

**Civilization, American Indians, and the Noble Savage Myth
in French Colonial and American Discourses**

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Panel: Imaginary Indians: Representations of Native American People
in Comparative Imperial Perspective

[Slide 2] In the well-known simplification of colonial relations, nineteenth-century historian Francis Parkman stated, "Spanish civilization crushed the Indian; English civilization scorned and neglected him; French civilization embraced and cherished him."¹ While most historians agree that there is at least a grain of truth in this aphorism, I intend to show that at the level of literary and artistic representation, both French and Anglo-American discourses had the same goals. Each labeled American Indians "savages" or "primitives" and used their knowledge (or perception) of Indian customs to generate and use the concept of civilization for nationalistic purposes and to advance white cultural objectives – be that social and political reform in France and America or the westward expansion of American settlement.

[Slide 3] According to historian Roy Harvey Pearce, Anglo-Americans understood American Indians and their cultures through the constructed dichotomy between savagery and civilization. Robert Berkhofer, Jr. built on Pearce's work but focused more broadly on Euro-American images of Indians from 1492 through the 1970s and argued that they served as a metaphor for the struggle between savagery and civilization and as a counterpoint to white self-perception. These representations served to validate the physical and cultural elimination of American Indians and formed a significant part of the American national narrative, which was itself used as a colonizing tool that discursively erased Indians and American violence at the same time.² This study asks, instead, where the idea of "civilization," on which these discourses were based, originated; why it was important to Euro-Americans; how American and French

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writers and artists employed the French concepts of civilization and *le bon sauvage*, or the “Noble Savage,” and what discursive work these ideas performed in France and the United States.

Encounters with real and imagined American Indians were central to the development of the concept of civilization and identity in two colonial empires. The concepts of *civilisation*, *barbare*, *sauvage*, and *le bon sauvage* were integral to French knowledge production, colonial power, justifications for colonization, and became fundamental to the way in which Frenchmen understood themselves, their identity, and their place in the world. Their significance outlasted the French colonial empire in North America and became equally important in American efforts to define a distinct identity during the creation and expansion of the United States.

French Discourse:

[Slide 4] After the Valois victory in the Hundred Years’ War between England and France, it became increasingly important to define a distinct and unifying French identity as the monarchy attempted to unite France beginning in the mid-fifteenth century. Contact with “others” in Africa, the Americas, and even the Far East provided different people and cultures with which to compare their own. As populations previously unknown to Europeans, Native Americans provided particularly powerful images. They either embodied everything that was not European and therefore deficient, or served as exemplars of the “Natural Man,” or were used to critique the decadent and corrupt French social and political systems.

French philosophers refined ideas about civilization and barbarism through contact with Native Americans. The coining of the new term "civilization" in the mid-eighteenth century marked its significance in contemporary discourse and served to identify and define in positive terms an extant concept, previously subsumed in the meanings of *sociabilité* (sociability) and *politesse* (politeness).

Development of an Idea: *Civilisation*

[Slide 5] By 1771 the recently invented word *civilisation* had come to incorporate a number of common ideas. It referred to a group of people who were sociable, civil (polite), tractable (compliant & governable), able to live in community with one another because they recognized their religious and moral obligations to God and others, and who lived in an ordered society that was governed by laws and sovereign authority.

To understand how this concept developed, we must trace the ideas that it came to encompass and consider the contexts in which they emerged. The following diagrams illustrate the process and clarify the interrelated meanings and ideas that came to define “civilization,” which are difficult to narrate in a linear fashion. [Slides 6 & 7 display the charts below.]

