hotly debated, thus remained quite divergent even as the more unitary absolutist state developed. In 15th-century France, scholars came to espouse a polity, or body politic, of the king's one body (that did not die) which was regenerated over time through formative male seed (Hanley, 1997: 133). A system of rule which centered on monarchic replication through male reproductive capacity, connecting male virility with French kingship and state, could not accommodate direct female succession. Female rule was thus prohibited (Cosandey, 1997).<sup>2</sup>

Eighteenth-century Sweden became profoundly influenced by the French Enlightenment and French cultural practices, including ideas about the state as a male body politic (Weibull, 1997: 69). It is not surprising that the constitution of 1720 introduced a prohibition of female succession to the Swedish throne (Weibull, 1997: 58). Until then, there had not only been

female monarchs such as Queen Kristina, but women had also served as state officials. As an example, two of the royal postmasters were women in the 17th century, presiding over the entire postal service (Ohlander, 2000: 118).

In England, on the other hand, political axioms of the monarch's two bodies developed, distinguishing mortal individual monarchs from the immortal public office and accommodating queen rule (Hanley, 1997: 133). English common lawyers were formulating an idea of the state as a perpetual corporation, yet they were unable or unwilling to separate state and monarch. Their concept of the king's two bodies was an attempt to deal with a paradox: men died and the land endured; kings died, the crown survived; individual subjects died but subjects always remained to be governed. Perhaps the lawyers were unwilling to envisage England itself as a perpetual corporation because the law had always vested land in a person. Anyway, for the purposes of law it was found necessary to endow the Queen with two bodies: a *body natural* and a *body politic*. (This body politic should not be confused with the old metaphor of the realm as a great body composed of many men with the king as head. The ideas are related but distinct.) The body politic was supposed to be *contained within the natural body of the Queen* (Axton, 1977: 12).

What is more, English high-born women could inherit state office with their property, and, in 1711, Queen Ann decreed that unmarried women could vote for the English parliament (Styrkársdóttir, 1998: 48). English abbesses were called to the first parliaments and women landowners could influence voting to the parliament on a par with men (Styrkársdóttir, 1998: 48). The Russian and Habsburg empires similarly embraced female succession, seeing monarchs such as Catherine the Great and Maria Teresia of the 1740s.

The 19th century saw important shifts in the state, particularly across Western Europe. State rule was increasingly depersonalized, no longer understood to have been bestowed upon populations by the will of God by means of the sovereign Monarch. Law gradually became understood as a deliberate construction, a willful human creation represented by written constitutions (e.g. Haupt and Langewiesche, 2001: 17; Poggi, 1978).<sup>3</sup> Constitutional parliaments had emerged well before 1848 in Belgium, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Norway (in its union with Sweden), Sweden, and Switzerland, and they formed in Austria in the 1860s, France in the 1870s, and Italy in the 1880s (Haupt and Langewiesche, 2001: 17).

Between the late 17th and the 19th centuries, the notion of what a person is, how a being is unified, also altered dramatically. New understandings of woman as essentially *different* from man emerged. Each of the now two distinct sexes became the embodiment of *either* male or female elements — woman became man's inferior opposite rather than simply a lesser man. Two-sex models of distinctive men and women thus came to compete with

and in many cases predominate over the previous one-sex models (e.g. Bock, 2002: 84; Riley, 1988).

There is a large feminist literature examining the implications of the 19th-century constitutional state for the political role of the new and distinctive category women. This literature points to two central ways in which the political sphere and 'man' came to overlap more tightly than before, squeezing women out of the political realm. The first concerns the state and violence. The constitutional state partly rested on a form of rule that legitimized coercion as vested in the military and police. Man, now as opposed to woman, was thought to embody physical strength and was thus considered the only sex fit to occupy or govern the coercive apparatus of the state (e.g. Elshtain, 1987; Peterson, 1992). To some, the state was even explicitly understood as being, in 19th-century German historian von Treitschke's words, of 'male gender,' of 'purely male essence' (Bock, 2002: 33).

Second, again in contrast with women, men could appear as generic 'humans' or 'persons' in possession of *reason*. Such unsexed individuals could deliberate and reason law into existence in the political sphere, speaking on behalf of the 'common' good and 'general' interests of the state (e.g. Elshtain, 1981; Jónasdóttir, 1994; Okin, 1979; Pateman, 1989; Squires, 1999). For instance, Young (1998: 405) argues that 'extolling a public realm of manly virtue and citizenship as independence, generality, and dispassionate reason entailed creating the private sphere of the family as the place to which emotion, sentiment, and bodily needs must be confined. The generality of the public thus depends on excluding women.'

