

MARIO VARGAS LLOSA VERSUS BARBARISM

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Abstract: This article studies how the Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa and, more generally, neoliberalism rearticulate the opposition between civilization and barbarism, and the vision of the world that underlies it. During a time in which many intellectuals have embraced a relativistic notion of culture that makes judgment problematic, neoliberals embrace this clear-cut value hierarchy with complete abandonment. In fact, one cannot but be surprised by the ease with which Vargas Llosa makes pronouncements based on the identification of individuals, groups, and political movements with either civilization or barbarism. However, the fact is that his reference to this dichotomy differs substantially from its nineteenth-century version and its colonial precedents. The implicitly racial hierarchization proposed by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento and other nineteenth-century thinkers has been replaced in Vargas Llosa's writings by one based on cultural and social values.

On March 28, 2008, the noted Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa was on a bus in the Argentine city of Rosario when it was attacked by a group of *piqueteros*—the street protesters who have become a fixture of that country's political life. As demonstrators beat the bus with bats and threw stones, the novelist asked himself: "Will I celebrate my seventy second birthday—because it's my birthday—trying to use my meager strength against the overwhelming fury of this horde of savages?" (2008a, A4).¹ Although in his essay "Borges y los piqueteros," which appeared in his "Piedra de toque" column, Vargas Llosa does not indicate how the ordeal came to an end; fortunately, the dramatic fate he envisioned did not take place. He and his companions were able to reach their destination, the locale of the Fundación Libertad, a neoliberal think tank that had organized a series of conferences in commemoration of its twentieth anniversary.²

1. In this case, as in all quotes from Spanish herein, the translation is mine.

2. Curiously, this was not the first time Vargas Llosa had been threatened—or at least had felt threatened—by the masses. In his book of memoirs *A Fish in the Water*, he remembers that while driving into a town in Piura, Peru, he found the local population "armed with sticks and stones and all sorts of weapons to bruise and batter, an infuriated horde of men and women came to meet me . . . who appeared to have emerged from the depths of time, a prehistory in which human beings and animals were indistinguishable, since for both life was a blind struggle for survival. Half naked . . . they hurled themselves on the caravan of vehicles . . . What were they attacking?" (Vargas Llosa 1994, 514–515).

According to news reports, the incident originated because the bus apparently took a wrong turn and ended at Plaza de la Cooperación, also known as Plaza Che Guevara (because of the presence of a mural of the revolutionary born in Rosario). Members of the crowd, already protesting against the neoliberal summit—which had been widely mentioned in the media—found themselves unexpectedly with the bus.³ (According to the *Prensa Libre* report, the demonstrators were not aware of Vargas Llosa's presence).⁴ Video taken by Indymedia Rosario shows that the crowd associated the bus with the neoliberal event—when they saw it they began to chant against George W. Bush and his allies. The attack got more violent and, as the bus drove away from the demonstration, bricks and stones replaced paint balls. Some windows were broken. However, the bus was never without protection. There were police at the site who, even if slow to react, used tear gas toward the end of the encounter to disperse the demonstrators. Apparently, a private security detail was also on board. The video shows several men getting out of the bus to help it leave the plaza safely.⁵

The episode, which conjoins the two extremes of Latin American politics and society—the elegant, mature, and sophisticated neoliberals and the mostly poor, young, and angry demonstrators—easily lends itself to allegory. After all, it juxtaposes Vargas Llosa, “the hero of the Latin American right,” with the figure of Che Guevara and the demonstrators who admire him.⁶ One can imagine a neoliberal reading of the event as an example of what can happen if the bus of democracy takes the wrong turn into the chaos and violence of populism or, for those caught in a time warp, communism. From the demonstrators' perspective, one can find in the event an example of how neoliberalism is ultimately incompatible with cooperation, the value celebrated in the official name of the plaza, or one can view the bus as greed backtracking in the face of the anger of

3. On more than one occasion, Vargas Llosa has expressed dislike for the term *neoliberal*, preferring *liberal* in its European and Latin American sense of commitment to the free market, individual rights, and representative democracy (Vargas Llosa 2001a). However, proponents of radical free market policies, including Hernando de Soto (1989), who during the 1980s was the novelist's closest collaborator, actually use the term.

4. According to Otto Guevara, a libertarian Costa Rican politician, “If they had known Mario was on [the bus], they would have burned it” (Carpineta 2008, n.p.).

5. There is video by Indymedia Rosario available of the episode that Vargas Llosa mentions posted on YouTube as “Incidente en el colectivo de Vargas Llosa,” at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uuvfvLf6j1A> (accessed December 12, 2008). Photos from inside the bus can be seen in the *Prensa Libre* report “Agresión a bus de Vargas Llosa,” also available on YouTube, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PAkcG0I9sHY> (accessed December 12, 2008).

6. According to a slightly ironic article in *Página 12*: “It was planned that the dinner on Friday would be a celebration of the anniversary of the Fundación Libertad, but it ended up being the birthday party of the writer and hero of the Latin American right Mario Vargas Llosa” (Carpineta and Pertot 2008, n.p.).

a people united who will never be defeated. In fact, Vargas Llosa (2008a, A4) implicitly presents the experience in allegorical terms, as he describes, in his words, Argentine history as “going from Borges to the piqueteros.” Moreover, Vargas Llosa (2008a, A4) views the piqueteros—obviously described as violent and irrational—as “an emblem of the other Argentina [in contrast with that of Jorge Luis Borges] that rejected civilization and resolutely opted for barbarism.” The novelist’s reference to the opposition between civilization and barbarism—while commenting on his own experience of Argentina and the country’s history—is more than a dramatic rhetorical flourish in his presentation of the attack on the bus. As is well known, the dichotomy between civilization and barbarism as the basis for understanding Latin American societies found its fullest presentation in the texts of two major Argentine writers of the nineteenth century: Domingo Faustino Sarmiento and Esteban Echeverría. Sarmiento provided a comprehensive historical and political application of the antinomy in his 1845 work *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism* (2004). Echeverría’s 1838 short story “The Slaughter House” (1997) can be considered both a thorough fictionalization of the antinomy and an allegory of the country’s social and political reality during the government of the caudillo Juan Manuel Rosas (1829–1852).⁷ Moreover, the plot of Echeverría’s story, which depicts the attack on a “civilized” Argentine by the gauchos and butchers working at the slaughterhouse, resembles the experience from which “Borges y los piqueteros” originated. Therefore, Vargas Llosa’s use of this dichotomy in his own interpretation of Argentina follows and updates these foundational representations of the country’s history and identity. But, as we will see, for Vargas Llosa, the antinomy of civilization and barbarism not only is relevant to Argentina, but also, as has always been the case, is applicable to Peru, Latin America, and even the rest of the world.