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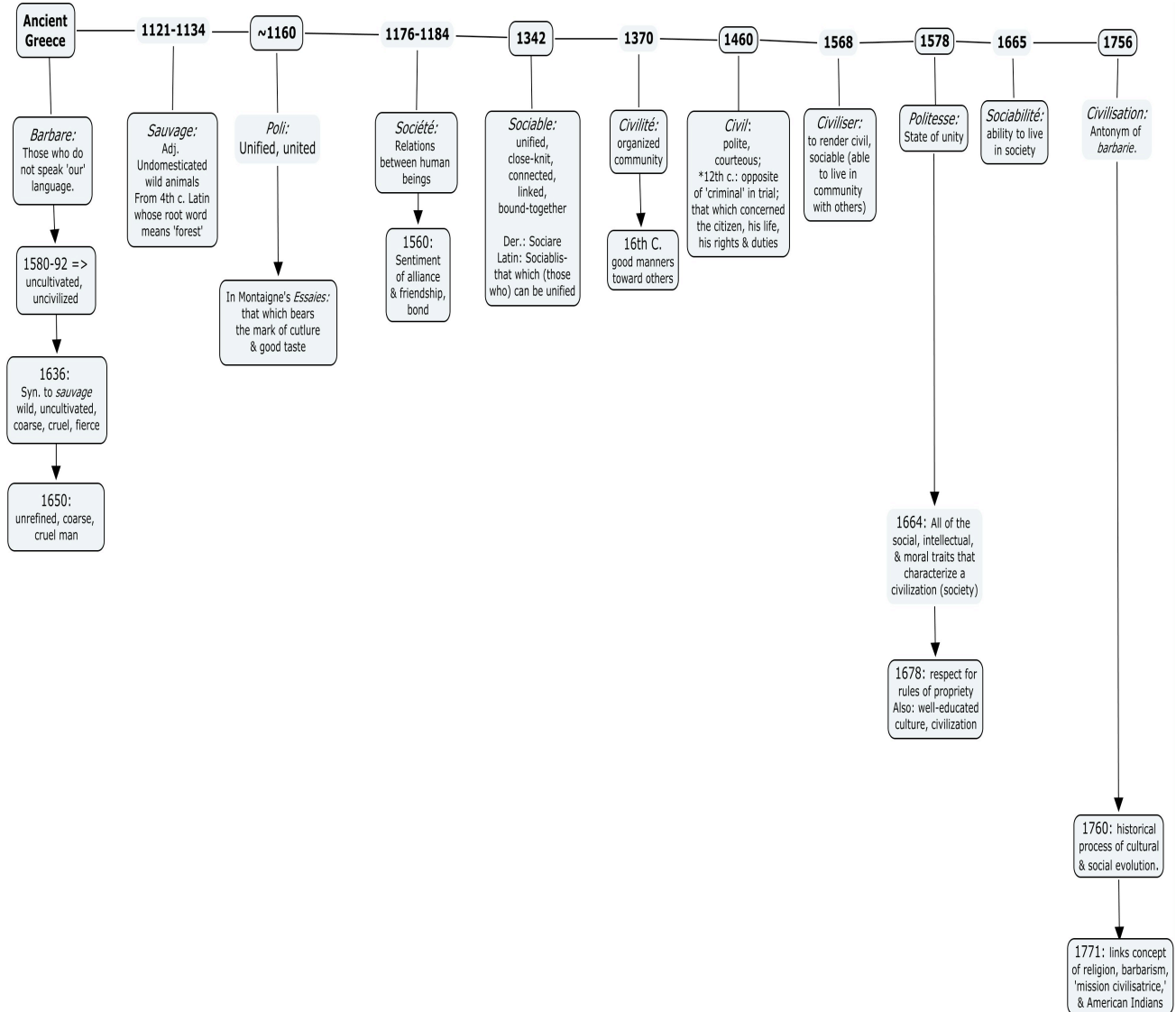