Peterson (1992) has shown how a public-private divide that rested on the exclusion of women from state affairs was part of the foundation of the modern state system. Indeed, 19th-century 'woman' consolidated as a being with characteristics and capacities for action that were in direct opposition to those of the constitutional state itself: as the state became one of reason and force, woman became entrenched with emotion and weakness; as the state became one of science, woman became infused with faith and religion; as the state became modern, woman became understood as traditional; as the state turned self-interested, woman was cast as selfless. With the new species-differentiation, it was possible for women *as such* to become excluded both from state institutions resting on depersonalized rational-legal authority and from coercive institutions. Although formal participation in state affairs was still restricted for most men as well, their exclusion was not premised on a presumed sexual unity of being *men* but rather on a combination of wealth requirements, estate belonging, and what we can loosely refer to as religious and 'ethnic' preconditions.

The spread of ideas about men and women as distinctive sexes and the particular development of the public/private spheres across Europe are

crucial for understanding the exclusion of women from politics in the 19th century. Each of these developments was furthermore intimately linked with the civilizational rank of a state. The question we will turn to next is how and why an exclusion of women from the political sphere was believed to be related to the civilizational progress of a state. How did political institutions stripped of women connect with civilization?

### *The Exit of Woman from the State in Civilized Society*

The concept of 'civilization' first emerged in Europe in the mid-18th century and then became a commonplace of Enlightenment thought by the early 19th century (e.g. Laffey, 1993; Mazlish, 2004). The development of the concept thus coincided with the emergence of the constitutional state and the two-sex model. Since its inception, civilization referred to the political organization of a society, indicating a society governed by civil law rather than military rule (e.g. Bowden, 2004a; Gong, 1984: 35; Mazlish, 2004: 5). A society in which law and reason placed bounds on brute force could properly be designated 'civilized.'

The idea of progress was also intimately linked with the concept of civilization (e.g. Laffey, 1993; Mazlish, 2004). The civilizing process was understood roughly as the course of transcending the presumed brutal givens of natural existence, towards the improved, civilized reality of living in a law-based state. 'Civilization is the composite result of progress from the purely natural life of the animal to the purely artificial life of the most enlightened individuals and peoples,' as one observer noted in 1895 (Mason, 1895: 272). Civilization was conceptualized as the most elevated of several progressive levels of being and was articulated together with 'less advanced' groups of humans or politics on a single scale of development and success. From the vantage point of European capitals, the world hence became separated into three rough classes of peoples and societies: the savage, the barbarous, and the civilized.

The emergence and development of the concept of civilization in the 18th and 19th centuries cannot be traced authoritatively to any one process. It is clear that the rise of the social sciences and the intensification of European colonialism were two important related developments. The social sciences became a crucial source of knowledge in the 19th century, exhibiting a belief in purposive human behavior and conscious design to achieve progress. A large number of scholars in the emerging fields of sociology, anthropology, history, and economics tried to understand the civilizing process, seeking information that could help society advance away from savagery (e.g. Starobinski, 1993). Analogies drawn from natural science were often central to this endeavor.

The intensified expansion of Europeans into the non-European world was also interwoven with the understandings of civilization. Europe's identity had already been shaped by its reflection in the image of 'the Indian' in the conquest of the Americas (Inayatullah and Blaney, 2004; Mazlish, 2004: 26; Todorov, 1997). Now, the new concept of civilization spurred and was formed by the increased encounters with societies in Asia and Africa. By the end of the 19th century, a clear sense of the supremacy of Western civilization had developed, backed by the social sciences (e.g. Gong, 1984; Mazlish, 2004: 70).

An important shift in the relations between European states thus took place between the 18th and 19th centuries: these states came to view themselves as belonging to a 'society of civilized states' regulated by international law. Schwarzenberger (1955) and Gong (1984) have shown that standards of civilization were expressed to protect the life, liberty, and property of Europeans in non-European settings. An increasing number of treaties signed with non-Europeans codified these expectations in the 19th century (Gong, 1984: 25–35). During this period, deliberated law increasingly became seen as a means to tame brute power not just domestically but also among states. The rise of highly professionalized and fairly secret diplomacy, third-party arbitration, and mediation provided a sense of rule-following order that allegedly assured that outcomes were not simply guided by military might (Bartelson, 1995: 182–5; Poggi, 1978: 48). This law-bound group of states, which had earlier shared some sense of unity in Christendom in interactions with non-Christians, came to characterize both its domestic legislation and international relations as 'civilized' (e.g. Neumann, 1999: 56–8). The formal society of civilized states emerged.