In this article, by means of the study of a selection of essays from the 1990s to the present and through a brief analysis of the novel *Death in the Andes* (1996a), originally published in 1993, I attempt to delineate the specific manner in which the dichotomy of civilization and barbarism is expressed and modified in Vargas Llosa’s writings and, more generally, in neoliberalism as an ideological movement. During a time in which many have adopted a relativistic notion of culture that makes judgment problematic, neoliberals embrace this clear-cut value hierarchy with complete abandon. In fact, one cannot but be surprised by the ease with which Vargas Llosa makes pronouncements based on the identification of individuals, groups, and political movements with either civilization or barbarism. However, the fact is that his reference to civilization and

7. Sarmiento’s *Facundo* was originally published in 1845. As is well known, “The Slaughter House,” while written in the late 1830s and circulating in manuscript form among Argentine liberal circles, was published only in 1871.

barbarism differs substantially from its nineteenth-century version and its colonial precedents.

CIVILIZATION AND BARBARISM IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

As Carlos Altamirano and Beatriz Sarlo have argued, underlying the nineteenth-century codification of the opposition between civilization and barbarism was the fact that Argentina was primarily a rural country in which, as one would expect, the agrarian elites were hegemonic. For urban liberals to justify taking power, they needed to rhetorically and ideologically displace the rural elites outside the imagined national space. As Altamirano and Sarlo (1997, 36) note, "In a ruralized environment, where the actual bases of political power were rural and where the projects of national organization proposed to interpellate the inhabitants of the city, and be based on urban development, the topic of the frontier not only includes the 'Indian' but also the 'barbarian.'" If the colony had been built on the coding of the Amerindian as "other," Sarmiento and the liberals, who obviously thought of themselves as representing civilization, will associate the rural caudillos and the gauchos, who frequently constituted the caudillos' military and political base, with the already excluded "indigenous barbarism" (Altamirano and Sarlo 1997, 11). For Sarmiento, therefore, the violence of nineteenth-century Argentina and the failure of that country to develop the social and legal institutions characteristic of modernity were due to the domination of the countryside—and its putative barbaric world of caudillos and gauchos, as well as of unassimilated Amerindians—over the urban space. According to Altamirano and Sarlo, Sarmiento imagines Argentine history as "a frank, naive and primitive struggle between the most recent progress of the human spirit and the most elemental aspects of savage life, between the populous cities and the dark forests" (Altamirano and Sarlo 1997, 13).

VARGAS LLOSA AND HERNANDO DE SOTO ON CIVILIZATION AND BARBARISM

A similar opposition between urban civilization and rural barbarism, though in this case primarily indigenous, is to be found in the writings of both Vargas Llosa and Hernando de Soto, the influential neoliberal economist. In his novel *Death in the Andes* (1996a), Vargas Llosa presents the rural Quechua culture and, arguably, population in terms that radicalize those that Sarmiento uses to describe Argentine Amerindian and rural cultures. In *Death in the Andes*, set during the 1980s, the heyday of the brutal Maoist Shining Path, Andean culture is presented as characterized by cannibalism, human sacrifices, and nearly inconceivable brutality. Moreover, as Ignacio López-Calvo (2008, n.p.) argues, "The novel suggests in several passages that Sendero Luminoso's massacres are nothing but a continu-

ation or modern version of pre-Columbian human sacrifice." Therefore, *Death in the Andes* implicitly presents Peruvian history as a "struggle . . . between the most recent progress and the most elemental aspects of savage life" (Altamirano and Sarlo 1997, 13), the latter represented spatially in the non-Hispanic, non-Western and, therefore, nonrational Andes.⁸

However, this negative portrayal of rural Andean culture as barbaric is not exclusive to Vargas Llosa. It is, for instance, present in de Soto's work *The Other Path: The Informal Revolution in the Third World* (1989). This study originally published in 1986, exercised a central influence not only on Vargas Llosa, who wrote its prologue, but also on Latin American neoliberalism as a whole. Curiously, for a text that Kristal (1998, 110) has described as arguing that "the Indians and the poor of Peru have laid the foundation for an economy that could overcome the obstacles of a corrupt and inefficient government bureaucracy," in *The Other Path*, there is little description of rural Andean existence. It is possible, however, to reconstruct de Soto's assumptions about life in the Andes through an analysis of the contrasts established in his text between city and country life. Writing about the effects of urban life on Andean migrants, de Soto (1989, 3) argues that "the cities have . . . conferred individuality on their inhabitants. Individual effort has come to predominate over collective effort." Therefore, de Soto, like José Carlos Mariátegui and other earlier Peruvian thinkers, associates the Andean Amerindian with communal social practices. But *The Other Path* presents the loss of this sense of communality as the necessary precondition for individual and, paradoxically, collective development.

De Soto takes this identification of the Andean peasant population with collective behavior to the extreme. For instance, he entertains, but fortunately dismisses, the absurd and racist idea that Amerindian migration to the city may be due to a "herd instinct" (de Soto 1989, 10). But, as we have seen, he does go as far as to claim that peasants of the Andes are not individuals. In *The Other Path*, the cities—or, to be more exact, the incorporation into the urban market economy that the phrase "individual effort" suggests—lead to the differentiation of the individual from the collectivity.⁹ In fact, de Soto imagines peasants as an amorphous

8. Other critics have noted the influence of Sarmiento on Vargas Llosa. Cohn (2000) and Williams (2002) point out the presence of Sarmiento in *Death in the Andes*. Kokotovic (2007, 30), while not mentioning Sarmiento, has noted the attribution in *Death in the Andes* between "the brutality of the conflict [with the Shining Path] and atavistic Indian barbarism." Evaluating the Peruvian novelist's writings as a whole, Braulio Muñoz (2000, 108n12) has argued, "Vargas Llosa is following in the footsteps of such conservative writers/critics as Sarmiento and Borges."