Figure 1: ETYMOLOGICAL TIMELINE

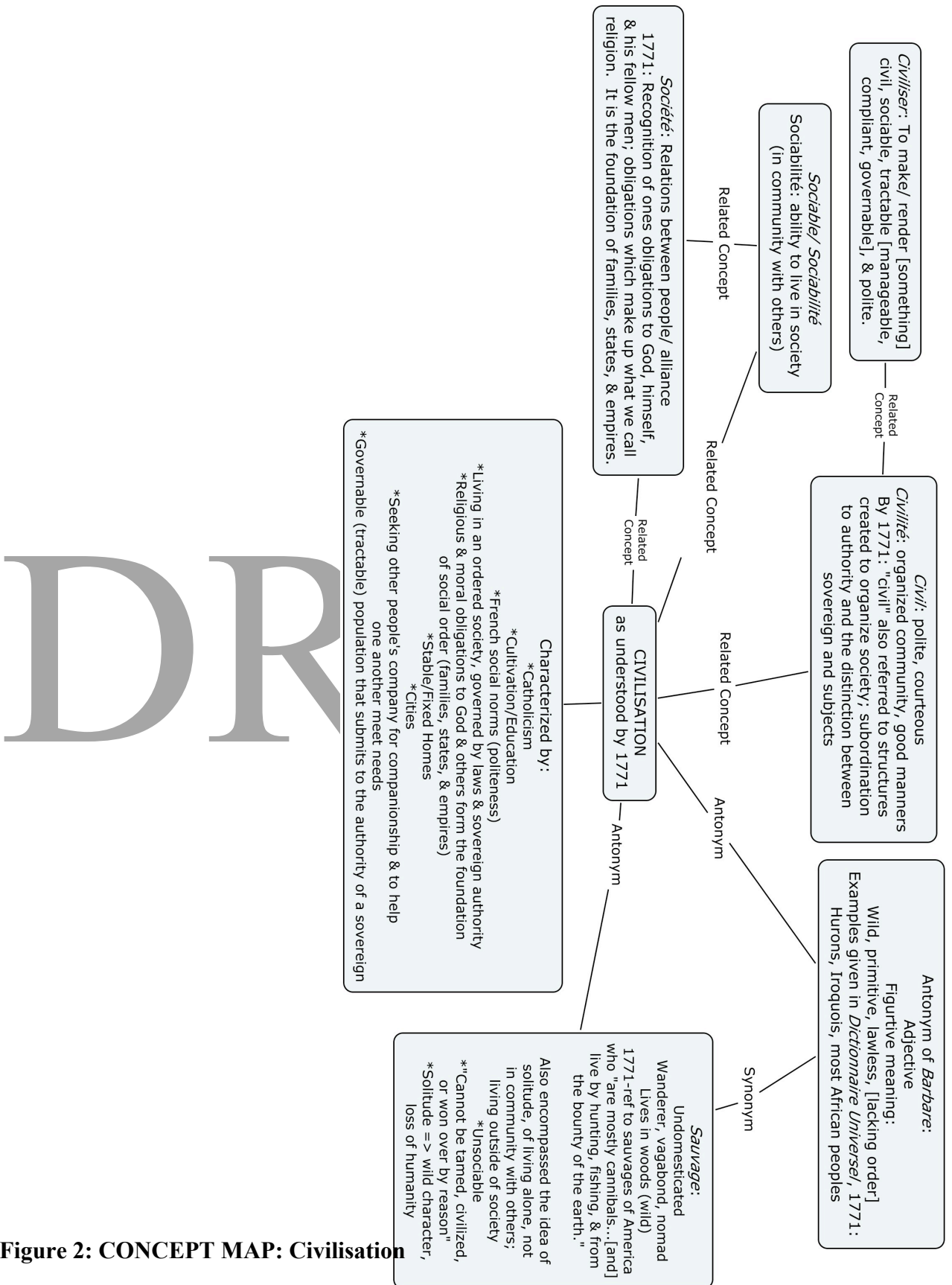


Figure 2: CONCEPT MAP: Civilisation

During the sixteenth century, the French verb *civiliser*, meaning “to civilize,” appeared for the first time and described the process by which one is rendered civil, sociable, or polite. Loys Le Roy was the first author to employ *civiliser* in his 1568 work, *Les Politiques d’Aristote*. Within ten years, *politesse* was coined and defined as a “state of unity,” but in his 1664 work, *Maximes*, François duc de La Rochefoucauld used the word more expansively to describe all of the social, intellectual and moral traits that characterize a society. Both ideas fed into the eighteenth-century concept of “civilization.” Originally, the noun, *civilisation*, derived from *civiliser* and referred to a judge’s decision to transform a criminal case into a civil one, but its meaning quickly grew beyond this literal sense and application in jurisprudence and soon encompassed the preexisting ideas that *sociabilité* and *politesse* referenced but did not entirely capture.³

The figurative definition of *civilisation* developed during the Enlightenment when scholars, such as Mirabeau, cast it as the antonym of *barbare* (barbaric) and a synonym for *sociabilité*. Over time, the definitions of *barbare* and *sauvage* were further refined, and by 1771, the *Dictionnaire Universel* gave the figurative meaning of *barbare* as an adjective for primitive people who live in the wilderness without police or laws.⁴ As examples, this dictionary cites the “Huron, Iroquois, and several African peoples,” who would have been relevant examples with whom literate Frenchmen and women were familiar due to the popularity of travel narratives.⁵

[Slide 8] Similarly, the 1771 *Dictionnaire Universel* defined ‘*sauvage*’ as an adjective for

people who live by roaming the woods, without fixed homes, without laws, without police, and almost without religion; wild people. [This meaning] is employed extensively. The wild people or the *sauvages* of America are mostly cannibals. They live by hunting and fishing and from the bounty of the Earth.⁶

Interestingly, the authors and editors saw no contradiction between the last two sentences. Based on definitions in a number of sixteenth and seventeenth-century dictionaries, Brazilian