It is important to keep in mind that the expectations for appropriate behavior varied by the classification of the Other. It was reasonable and expected for 'civilized' states to engage in diplomatic bargaining and deliberation of international law, showing restraint and respect, in the interactions with other civilized countries. Conquest for subjugation and humiliation was out of the question. In drastic contrast, patronizing, paternalistic, and brutally violent behavior was considered suitable toward the 'less civilized' (e.g. Gong, 1984; Puchala and Hopkins, 1983).

There were a number of standards that determined whether a polity was to be included in the society of civilized states and receive the privileged treatment that came with this classification. Demonstrating the capacity for self-rule and exhibiting a domestic system of state institutions governed by law were some of the more explicit requirements (Gong, 1984). Ability to ensure basic rights, including the protection of life, liberty, and property of foreigners, was an additional crucial criterion (Gong, 1984; Schwarzenberger, 1955: 227). Adopting certain rules of war was another (Gong, 1984;

Price, 1995). However, the criteria were malleable and illusive, providing slim chances for 'advancement' into the civilized fold of official statehood (Gong, 1984).

By the mid- to late 19th century, the new category woman had also become intimately implicated in the ordering of societies along the stages of civilization. The status of women did not operate as a formal criterion, and the situation of women was never used as a standard to enable or disqualify a state from formal entry into the society of civilized states. As an informal standard, however, the situation and treatment of women became indicative of the advancement of a society, a factor that helped define and rank a nation. In 1845, Marx and Engels expressed this very clearly in *The Holy Family*. While critical of colonialism and disagreeing with the predominant understandings of the stages of civilization, they nevertheless claimed that

the transformation of a historical era can always be determined by the condition of progress of women toward liberty, because it is here, in the relation of women to men, of the weak to the strong, that the victory of human nature over brutality appears most evident. The degree of female emancipation is the natural measure of general emancipation. (Marx and Engels, 1956 [1845]: 259)

A society in which women prospered clearly had developed rules and institutions that protected them from the sheer force of the stronger sex. To many, the status of women thus became symbolic of the advancement away from the state of nature, the lawless and primitive condition that enabled rule by the strong.

The political status of women was not merely important in a symbolic manner. It was believed to have effects on the advancement of society in very real and material ways. As pioneer sociologist Herbert Spencer contended, we have 'to bear in mind these traits of intellect and feeling which distinguish women, and to take note of them as factors in social phenomena.' Any 'increase of female influence,' he insisted, would affect the advancement of society 'in a marked manner' (Spencer, 1873: 142, 140). The key questions were how and why. In other words, what role should women occupy to stimulate movement toward higher levels of civilization? We will now turn to some of the attempts to make out precisely how and why the standing of women may affect progress.

A shared presumption among those grappling with the question of women and progress was that adaptation to surrounding conditions was central for the ability of a society to move forward. Charles Fourier could thus claim of the French that 'the French are the foremost civilized nation owing to this single fact of adaptability, the trait most alien to the barbarian character' (Fourier, 1846: 145). Adaptation was in turn widely understood as a product of a competitive struggle for existence, whether among individuals

or nations. Competition and struggle brought about movement along the social stages, either upward toward a higher level of civilization or downward toward barbarity or savagery. A society needed to be adaptive and capable of change in order not to regress or even perish.