9. A similar lack of individuality as characteristic of non-Westernized indigenous communities is found in Vargas Llosa's description of the Amazonian Machiguenga, in *The Storyteller* (2001b), first published in 1987, one year after the original Spanish edition of *The Other Path*. The lack of a proper name, replaced by the name *Tasurinchi*, originally that of

collectivity that threatens the simultaneously ordered and individualistic city. *The Other Path* describes the Peruvian countryside as a “wild and rustic land” and, in terms Sarmiento would have approved, even as “chaos” poised to invade the urban “cosmos” (de Soto 1989, 11).

However, *The Other Path* diverges from earlier uses of the antinomy. It not only shows the indigenous peasants as actively seeking civilization—“Civilization was expected to go to the countryside: the peasants were not expected to come looking for it” (de Soto 1989, 10)—but also does not find a solution to this dichotomy in genocide, or even full assimilation, but rather in a new and superior synthesis: the “barbarians” and their struggles to adapt to urban capitalism are the basis for an improved civilization. Once in the city, the former peasants, now described as “informals,” are presented as opening up the mercantilistic—that is, statist, monopolistic, and bureaucratized—economic structures of formal Peru and replacing them with free markets that do not inhibit their participation. Thus, the Amerindian migrants become not only individuals but also, as de Soto (1989, 243) writes, “entrepreneurs, . . . people who know how to seize opportunities by managing, available resources, including their own labor, relatively efficiently.” As the foregoing quotation makes clear, for de Soto, entrepreneurs are the highest possible result of individuation.

Furthermore, informal entrepreneurs constitute what the Peruvian economist in a Rostowian phrase calls “the human capital essential for economic takeoff” (de Soto 1989, 243). Surprisingly, in *The Other Path*, the migrants and their black market capitalism, commonly considered symptoms of the decay of Latin America’s cities, are presented as precipitating social modifications necessary for the achievement of economic and political modernity, the region’s until-now-unattainable Holy Grail. According to de Soto, unlike the criollo elites trapped by mercantilist institutions and dogmas, the mostly indigenous migrants in their struggle to survive in the hostile urban environment are able to spontaneously produce the cultural, legal, and economic framework necessary for modernization.

Vargas Llosa, despite his enthusiastic endorsement of *The Other Path*, has always been less optimistic than de Soto regarding the modernizing potential of indigenous migrants and their hybrid urban cultures. *Death in the Andes* presents indigenous migrants as carriers of Andean barbarism into the apparently civilized coast—it presents the once exclusively Andean belief in the existence of “eye-cutters” or “eye robbers” as expanding into the coastal cities of “Lima, Chiclayo, Ferreñafe” (Vargas Llosa 1996a,

their creator deity, shared by all male Machiguenga, represents this nonindividuation. As Kerr (1992, 209n35) notes: “The name ‘Tasurinchi,’ which the hablador [storyteller] uses to identify his different interlocutors (i.e. the members of the tribe with whom he has spoken and from whom he learns the stories he tells), functions as a provisional tag for every member of the tribal community, none of whom has a proper name.”

161). Moreover, in *La utopía arcaica*, his study of the Peruvian *indigenista* writer José María Arguedas, Vargas Llosa (1996b) correctly notes that the migrants were among the principal supporters of Alberto Fujimori's corrupt and semidictatorial government. However, belief in the possibility of the modernization of the Andean population, if not necessarily its culture, is present throughout the novelist's political writings. In "El nacimiento del Perú," first published in 1986, the same year as *The Other Path*, arguably his most criticized article,¹⁰ undeniably the one moment in which the novelist explicitly makes the case for the necessary disappearance of indigenous culture, he writes:

Perhaps there is no realist way of integrating our societies other than asking Indians to pay this high price; perhaps, the ideal, that is the preservation of the primitive cultures of America, is an utopia incompatible with another more urgent goal: the establishment of modern societies, in which social and economic differences be reduced to reasonable, humane, proportions in which all can achieve, at least, a free and decent life (Vargas Llosa 1990b, 377).

Earlier in the essay, Vargas Llosa (1990b, 377) describes what that price is: "[to] renounce their culture—their language, their beliefs, their traditions and customs—and adopt those of their former overlords." Although here he announces the need for the complete disappearance of indigenous cultures (a position on which he has wavered and that may in fact contradict his more frequent interpretation of the relationship between modernity and local cultures),¹¹ he does not present race as the primary determinant of behavior, or even as any kind of determinant for that matter.¹²

10. For instance, the historian Peter Winn (1992, 244) describes the abridged English version of the essay "Questions of Conquest" as "his most controversial writing"; the anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena (2000, 3) claims that Vargas Llosa's essay "echoes some nineteenth-century racial thinkers . . . like Gobineau." Although the essay was originally published in 1986 in the Peruvian newspaper *El Comercio*, it was reprinted in his 1990 anthology *Contra viento y marea*.

11. For instance, in the essay "Questions of Conquest and Culture," after asking "Can indigenous cultures survive?" Vargas Llosa (1993, n.p.) answered: "I believe this is possible for cultures like the Quechuas . . . who number in the millions and have a long history. Their culture achieved a great deal of development and it still serves to create cohesion among its people. . . . But even in the case of the Quechua Indians, I sometimes have the impression that mestizaje has shaped a culture that is as Indian as it is Western because cultural integration has taken place not only with respect to religion, clothing, family and work, but also with respect to the backbone of any culture: its language. Should this process be supported or resisted? Is Westernisation of indigenous peoples a crime or is it the fastest way to overcome the backwardness and exploitation they are suffering today?" This essay, originally a lecture given in Sydney, Australia, basically rewrites "El nacimiento del Perú" and repeats verbatim several of its passages. As Kristal (1998, 157) correctly notes: "Vargas Llosa has not resolved his own dilemmas about the preservation or eventual modernization of indigenous cultures."