Amerindians were commonly believed to be cannibals, thus the reference in the second to last sentence, but the last sentence describes Frenchmen's actual experience with Amerindians in North America, some of whom were hunters and gatherers and some who hunted and practiced agriculture.

Measures of “Civilization”

From the sixteenth through the eighteenth century, French explorers, missionaries, statesmen, and scholars often defined civilization by what it was not and employed accounts and images of Native Americans either to support the superiority of French society and norms or critique the decadence of French culture. In their writing, certain markers of civilization stand out. Hygiene, “politeness,” religion, and gender norms were among the most common measures of civilization by which Frenchmen judged Others.

[Slide 9] In the following two accounts, missionaries used hygiene, social norms, and religion to determine whether the Indians they encountered were “civilized.” Louis Hennepin, a Récollet missionary to New France between 1675 and 1681, was horrified by the “rudeness” of the Indians he met. In a description of their manners, he expounds on the lack of hygienic practices among Indians – the absence of soap, hand-washing, and general cleanliness of plates, clothes, bodies, and cabins. Indian social norms (he does not differentiate by tribe), including hospitality, did not escape Hennepin's disparagement either. In a comparison of Indians' “rudeness” and “courtesy,” he notes the practice of offering guests the best seats in the home but confuses guests' assumption that they are entitled to those places for poor manners and disrespect. “In [sum],” he writes, “they put no restraint on their actions, and follow simply the animals.”⁷

[Slide 10] Different social norms and “dirt” or dirtiness marked American Indians as Others. Even basic interactions between people seemed backwards, coarse, vulgar, and rude to him. He writes, “The Indians trouble themselves very little with our civilities, on the contrary, they ridicule us when we practice them. ... Their conversation whether among men or women is generally only indecency and ribaldry.”⁸ The absence of parental discipline and children’s apparent lack of respect for parents also troubled him, as it challenged his notion of a proper social hierarchy grounded in patterns of deference. This appraisal was interspersed in his commentary about hygiene and food preparation, signifying the complete disorder he detected in the domestic sphere, the very heart of a society and civilization’s foundation.⁹