The idea that women were inert and unadaptive thrived in the 19th century, in the natural as well as social sciences. Evolutionary biology drew on examples from the natural world to develop a science of sexual selection, a form of progress that depended, in the words of Darwin, 'not on a struggle for existence in relation to other organic beings or to external conditions, but on a struggle of individuals of one sex, generally males, for the possession of the other sex' (Darwin, 1873 [1936]: 69). In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin argued that:

the chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shown by man's attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than can women — whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands. If two lists were made of the most eminent men and women in poetry, painting, sculpture, music (inclusive both of composition and performance), history, science and philosophy, with half-a-dozen names under each subject, the two lists would not bear comparison. We may also infer ... that if men are capable of a decided pre-eminence over women in many subjects, the average standard of mental power in man must be above that of woman ... [Men have had] to defend their females, as well as their young, from enemies of all kinds, and to hunt for their joint subsistence. But to avoid enemies or to attack them with success, to capture wild animals, and to fashion weapons, requires the aid of the higher mental faculties, namely observation, reason, invention, or imagination. These various faculties will thus have been continually put to the test and selected during manhood. (Darwin, 1873 [1936]: 873–4)

The physical strength and intelligence of men was constantly improved and developed by means of sexual competition for women, in short, while women's capacities remained quiescent.

Anthropologists and geographers helped connect the notion of sexual selection with the stages of civilization by adding comparative studies from the then-contemporary human world. Women, it became clear through plain observation, did not generate progress. In the words of one anthropologist:

One has only to look around him in traveling through countries lately touched by civilization to notice that men have to drop their old occupations for new ones. In fact, not five men in a hundred in the most favored lands are at this moment pursuing the calling for which they were educated. But in transitions from savagery to civilization, and in the vicissitudes of life, women go on housekeeping, spinning, demanding if no longer making pottery, using the same vocabulary, conning the same propositions, reproducing the same forms of ornaments, believing as of old, only making use of modified and better



appliances. In this they are conservative, indeed, and the blood coursing through the brain tissue carries on the same commerce that has been familiar to women during many thousands of years.

The savage man in his normal life is ever changing.... On the other hand, the women of a savage tribe, and the ordinary run of women in any civilized land, who change slightly the duties they have to perform, or their manner of doing them, need to modify their conception and their opinions very little. The constant doing the same things and thinking the same thoughts from generation to generation pass the bodily activity and the mental processes on to a semiautomatic habit. Very few men are doing what their fathers did, so their opinions have to be made up by study and precedents. Nearly all women, whether in savagery or in civilization, are doing what their mothers and grandmothers did, and their opinions are therefore born in them or into them. (Mason, 1895: 274–5)

In their explorations and comparative analyses of the world outside Europe, scholars and travelers made connections among women across geographical and cultural divides as a singular stagnant rather than progressive force. Women in all parts of the world were essentially the same: inert and uncreative. As such, women were not generative of advancement.

Although women were closer to the state of nature, it was evident that women benefited most from living in a civilized society. If law truly placed bounds on and civilized brute force, then women, as the weak sex, could only stand to gain — in an environment of ‘might is right,’ women were thought to surely succumb. It became a matter of established fact that ‘the condition of woman has always been the most degraded the nearer we approach to a state of nature, or, rather, the less we are raised above the level and mere animal characteristics of the brute creation’ (Fullom, 1855: 149). The brute subjugation of women was by the early to mid-19th century widely represented as an effect of savage society, an ‘oriental, and semi-barbarous delusion,’ a sign of ‘Turkish contempt of females, as subordinate and inferior beings’ (Young, 1837: 17).

Women were thus simultaneously most in need of civilization, in order to be raised out of degradation and protected from sheer force, and yet they posed a challenge to civilization’s creation and maintenance. As vestigial beings lacking in reason, many claimed that it was critical that women not be entrusted with deliberating law or with bureaucratic public functions. If they did, the state of civilization and their own well-being would be jeopardized. Evidence from less advanced societies and from a less-developed past was presented to support the claims. Noted US historian Francis Parkman contended that:

... the social power of women has grown with the growth of civilization, but their political power has diminished. In former times and under low social



conditions, women have occasionally had a degree of power in public affairs unknown in the foremost nations of the modern world. The most savage tribes on [the North American] continent, the Six Nations of New York, listened, in solemn assembly, to the counsels of its matrons, with a deference that has no parallel among its civilized successors. The people of ancient Lycia, at a time when they were semi-barbarians, gave such power to their women that they were reported to live under a gynecocracy, or female government. The word gynecocracy, by the way, belongs to antiquity. It has no application in modern life; and, in the past, its applications were found, not in the higher developments of ancient society, but in the lower. Four hundred years before Christ, the question of giving political power to women was agitated among the most civilized of the ancient peoples, the Athenians, and they would not follow the example of their barbarian neighbors. (Parkman, 1884: 10–11)

Far from everyone agreed that women had no essential role to play in the generation of civilization, however. The 19th century also saw prevalent identifications of woman as a crucial civilizing agent. Because of their essential difference, it was argued, women had a distinctive mission in the conversion of nature into culture, especially with reference to the socialization of children. 'No universal agent of civilization exists but our mothers,' argued Louis-Aimé Martin in his enormously influential 1834 book, *The Education of Mothers; or, The Civilization of Mankind by Women*, which had won French Academy acclaim and reached an impressive 11 editions in French by 1883, three in English, and translations into Swedish, German, and Italian (Bock, 2002: 89).