12. The questions he identified in "El nacimiento del Perú" are, however, not limited to Vargas Llosa's native country. Cultural contact and migration and the challenges they

RACE AND BARBARISM

Vargas Llosa's and de Soto's appropriation of the opposition of civilization and barbarism, and their identification of indigenous cultures with the latter, differs substantially from earlier uses of this antinomy. For nineteenth-century thinkers, such as Sarmiento or Echeverría, race was a crucial component of what constituted civilization, an association that became fixed as racialism became scientific orthodoxy after the 1850s.¹³ Thus, essentialist definitions of race—defining whether a group could ascend to civilization—determined the political options for dealing with this putative barbarism. Thus, as Roberto Fernández Retamar (1977, 42) puts it, when Sarmiento achieved power in 1868, he “killed the Indians and the Gauchos and taught whites how to read.” Retamar omits a third option practiced throughout the region during the nineteenth century and early part of the twentieth century: immigration from Europe to whiten the population (for an analysis of whitening, see De Castro 2002, 17–18). The opposition between civilization and barbarism was, therefore, compatible with the social structures of Latin America in which light-skinned elites benefited from the labor of a darker—indigenous, mestizo, black, and so on—majority. The dichotomy rapidly became one of the principal justifications for the intertwining of race and class in the region and the maintenance of existing neocolonial social structures.

But as exemplified in the passages quoted from *The Other Path* and “El nacimiento del Perú,” both Vargas Llosa and de Soto believe that indigenous origins are not incompatible with civilization. Even in *Death in the Andes*, which repeats the colonial representation of the Amerindian as sodomite, cannibal, and as practicing human sacrifices, the three greatest

raise to liberal values are central problems in contemporary United States and Europe. For instance, in “El velo no es el velo” Vargas Llosa (2007b, A4) states, “The permission to use the Islamic veil in public schools is a foothold with which the enemies of the separation of church and state, of the equality between men and women, of religious freedom and of human rights, pretend to achieve true spaces of legal and moral extraterritoriality, something, that if these [European states] admit, could lead them to suicide.” Curiously, the association of barbarism with Islamic cultures has been present in Latin American versions of the antinomy beginning with Sarmiento. In *Facundo*, Sarmiento (2004) identifies the Argentine frontier—referred to as the desert—with the landscapes of the Middle East: “there is some analogy between the spirit of the Pampas and the plains that lie between the Tigris and Euphrates” (49). He later calls the gauchos “American Bedouins” (Sarmiento 2004, 50).

13. The racism present in nineteenth-century, liberal, Argentine thought clearly manifests in the monotonously derogative representation of the black and mixed-race characters in Echeverría's “The Slaughter House.” In fact, the text presents itself not only as an allegory but also as a valid representation of Argentine society and, especially, the working class: “The Slaughter House offered a lively, picturesque spectacle, even though it did contain all that is horribly, ugly, filthy, and deformed in the small proletarian class peculiar to the Plata River area” (Echeverría 1997, 63).

sins according to the conquistadores,¹⁴ Vargas Llosa (1996a, 11) states, "It isn't a race that separates us, it's an entire culture." Therefore, race is not a significant factor in determining the degree of civilization that an individual or community has acquired. For instance, in a recent restatement of his neoliberal beliefs, the article "Lecciones de los pobres," Vargas Llosa (2008b) presents the indigenous Añanos and Flores—the entrepreneurs behind the successful enterprises Kola Real and Topsy Tops—as examples for all Latin Americans to follow.

In fact, in a 2006 attack on Evo Morales, then president-elect of Bolivia, Vargas Llosa provides a negative example of how, for him, race is ultimately an irrelevant fact. The article—"Raza, botas y nacionalismo"—reaffirms Vargas Llosa's opposition to racism while accusing Morales, Hugo Chávez, and Ollanta Humala (the nationalist candidate for the Peruvian presidency in 2006) of using race for political purposes: "To present Latin America's problems in racial terms, as those demagogues do, is a foolish irresponsibility. It means attempting to replace the stupid and self-interested prejudice of some Latin Americans who think they are white, for the other, equally absurd, of Indians against whites" (Vargas Llosa 2006, A4). He even goes as far as to claim that Morales, indigenous and a coca activist, who assumed the presidency of Bolivia in 2006, is not actually an Indian. After noting that the Humalas were a family of land owners in the Andes—and, therefore, exploiters of Indians—Vargas Llosa (2006, A4) argues: "Neither is Mr. Evo Morales properly an Indian, even though he was born in a poor indigenous family and was as a child a keeper of llamas." He continues: "Don Evo is the emblematic Latin American *criollo*, astute like a squirrel, a climber and scam artist, and with a vast experience as a manipulator of men and women acquired through his long trajectory of coca activist and member of the union aristocracy" (Vargas Llosa 2006, A4). Despite the sarcasm of Vargas Llosa's description of Morales, the fact is that, in this case, as throughout his writings, race is not a factor in determining human behavior. Depending on one's behavior, culture, and social status, whether inherited or acquired, one can be a *criollo*—that is, white Latin American—even if born into an indigenous family. Vargas Llosa (2006, A4) clearly states the reason for this paradoxical fact: "Anyone who is neither blind nor stupid notices from the start that, in Latin America, more than racial, the notions of 'Indian' and 'white' (or 'black' or 'yellow') are cultural and are impregnated with an economic and social content." Despite the problematic nature of Vargas Llosa's

14. In fact, for many conquistadores, sodomy, cannibalism, and human sacrifices justified the conquest and the "use of terror tactics" (Restall 2003, 105). According to Restall (2003, 105), "Even Bernal Díaz del Castillo, usually seen as more evenhanded than most Spanish chroniclers, harps repeatedly on native tendencies towards sodomy, human sacrifice, cannibalism and larceny."

descriptions of indigenous cultures, his inability to see the role that racial identification may still play in Latin American politics and society, and his relative indifference to the destructive effects of racism on individuals and communities, for him, unlike for earlier thinkers, civilization is not linked to race. If, as he states, Morales, Chávez, and Humala are “barbaric caudillos” (2006, A4), it is because of the policies they propose, not their racial or genetic makeup. Therefore, even if he is vehemently opposed to identity politics, Vargas Llosa’s thought is not strictly racist. In fact, although he establishes hierarchies among human groups, these are based on cultural not racial criteria.

CIVILIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Although for Vargas Llosa, civilizational values present in Western culture are normative, he does not necessarily endorse all European or North American cultural traditions, practices, and products. For instance, in “El nacimiento del Perú,” Vargas Llosa (1990b, 374) celebrates in the conquistadores “the apparition of the individual as sovereign source of values which society must respect,” despite lamenting their “excesses and crimes.” In an article about Isaiah Berlin, curiously the one liberal (in the Latin American sense of the word) he admires who was not an unabashed free marketer, Vargas Llosa (1997, n.p.) writes about a “democratic culture” defined “as tolerance, pluralism, human rights, individual sovereignty, and legality.”¹⁵ More recently, in “Confessions of a Liberal,” Vargas Llosa (2005, n.p.) again restates his belief in the link between liberal values and civilization:

Political democracy and the free market are foundations of a liberal position. But, thus formulated, these two expressions have an abstract, algebraic quality that dehumanizes and removes them from the experience of the common people. Liberalism is much, much more than that. Basically, it is tolerance and respect for others, and especially for those who think differently from ourselves, who practice other customs and worship another god or who are non-believers. By agreeing to

15. “Isaiah Berlin did not fully agree with those who like Frederick Hayek or Von Mises see in the free market the guarantor of progress, not only political, but also economic and cultural, and the system that can best harmonize the nearly infinite diverse human expectations and ambitions within a system that guarantees freedom. Isaiah Berlin always held ‘social democratic’ doubts about *laissez faire* and he repeated them a few weeks before his death . . . repeating that he couldn’t without feeling anguished support an unlimited economic freedom that had once filled mines with child workers” (Vargas Llosa 1997, n.p.). Kristal arguably gives the best explanation for Vargas Llosa’s admiration of Berlin. Despite the fundamental difference between the two intellectuals regarding the role of the free market in democratic society, Berlin provided the Peruvian novelist with a compelling argument to abandon his belief in socialism: “utopias are impossible ideals that lead to needless violence” (Kristal 1998, 104). Moreover, Berlin’s defense of tolerance has become central to Vargas Llosa’s conceptualization of civilization.

live with those who are different, human beings took the most extraordinary step on the road to civilization.

Civilization, for Vargas Llosa, thus begins with tolerance, which, as we have seen, he presents implicitly as formalized into political democracy, rational legal frameworks, and the free market. In the foregoing passage, he also presents a kind of litmus test for the compatibility of a specific culture with civilization: its acceptance of individual difference and its compatibility with formal democracy and markets.

Vargas Llosa's 2007 essay "El velo no es el velo" makes clear the reasons behind his hierarchical vision of cultures:

There are some cultures that are more evolved and modern than others. And although it is true that even in the most primitive cultures there exist practices, uses, and beliefs that have enriched human experience and teachings that other cultures can take advantage of; it is also true that in many cultures survive barbaric prejudices and behaviors, discriminatory and even criminal, that no democracy can tolerate without denying itself and backtracking on the long road of civilization it has already trodden. (Vargas Llosa 2007b, A4)

Civilization is, therefore, a fragile achievement, dependent on the maintenance of specific core values that Vargas Llosa considers always under potential threat.¹⁶ The West can lose civilization, and other cultures can attain it.

Thus, the consistent differentiation that Vargas Llosa makes in his essays between culture and civilization—the former is linked to specific groups of people, and the second to tolerance, democracy, and markets—can be explained by the fact that, though civilization is viewed as originating in Western culture, it is not identical to it. If Europe and the United States lose their respect for human rights, for equality under the law, if the separation between church and state breaks down—traits that Vargas Llosa mentions in "El velo no es el velo"—the West could begin a slide down the civilizational scale. In a similar manner, Vargas Llosa's hesitation about the compatibility of Andean culture with civilization arises from his vision of that culture as communal and, therefore, as potentially opposed to

16. For Vargas Llosa, Islamic cultures, by supposedly refusing to tolerate difference, by rejecting otherness, particularly of women, are less "civilized" than those of the West. Islam "is a religion in which discrimination against women is . . . harshest than any other" (Vargas Llosa 2007b, A4). The veil represents for Vargas Llosa a physical and explicit manifestation of the subordination of women. There is an obvious tension in Vargas Llosa's favoring of a ban on the veil in public schools. In "Confessions of a Liberal," he stated that liberalism "is tolerance and respect for others, and especially for those who think differently from ourselves, who practice other customs and worship another god" (Vargas Llosa 2005, n.p). However, Vargas Llosa (2007b) is actually concerned with individual difference, not differences of a group. Moreover, for him, tolerance of the veil could lead to the destruction of the values that he claims constitute the basis of liberalism and civilization.

the development of the individual who constitutes the subject and object of tolerance, which, as we have seen, is at the core of civilization.¹⁷

Vargas Llosa's "Borges y los piqueteros" applies the dichotomy of civilization and barbarism to a country and individuals who clearly belong to the West. Vargas Llosa presupposes a post-Sarmiento Argentina in which Sarmiento's actions have led to the population's internalization of so-called civilized values and in which the countryside has become subordinated, in population and influence, to the city. Thus, he describes Argentina as "one of the first societies in the world which, thanks to an admirable educational system, defeated illiteracy" (Vargas Llosa 2008a, A4). (Sarmiento, also known as "the father of the school," was the organizer of the country's educational structure). Vargas Llosa (2008a, A4) begins the essay by reminiscing of "an Argentina of voracious and universal readers, of frenetic cosmopolitans, of excessive polyglots" and, more to the point, "the most prosperous and educated country of Latin America." Moreover, he writes about the piqueteros who attacked the bus: "I had time to study up close the angry faces of our attackers. They are all as white as can be" (Vargas Llosa 2008a, A4). Culturally and racially—even if his mention of race serves, again, to discredit it as a useful classificatory concept—Argentina is described as fully Western. Nevertheless, for Vargas Llosa, Argentina has experienced a process of political barbarization, that is, of a decline from civilization to barbarism. In the essay, the violence of the piqueteros can be viewed as representing the rejection of tolerance in its purest form.

For Vargas Llosa (2008a, A4), Argentina is the prime example of a Western country that has chosen barbarism despite having once been civilized:

A whole nation that progressively renounces everything that made it a country of the First World—democracy, market economy, its integration with the rest of the world, an open culture—in order to—blinded by populism, demagoguery, authoritarianism, dictatorship and messianic delirium—become impoverished, divided, bloodied, provincial and, in conclusion, go from Jorge Luis Borges to the *piqueteros*.