In contrast, Father Buisson de St. Cosme, a missionary who traveled through Illinois Country at the end of the seventeenth century, was more inclined to notice and remark on the behavior of “civilized” Indians. After crossing the rough northern width of Lake Michigan from east to west and then the length of it south to Chicago, Father St. Cosme and his party chopped through the ice of the freezing November rivers and finally arrived in Illinois Country. The frosts prevented the travelers from staying long, setting out for the Arkansas just a few short days later, well into November, enduring the bitter cold, snow, and ice on the lakes and rivers that impeded their canoes’ progress. [Slide 11] The first day after setting out from the primary Illinois camp, they met Rouensas, an Illinois chief, and “a very good Christian.” He “received [them] politely, not like a barbarian, but like a well bred Frenchman,” according to St. Cosme.¹⁰ He writes that Rouensas forced them to stay the night in his cabin, but after traveling for 9 weeks through the early winter frost and snow, I doubt Rouensas had to twist their arms. Nevertheless, it seemed important to St. Cosme to describe their host as a “civilized” Indian, a good Christian – devout in his prayers and the sacraments – and polite, like a “well bred Frenchman,” not a “barbarian.”

Therefore, not all Indians were perceived to be “savages” or beyond salvation – at least at the end of the seventeenth century. Rather, depictions, such as St. Cosme’s served both to defend the missionaries’ cause by pointing to their “successes” and as reminders of man’s potential to change himself and his society.

In these two appraisals of Indian civilization, we find descriptions of social customs that the French deemed necessary to live in community, such as hygienic practices, forms of politeness and hospitality, and outward demonstrations of Christianity; these traits would come to exemplify *civilisation* in the eighteenth century.

American Indians’ gender norms, which comprised the basis for domestic relations, were also of great interest to Frenchmen and were among the missionaries’ primary concerns. French evaluations of Indian societies and their place in the hierarchy of civilizations were rooted in judgments about Indian constructions and performances of gender and sexuality. French missionaries, explorers, and philosophers took into account native women’s mode of dress, demeanor, attitudes, and behavior, as well as their society’s marriage practices, and the existence of genders that did not fit Western European constructions of masculinity and femininity. For instance, in writing about his attempts to “civilize” and convert Indians to Catholicism, Hennepin observed the “positive” effect the missionaries’ daily visits to Indian homes had on young girls. After remarking on the common practice of allowing young girls to remain naked until four or five years of age and young boys much longer, he observed that after requiring the girls to cover themselves when they visited the cabins, these girls began to “feel a little ashamed of their nakedness, and cover their persons a little more frequently than they did before.”¹¹ Modesty, especially among women, was an important Christian teaching, as evidenced by the time that French missionaries spent describing Indians’ state of dress (or undress) and the time they

apparently devoted to “rectifying” the situation. Because of the conflation between Christianity and civilization, the priests felt that they were making progress in transforming Native practices to conform to Christian principles and notions of civilized conduct by causing some of the young girls to feel embarrassed over their nakedness and begin to wear clothing, at least in their presence.

[Slide 12] Thus, in early modern France, to be civilized was to be Christian and to be Christian was to be civilized. However, a number of Enlightenment intellectuals, including Diderot, Rousseau, Condorcet, and Englishman Adam Ferguson, worked to separate the concept of civilization from religion. They connected the ideas of civilization and progress to develop secular theories about the stages of human development from primitivism (hunter-gatherers) to European Enlightenment.¹² Their use of *civilisation* expanded its definition to include the “advancements in comfort, increased material possessions and personal luxuries, improved [and expanded] education, ‘cultivation of the arts and sciences,’ and the expansion ‘of commerce and industry.’”¹³