Many of those speaking as and on behalf of women objected not to the characterization of woman as a selfless, conservative, and emotional beings, but rather to the devaluation of such qualities. 'The one quality on which woman's value and influence depends is the renunciation of self,' Sarah Lewis claimed in 1839, in the bestselling *Woman's Mission* that was to reach 17 British and five American editions by 1854. She extended Martin's discussion and argued that 'the fundamental principle is right — that women were to live for others — and therefore all that we have to do is to carry out this fundamentally right principle into wider application' (Lewis, 1839: 54).

To Lewis, Martin, and others, that wider application absolutely did not include state institutions and the political sphere. Instead, 'the greatest benefit which [women] can confer upon society is to be what they ought to be in all their domestic relations' (Lewis, 1839: 54–5). There, women should demonstrate 'devotion to an ideal good, self-sacrifice and subjugation of selfish feelings,' so that they could be set aside from men, who had been ruined by the 'selfish and groveling utilitarianism' of the state (Lewis, 1839: 44 and 23, respectively). Women would risk succumbing to selfishness if they were to enter the public sphere of the state. With their nature ruined, they

would thus cease to be the ‘potent agent for the amelioration of mankind,’ leading to the degeneration of civilization (Lewis, 1839: 48–9). Unless properly nurtured in the domestic sphere, in New York Senator Samuel Young’s words, woman was ‘destined to be the mother of savages and barbarians, who in every age have been immersed in ignorance, blackened with crime and stained with blood’ (Young, 1837: 8).

The answer to the question that set up Lewis’s book and which concerned so many statesmen of the time — ‘Would the greatest possible good be procured by bringing [woman] out of her present sphere into the arena of public life?’ — was thus a resounding NO! Women’s ‘empire is that of their affections,’ and the essential influence women exercise in the home is ‘the cultivation of the moral portion of [mankind’s] nature, which cultivation no government has yet attempted, over which, in fact, governments and public institutions have little or no control’ (Lewis, 1839: 23). She underscored that ‘the beneficial influence of woman is nullified if her motives, or her personal character, come to be the subject of attack; and this fact alone ought to induce her patiently to acquiesce in the plan of seclusion from public affairs’ (Lewis, 1839: 57).

To equate separate spheres with the elevation of women was thus no contradiction. Lewis proclaimed that ‘this, then, is the law of eternal justice — man cannot degrade woman without himself falling into degradation: he cannot elevate her without at the same time elevating himself’ (Lewis, 1839: 41). New York Senator and gubernatorial candidate Samuel Young was also opposed to women holding public office and to extending voting rights to women. He nevertheless likewise declared, ‘Let man, when he feels inclined to boast of his advancement, look at the condition of the other sex; and, whilst he finds woman deprived of any of the rights and privileges, which he enjoys, let him lay his hand on his mouth and cry, “uncivilized”’ (Young, 1837: 23). Keeping women out of the political sphere was often discussed as a way of elevating women by protecting them from the brutality of politics. This, more importantly, was also done by setting states in the right direction in the civilizing process.

By the late 19th century, the notion that civilized states keep women out of the political sphere appeared to make sense. As the stagnant and less rational of the sexes, women could presumably contribute little to the civilizing process. Prevailing evidence clearly demonstrated that women simply could not advance on their own, in this view, and women were in need of male initiative and competitiveness to enjoy the benefits that civilization brought along. Others maintained that women did have an important role to play and placed equal value on the distinctive contribution of women as mothers in the domestic sphere. Importantly, both lines of thought supported the idea of separate spheres for women and men. The advancement of civilization was

best assured with women in the domestic sphere and (some) men occupying public positions. Evidence from a European past and from less-advanced societies across the world proved the point that only savage societies provided a political role for women.