As we have seen, the essay presents the piqueteros as the "emblem" of an Argentina that has "rejected civilization and opted resolutely for bar-

17. In "El nacimiento del Perú," Vargas Llosa (1990b, 373–374) provides a paradoxical passage in which brutality gives rise to tolerance through the mediation of individuality: "Those, who with all justification in the world, are scandalized by the excesses and crimes of the conquest, must keep in mind that the first in condemning them . . . were men like Father Las Casas, who arrived to America with the conquistadors . . . This would have been impossible among the Incas or in any of the other great pre-Hispanic cultures. In them, as in all great civilizations outside the West, individuals could not question the social organism to which they belonged . . . because in them morality was not dissociable from the reason of state."

barism" (Vargas Llosa 2008a, A4). In the essay, Argentina's long descent into barbarism is described as having begun with the support for and election of Juan Domingo Perón, in the 1940s;¹⁸ therefore, in Vargas Llosa's mind, civilization, like prosperity, can be chosen.¹⁹ And the mention of Perón, a forefather of Latin American populism, makes clear the true danger that Chávez, Morales, and other contemporary populists pose: they represent the rejection not only of the free market but also, ultimately, of civilization.

DEVELOPMENT AND CHOICE

But is Vargas Llosa correct in seeing Argentina before Perón as, somewhat anachronistically, a full member of the first world? Was Argentina a society in which economic and cultural inequalities were tolerable; in which individual differences were tolerated; and in which the vast majority of people had the possibility of living a decent, if not prosperous, life? These questions are of importance in evaluating Vargas Llosa's description of Argentine history and the individual and collective political choices of Argentines, which, as we have seen, Vargas Llosa views as implying a preference for barbarism over civilization.

A basic difficulty with Vargas Llosa's narrative is that it is possible to argue that the process of economic and institutional degradation of Argentina began not with the election of Perón, but earlier, in 1930, with the military coup against the democratically elected president Hipólito Irigoyen led by José Félix Uriburu.²⁰ As Robert D. Crasweller (1996, 7)

18. According to Vargas Llosa (2008, A4): "Borges was fired from his position at the 'Miguel Cané Library' by Perón's government in 1946. . . . This event is a symbol of the process of political barbarization that would make Argentina into a Latin American country and would reveal to Argentines with the passing of time that they were not what they had thought they were—citizens of a civilized, cultivated, and democratic European country located by accident in South America—but, instead, alas, nothing more than another third world country underdeveloped and uncivil."

19. Vargas Llosa has stated this many times. For instance, in *A Fish in the Water*, he links civilization and prosperity in his hopes for Peru: "When I was younger, hope that skipping intermediate steps in one leap, it would become a prosperous, modern, cultivated country, and that I would live to see that day. Later on, the hope that, before I died, Peru would have at least begun to cease being poor, [barbaric], and violent. There are no doubt many bad things about our era, but there is one very good one, without precedent in history. Countries today can *choose* to be prosperous . . . if it opens out to the world and organizes its economy on a competitive basis, to achieve rapid growth" (Vargas Llosa 1994, 44–45).

20. Despite the difficulty in identifying pre-Perón or pre-Uriburu Argentina with a truly generalized prosperity and respect for civil rights—and with what Vargas Llosa implies in civilization—many observers view the history of the country as implying a progressive degradation from the period of oligarchy: "the country would go through a sweeping process of economic growth and modernization that before long turned it into the most developed country in Latin America" (Nouzeilles and Montaldo 2002, 158).

argues, the coup “signified a great turning point, the end of a long era of success, and the approach of more than half a century of Argentine misfortune.” In other words, unless one assumes that the nation as a whole willed Uriburu to commit the coup, one must conclude that the Argentine debacle was not chosen by the majority of the country’s population but, instead, imposed by a small group ultimately acting against the interests of the majority. Moreover, most historians agree that sectors of the oligarchy and intelligentsia supported, and even prompted, the Uriburu coup.²¹

Vargas Llosa’s interpretation of Argentine history becomes even more problematic considering that, though wealthier than its neighbors, Argentina had a flawed economic model that, unless profoundly modified, would have necessarily led to the general involution he has so passionately pointed out. Thus, Mauricio Rojas (2002, 49), writing about the Argentina of 1930, notes, “We have a ramshackle model of industrial growth which became wholly untenable when its absolute prerequisite, a dynamic export sector, disappeared. Argentina the prosperous would one day, like Kafka’s Gregor Samsa, awake transformed—into a country on the edge of the abyss.” The general social crisis of the 1930s led to a breakdown in the economic structure of the country, as the Great Depression and its aftermath significantly decreased the demand for Argentine agricultural exports; to a profound degradation of the country’s political institutions promoted by the oligarchy and the military; and, not surprisingly, to a worsening of the majority’s standard of living. As Winn (1992, 129) has noted about “the social changes set in motion by the Depression”:

With declining export markets for their produce, landowners began laying off laborers and expelling them from their estates. A veritable army of the unemployed streamed out of the dusty farms and towns of the interior of Argentina and headed for the cities of the coast. By 1947, 1.4 million internal migrants had settled in Buenos Aires, drawn by reports that there were jobs to be had in the new manufacturing industries.

Therefore, given the changes experienced by Argentina during the 1930s, which only made evident the weaknesses that Rojas had pointed out, the rejection of the country’s social structure and hierarchy is not, in principle, an irrational or misguided act. Thus, even if one is critical of Perón’s government and its policies—and it is obvious that it neither cre-

21. According to Winn (1992, 126), “In September 1930 a coalition of oligarchs and officers ousted Yrigoyen . . . On the surface the oligarchy had turned back the clock to 1912, before universal suffrage or mass politics interfered with their ability to run Argentina according to their lights and in their own interests.” Of Leopoldo Lugones, who at the time was considered Argentina’s major writer and who authored in 1924 “La hora de la espada” (“The Time of the Sword”), a key Fascist document in Argentine and Latin American history, Crasweller (1996, 78) notes: “Lugones had been part of the intellectual force behind General Uriburu.”

ated the structural economic problems of Argentina nor solved them—he, at most, made worse an already-bad situation.