American Discourse

[Slide 13] At the same time, French and Scottish philosophers used the life cycle as an analogy to create a history of mankind’s progress from “savagery” to “civilization.” In his 1777 work *The History of America*, Scottish historian William Robertson established a model for American intellectuals, as he employed the French concepts of “civilization” and the progression of mankind through stages of development to describe American Indians’ place in history. His work was foundational in shaping early American leaders’ understanding of Indians and a nascent American identity. In his analysis of Indian origin hypotheses, Robertson clearly ranks Indians’ level of civilization on a social hierarchy, as did the French, using the same definition of

civilization that developed in Enlightenment France. **[Slide14]** To be civilized was to be unified socially, to exhibit social “norms” necessary for civil life, to exchange complete liberty for life in community with others and therefore be subject to government and its laws. Furthermore, a community must understand property rights, express its culture in the arts (as Euro-Americans defined them), and have established industry to be considered “civilized.”¹⁴ Thomas Jefferson took many of his ideas about Indians from Robertson and other Scottish philosophers who argued that “circumstance” (rather than environment) created character, as well as the French *philosophes*’ notions of civilization and human progression through stages of development.¹⁵

[Slide 15] Through the appropriation of Indian imagery for early nineteenth century artistic and literary purposes, Americans created distance between themselves and indigenous societies by assuming authority over representations of Indian customs, beliefs, and life ways. In so doing, artists and writers began to develop a distinctly American identity that was separate from Europe. This movement grew out of nineteenth-century romanticism and cultural nationalism in the early republic. Indians were ideal characters in romantic tales because of their exoticism, peculiar customs, potential for heroism, and the widely-believed myth (at least in the East) that they were “vanishing.” This perception was then perpetuated by their portrayals in literature, such as James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), and in artists’ race to capture images of Indians before they disappeared.¹⁶

Representation of the “Noble Savage”

To remake Indians into sympathetic characters in the romantic tragedies of the period, artists drew on the image of the Noble Savage, popular in France since Marc Lescarbot introduced the concept of *le bon sauvage* in his 1609 travel narrative. What little appearance the Noble Savage made in English literature and imagery can be attributed to the French influence

and the fleeting English fascination with four Mohawk chiefs (the “four kings”) who visited in 1710.

[Slide 16] The Noble Savage idea appeared more frequently in the writings of French and American philosophers who employed it as a powerful analogy for human potential and the possibility to reform society and politics: If the primitive Indians could behave with more civility than the cultivated French and English, then (it was believed) there existed the possibility that the French and Americans could transform their own societies and political organizations to align with the nature of free and independent man. Following the American Revolution, the Noble Savage image experienced resurgence, but it could only be adopted in regions of the United States in which Indians were perceived to have disappeared, in which they were safely part of the past and no longer a present danger to settler society.¹⁷ It comforted White Americans to think of Indians as part of *their* heroic history and part of their national identity that separated them from Europe. Both images of the noble and ignoble “savages” served to justify the idea of “Manifest Destiny” because many Americans believed that Indians, whether noble or not, would inevitably disappear under the weight of White American civilization and its unstoppable westward progress.¹⁸

Representations of American Indians in literature and film exemplified two competing tropes that have existed since Anglo-American captivity narratives and tales of brutal Indian warfare depicted Indians as cruel barbarians and French and later American writers portrayed Indians as “Noble Savages” and romantic heroes. Nineteenth-century white Americans perpetuated the image of savage, degenerate Indians to further their own objectives of land acquisition and defining their identity as “civilized” Americans, particularly on the frontier where it was often difficult to distinguish between white settlers and their indigenous

neighbors.¹⁹ On the other hand, during the same period, romantic artists and writers featured heroic but doomed Indians, bolstering the idea of their disappearance. Mid-twentieth-century Westerns (both film and novels) combined imagery associated with noble and ignoble Indians and portrayed them as either the cunning enemies of innocent White settlers or their naïve but friendly accomplices in the conquest of the West. In spite of the apparent contrast between early Anglo-American and French writings, Native Americans were used in every case to demonstrate the distance between White Euro-American culture and that of primitive peoples, either to critique or praise and advance contemporary Euro-American civilization.