### *Conclusion*

By the turn of the 19th century, the constitutional states of civilized society had purged the new category woman from their political realm in the name of civilization. As this article has shown, the political role of women received considerable attention from those interested in the advancement of the state along the stages of civilization. The consensus, though never unchallenged, was that women clearly had no productive role to play in politics if a state hoped to remain in or advance to the civilized fold. Women only participated in political affairs in primitive societies, a factor among several presumed to keep these societies stagnant.

There are important contemporary implications of the analysis of the 19th century. As mentioned in the introduction, the presumptions about the political empowerment of women being a 'Western' phenomenon, originating in Europe and with roots in Western Enlightenment and liberal traditions, is pervasive. International relations scholarship certainly does not dispel this account. A small but notable number of constructivist scholars interested in international norms have focused on the emergence and international spread of women's rights policies (Berkovitch, 1999; Finnemore and Sikkink, 1999; Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Ramirez and Weis, 1979; Ramirez et al., 1997). They point to the Western origins of norms regulating state behaviors that empower women, such as the now widespread existence of women's suffrage and national policy agencies for the advancement of women. The political empowerment of women is accredited to the modern and liberal values of the West, and especially the progressive effects of individualism as it developed along with the constitutional state. Since they leave pre-19th-century Europe beyond the scope of analysis, these studies implicitly tell the story about a universal history of gender-based political exclusion from which European women were first to break free.

Inglehart and Norris (2003) may be the political scientists that have been most clear about tying gender equality to the West. They contend that gender equality is the source of 'the true clash of civilizations' and proclaim that it is around these values that the world's civilizations differ. Although their studies center on the contemporary world, a historical account is implied that is consistent with the narrative above: the political empowerment of women is of Western origin. Such ideas have also been picked up by a number of global governance organizations, which similarly argue that

bringing more women into public decision-making bodies is intimately related to the move away from 'traditional' toward 'modern' and Western values and practices (Towns, forthcoming). The connection between the empowerment of women and 'Western values,' values presumed to have some continuity with the past, are pervasive.

A look at the recent past puts some of the core claims of this narrative in doubt. First, the claim that 'tradition' (values and practices inherited from the distant past) keeps women out of politics needs to be modified. The full-scale removal of women from the state in European and European settler states is a relatively recent phenomenon. It was not until the 19th century, as this article has demonstrated, that 'advanced' states became expected to completely abandon female rule and bar women from state office and formal politics. European history thus places in question the notion that tradition as the past is the culprit keeping women out of politics. What is more, a number of non-European so-called 'traditional' societies did make available a political role for women in the 19th century. As we saw above, they were chastised by European scholars and politicians as 'primitive' and 'traditional' for doing so. The political disempowerment of women cannot and should not be equated with 'tradition' as some common human past of sexual differentiation from which Europeans were first to break free.

The adjacent claim that the empowerment of women is attributable to Western, liberal values and practices also needs to be questioned. The emergence of the 19th-century constitutional state, resting on procedural legitimacy and law as a product of reason, was intimately linked with the exclusion of women from the political sphere. It would take considerable effort by massive social movements to transform the constitutional state to become more inclusive. Equally importantly, the exclusion — not the inclusion — of women from politics was hailed as an advanced and civilized measure, something presumed to set aside 'modern' and Western states from 'traditional' societies. The recent European colonial policy of instituting separate spheres in those colonized areas where women were not already excluded from political power now seems to have become forgotten. The equation between disempowerment of women and 'tradition,' on the one hand, and between political empowerment and 'modern' and 'Western' values and practices, on the other, needs to be reconsidered.

### *Notes*

1. Aristotle had notoriously stated that 'The woman is as it were an impotent male, for it is through a certain incapacity that the female is female, being incapable of concocting the nutriment in the last stage into semen' (as cited in Lange, 1983: 9).

2. However, as guardians of young regent sons, queen mothers did direct the council of state, and France experienced three such regencies from 1560 to 1651 alone. See Lightman (1981).
3. Most European states of the 19th century were to take the form of constitutional monarchies, combining the non-elective rule of the Monarch with legislatures that were elected by restricted suffrage (e.g. Haupt and Langewiesche, 2001: 17).

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ANN TOWNS is assistant professor of political science and international relations at the University of Delaware. She has published various chapters and journal articles on norms and inequality in international society, with a focus on the status of women as a mechanism of international rank. Her book *Women and States: Norms and Hierarchies in International Society* is forthcoming with Cambridge University Press.