Moreover, *mutatis mutandis*, a similar argument can be made regarding the other populist leaders that Vargas Llosa decries. Again, even if their specific policies and modes of governing can be criticized, and even if their actions can be seen as worsening people's quality of life, their rise to power is predicated precisely on the exclusions, injustices, corruption, and (more generally) flaws of the economic models and social structures of Venezuela (in the case of Chávez), Bolivia (in the case of Morales), Peru (in the cases of Humala and Velasco), and so on. In fact, given Vargas Llosa's definitions of civilization and barbarism, one could well classify the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s—when the U.S. electorate preferred someone who did not defend strict free market policies—as a turn to barbarism. Vargas Llosa's allegory of Argentina as going from Borges (the personification of culture, modernity, and ultimately civilization) to the piqueteros (embodying brutality, intolerance, and more generally barbarism) flounders in that it implies a misrepresentation of Argentine and Latin American history and society.²²

DEMONS, IDIOTS, AND BATAILLE

Regardless of the flaws implicit in Vargas Llosa's historical analysis, his essays present what could be called a rationalist vision of political choice. For Vargas Llosa, any rational individual would choose Borges—or his equivalent—over a populist. Civilization and the prosperity it entails can, therefore, be chosen. This is a problematic statement because, as we have seen, Vargas Llosa also celebrates individualism. Therefore, Vargas Llosa assumes that at least a majority of individuals benefit from neoliberal policies in the short or medium term. On the contrary, if neoliberal policies do not directly or indirectly benefit an individual, that individual would exhibit true rationality in rejecting them.

However, given this linkage between neoliberalism and rationality, it is not surprising that Vargas Llosa, following his son Álvaro's lead, occasionally uses the term *idiot* to describe those who reject neoliberalism and, implicitly, civilization. Thus, in his "Presentación" to the neoliberal screed *Manual del perfecto idiota latinoamericano*, cowritten by his son Álvaro,

22. Vargas Llosa's choice of Borges as representing civilization vis-à-vis the piqueteros is problematic in that Borges temporarily supported his country's brutal military dictatorship during the 1970s. When Borges met the military president Jorge Rafael Videla soon after the coup, Borges thanked him "for what he had done for the *patria*, having saved it from chaos, from the abject state we were in, and above all from idiocy" (qtd. in Williamson 2004, 422). Later, Borges would recant and become one of the most important public voices "calling for the matter of the *desaparecidos* to be investigated and those responsible punished—with death sentences if necessary" (Williamson 2004, 473).

together with the Cuban American journalist Carlos Montaner and the Colombian writer Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, Vargas Llosa (1996c, 12) argues that idiocy “is adopted consciously, due to intellectual laziness, ethical sluggishness, and civil opportunism. It is ideological and political, but above all, frivolous, because it reveals an abdication of the ability to think on one’s own, to contrast words with the facts they claim to describe, to question the rhetoric that sometimes substitutes for thought.” Like barbarism, idiocy is chosen. Even though Vargas Llosa (1996c, 13) temporarily admits the possibility of a “[neo]liberal idiocy,” one cannot avoid coming to the conclusion that, according to him, if one were to rationally analyze reality one would have to admit neoliberalism as absolutely true. As he puts it, idiocy is also “weakness and cowardice in front of real reality” (Vargas Llosa 1996c, 14).²³

One of the tensions in Vargas Llosa’s thought is that, while he proclaims the need and the possibility of rationality in politics—otherwise no group of people would ever have chosen to become civilized—he is perfectly aware that human actions are rarely fully rational. In fact, his theory of literature is predicated on the idea of demons, that is, irrational and apparently uncontrollable desires or urges. Writing in “Truth of Lies,” about novels’ documentary validity, or lack of it, Vargas Llosa (1998b, 325) argues: “These lies do not document their lives, but the demons that were stirred up, the dreams in which they found pleasure, which made the life they were leading more bearable.” And in his study of Gustave Flaubert, *The Perpetual Orgy*, he again argues that “every novelist recreates the world in his image and likeness, corrects reality at the prompting of his demons” (Vargas Llosa 1986, 127). Thus, even the most rational of writers, such as Flaubert, are described as submitting to their unconscious demons. According to Vargas Llosa (1976, 116), *Madame Bovary* originates in a “theme [that] was an old demon that had pursued Flaubert since his adolescence”: “the downfall of a woman whose irresistible desire to live beyond the limitations that her condition [as a woman] imposed, led first to adultery and then to disaster.”²⁴

23. In his prologue to *El regreso del idiota latinoamericano*, a follow-up to *El perfecto idiota latinoamericano*, also by Mendoza, Montaner, and Álvaro Vargas Llosa, Vargas Llosa notes that they included in their gallery of idiots “Noam Chomsky, flagrant case of intellectual schizophrenia, inspired and even a genius when he limits himself to transformational linguistics and an incorrigible idiot when he talks about politics,” and Harold Pinter, “author of dense, rarely comprehensible experimental dramas . . . an unrepresentable demagogue when he agitates against democratic culture” (2007a, 12). In both cases, Vargas Llosa implies that, despite their obvious intelligence, Chomsky and Pinter choose not to analyze political reality and, therefore, end up supporting what the Peruvian novelist considers idiocy.

24. The English version, *The Perpetual Orgy*, mistranslates this key passage: “the downfall of a woman whose irresistible desire to live beyond her means and station leads first to adultery and then to catastrophe” (1987, 98). The translation seems to present the reason for Emma Bovary’s downfall as mainly overspending. However, the reason this story sup-

Vargas Llosa (1998b, 327) believes that it is possible and necessary that this irrationality be limited to the field of literature: "These well-defined boundaries between literature and history—between literary and historic truths—are a prerogative of open societies. In these societies, both coexist, independent and sovereign, though complementing each other in their utopian desire to include all of society." This separation between a rational society and an irrational literature is supposed to exist despite that, "by itself, literature is a terrible indictment against existence under whatever regime or ideology: a blazing testimony of its insufficiencies, its inability to satisfy us. And, for that reason, it is a permanent corroder of all power structures that would like to see men satisfied and contented" (Vargas Llosa 1998b, 330). In what can be considered only a paradox, although literature corrodes and undermines society by showing us what the latter excludes, we are expected, if living under neoliberal civilization, to express continuous satisfaction by perpetually supporting its unchanging and unchangeable policies and politics. However, Vargas Llosa has also stated on numerous occasions his belief, based on Georges Bataille's ideas, that irrationality is not limited to literary creation but ultimately is part and parcel of the human condition. In the 1972 essay "Bataille or the Redemption of Evil," which predates his conversion to neoliberalism, Vargas Llosa (1998a, 117) describes approvingly this idea of Bataille's:

In order to allow beings to endure . . . society must constrain man . . . force him to suffocate the non-rational part of his personality—that spontaneous and negative aspect of his being which, if left unchecked would, would destroy order and communal life . . . Only when this *maudit* dimension manages to express itself, causing violence against Good (placing the laws of the city in danger) can man achieve his sovereignty.