Conclusion & Legacy

During the process of unification in France and the creation of the United States, both Frenchmen and Americans developed a common understanding of what it meant to be civilized in relation to American Indians. Their national identities were, in part, crafted out of the contrast between the representations of wild, barbaric Indians, and their own “civilized” society. “Civilization” was defined both positively, in relation to French cultural norms of “politeness” and religion, and negatively, in relation to Native Americans’ deficiency. White Americans took this process of definition and representation further by using the notion of Indians as backward, primitive, and in need of social reform “to justify their policies of extinction and assimilation.”²⁰

¹ Francis Parkman, *The Jesuits in North America in the Seventeenth Century* (Toronto, 1899) vol. I, p. 131.

² Roy Harvey Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, [1953], 1965); Robert F. Berkhofer, J., *The White Man’s Indian: Images of the American Indian From Columbus to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978); James Joseph Buss, *Winning the West with Words: Language and Conquest in the Lower Great Lakes* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2011).

³ Brett Bowden, “The Ideal of Civilization: Its Origins and Sociopolitical Character,” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2004), 29.

⁴ *Dictionnaire Universel François Et Latin Vulgairement Appelé Dictionnaire de Trévoux*, 8 vols. Nouvelle [7th] ed. (Paris, 1771), I, 753.

⁵ *Dictionnaire Universel* (1771), I, 753.

⁶ *Dictionnaire Universel*, 1771, 567. « Sauvage, se dit aussi des peuples qui vivent errans [errons] dans les bois, sans habitation fixe, sans loix, sans police, & presque sans religion. Peuple *sauvage*. Dans ce sens il est souvent employé substantivement. Les peuples *sauvages*, ou les *sauvages* de l'Amérique sont la plupart ant[h]ropophages. Ils vivent de chasse & de pêche & des fruits de la terre. »

⁷ Louis Hennepin, in John Gilmary Shea, ed. and trans., *Discovery and Exploration of the Mississippi Valley with the Original Narratives of Marquette, Allouez, Membré, Hennepin, and Anastase Douay*, second edition ([originally published in French, *Description de la Louisiane*, 1683], Albany: Joseph McDonough, 1903), p. 306.

⁸ Hennepin, 304.

⁹ Hennepin follows this description (of Indian rudeness) with a brief commentary on their “civilities”: their respect for their elders’ advice, their hospitality to guests, reciprocity in gift-giving, and the attempt by some to learn the French manner of dining, but he ends by saying that the chief who ate according to French customs did so “out of malice or apishness and to get some present from the French.” (308) Thus, even when describing their perceived courtesies and acquisition of “civilized” habits, he ascribes it to nothing more than mimicry and the child-like desire for gifts.

¹⁰ “The first day after our departure we found the cabin of Rouensas, the most considerable of the Illinois chiefs. He is a very good Christian and received us politely, not like a barbarian, but like a well bred Frenchman; he took us to his cabin and forced us to spend the night there. He made us a present of three deer, one of which he gave to the Father, the other to Mr. de Tonty, and the third to us.” (J.F. Buisson de St. Cosme, edited and translated by John Gilmary Shea, *Early Voyages Up and Down the Mississippi* [Albany, NY: Joel Munsell, 1861], p. 60).

¹¹ Hennepin, 287-289.

¹² Jean Starobinski, *Blessings in Disguise; or The Morality of Evil*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 4-5.

¹³ Starobinski, 3 in Bowden, 30.

¹⁴ William Robertson, *The History of America* (London: Printed for W. Strahan, T. Cadell, and J. Balfour, 1777), vol. I, pp. 282-3

¹⁵ Pearce, 92-96.

¹⁶ For one of the most prominent artists of the time, see George Catlin’s portraits of Indians in the plains and prairies.

¹⁷ Berkhofer, 88.

¹⁸ Pearce, 106-114.

¹⁹ Buss, 97-8.

²⁰ Berkhofer, 109.