In other words, for Bataille and for Vargas Llosa, irrationality—why not barbarism?—is intrinsic to all human beings. Paradoxically, it must be repressed in order for society and individuals to prosper, but it is only when able to transgress laws, legal or moral, that human beings truly exercise their freedom and humanity. Although Vargas Llosa proposes literature as the privileged field in which transgression can be expressed without damaging society, and in fact actually benefiting it, he does not provide any reason why this *maudit* dimension can be consistently limited to writing.

Kristal (1998, 117) has noted the theoretical contradiction to be found in Vargas Llosa's simultaneous loyalty to Karl Popper (and his rationalism)

posedly becomes a demon for Flaubert is that it encompasses the rejection of social, gender, and even erotic subjugation. According to Vargas Llosa (1986, 108–109), this narrative of female self-destruction in rejecting social limitations is not the only demon expressed in *Madame Bovary*; he also mentions foot fetishism and "a tortuously prolonged Oedipus complex."

and Bataille (and his transgressive irrationalism): “Vargas Llosa is willing to deploy Popperian arguments against socialist doctrines, but the same arguments apply to irrationalist positions like Bataille’s.” However, the contradiction in Vargas Llosa’s thought between rationalism and irrationalism is not limited to its theoretical foundations; it also undermines his more concrete political comments. After all, if human behavior is not fully rational, if the demons can jump from the page to society, politics cannot be defined or prescribed as exclusively rational choice. And what one considers as civilization or barbarism can, at least to a degree, be determined by one’s own *maudit* dimension.

CONCLUSION

Although the violence of the *piqueteros* is inexcusable, it obviously reflects a profound rejection of the policies that the *Fundación Libertad* and Mario Vargas Llosa support. As Birns and Birns (2007, 20) point out: “The neoliberal prescriptions handed down from Washington in the past two decades . . . have stoked . . . resentment. Latin Americans are now more vociferously seeking redress for the economic distortions and the resulting inequalities long present in their societies.” In fact, throughout the 1990s, Argentina had been considered a shining example of a neoliberal success, but that ultimately led to the economic collapse of 2001.

But the anger of the *piqueteros* goes beyond their rejection of the neoliberal Washington Consensus. As one of the demonstrators, “Virna, a girl of only fourteen, with curly blonde hair” noted: ‘Don’t they realize that they are supporting a sector that backed the dictatorship? Like those who are inside,’ she added, pointing to the mirror-covered building of the *Fundación Libertad*” (Carpineta 2008, n.p). Ironically, Vargas Llosa, who during the 1970s was a critic of the Argentine dictatorship, is now viewed as hobnobbing with its former supporters.²⁵ Although I have not been able to verify whether any supporters of the dictatorship attended the celebration, the fact is that, for the demonstrators, the *Fundación Libertad*, neoliberalism, and even Vargas Llosa represent barbarism. If Vargas Llosa associates demonstrators with barbaric *caudillos*, like Chávez, the *piqueteros* see in *Fundación Libertad* the glittering offspring of what was one of the truly barbaric regimes of Latin American history.

25. Vargas Llosa, when president of International PEN, attempted to find out the whereabouts of disappeared writers; see “Kafka en Buenos Aires” (Vargas Llosa 1990a). As *Página 12* points out, more than 1,500 neoliberals, including businesspeople, paid sixty dollars to attend the dinner celebrating *Fundación Libertad*’s anniversary (Carpineta and Wernot 2008, n.p.). It is probable that among the attendees were individuals who had benefited from the dictatorship.

Despite on occasion appealing to rancid stereotypes, Vargas Llosa proposes a nonracist interpretation of Latin American society as based on the opposition between civilization and barbarism. He believes that civilization can be chosen. In other words, if a majority of a community desires and elects (or rejects) modernity, liberalism, democracy, prosperity, and tolerance, among other traits, that community can achieve or lose, respectively, civilization. And, in fact, throughout his essays, Vargas Llosa provides examples of individuals (and sometimes communities) who belong to diverse racial and cultural backgrounds and choose what Vargas Llosa considers civilized values. Nevertheless, his belief in the possibility of social rational choice seems to contradict his simultaneous belief in the irrationality of human nature. And the possibility of demons influencing political choice and beliefs, including his own, seems to escape his own model of civilization and barbarism.

Even more problematic is the manner in which neoliberal values and beliefs are necessarily, apodictically, and therefore ahistorically identified with civilization. At no moment does Vargas Llosa take into account the context in which societies make political decisions. According to Vargas Llosa's definition of civilization as the consequence of unfettered free markets, social-democratic countries, such as Sweden or Denmark, should be in the midst of barbarity. The fact that Argentine political behavior may be rational, given the historical and political realities of the country and despite its failures, is for Vargas Llosa unthinkable.

But even if Vargas Llosa's version of the dichotomy is not racist, it cannot avoid dismissing the ideas and experiences of those he defines as barbarians. After all, barbarians, as rude, wild, uncivilized persons, are by definition those whose ideas and voices can be disregarded as meaningless.²⁶ Neoliberalism has defined what it considers acceptable as rational discourse and what it dismisses as noise: the ideas and feelings that its critics express.

The violence of the demonstrators in Rosario can be viewed as representing what neoliberal analysis and discourse has excluded: the effects of the unfettered free market on the everyday life of the majority. It is, therefore, tempting to provide another alternative allegorical reading of the event, one that taps into another formational Argentine discourse: psychoanalysis. It is possible to see in the demonstrators the return of the repressed of neoliberalism—the effect of its policies on the everyday

26. Etymologically, the meaning of *barbarian* is "a foreigner, one whose language and customs differ from the speaker's." However, given that Vargas Llosa uses the term in order to make value judgments among populations and individuals, the alternative definition of *barbarian* as "a rude, wild, uncivilized person" is more to the point (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989).

lives of the majority. As Walter Benjamin (1968, 256), in a statement that contradicts a whole tradition of interpreting Latin America, noted: "There is no document of civilization that is not simultaneously a document of barbarism." The barbarity of the piqueteros reflects the disguised barbarity of neoliberal civilization.

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