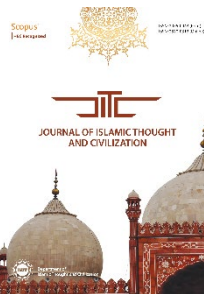


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# Deconstructing Eurocentric Narratives: A Critical Analysis of Civilization through the Works of Guizot, Gobineau, and Buckle

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## Abstract

This article critically analyzes the Eurocentric conception of civilization through the canonical writings of three major Western historians; François Guizot, Arthur de Gobineau, and Henry Thomas Buckle, proposing a deconstructive analysis through the lens of broader historical and cultural perspectives. By employing the critical textual analysis informed by the deconstructive approaches, the study explores the development of Eurocentric frameworks of civilization to reveal how the underlying cultural, racial and teleological assumptions played a key role in shaping the understanding of three influential European historians. Starting with Guizot's focus on teleological framework, Gobineau's racial determinism, and Buckle's environmental determinism, the paper critically deconstructs the generalizations and inherent precincts of their civilizational frameworks. The paper challenges the idea that European civilization stands as the exclusive model of human progress, highlighting how these theorists overlook the intricate interactions of social, cultural, and economic forces that contribute to the development of civilizations. Through a detailed comparative and textual analysis, the article discursively explores how the teleological model of Guizot, the racial hierarchic model of Gobineau, and the environmental determinism framework of Buckle conceptualizes the term civilization as a sole achievement of the European endeavors while neglecting the contributions of the non-European societies, thus legitimizing the world order based on hierarchies. With these findings, the study contributes to historical literature by exposing the ideological basis of Eurocentric historiography of the 19th century.

**Keywords:** civilization, Eurocentrism, scientific determinism, natural law, positivism

## Introduction

The term civilization in contemporary historiographical discourse, is ontologically associated with the Western world, reflecting their linear conception progress and societal development. Civilization as a term is derived from the Latin word *civitas*, which means city, thereby referring to a society made up of cities.<sup>1</sup> The earliest accounts of civilization can be traced back to the Neolithic era, when various civilizations emerged in West Asia. The emergence of these civilizations in West Asia occurred as a result of rapid urbanization and state formation.<sup>2</sup> However, the universal notion of the term civilization is deeply entrenched in Eurocentrism, which highlights the scientific, intellectual and cultural achievements of Europe as the cornerstone of human progress. From the standpoint of European historiography, the concept of civilization corresponds to singularity and

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<sup>1</sup>Yi Jianping, "Civilization" and "State": An Etymological Perspective," *Social Science in China*, 45, no. 2 (2012): 181–197, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02529203.2012.677292>.

<sup>2</sup>Trevor Watkins, "New Light on Neolithic Revolution in South-West Asia," *Antiquity* 84, no. 325 (2010): 621–634, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00100122>.

exclusivity, framing the history of the human as a linear progression originating in Europe.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, this narrative is inherently rooted in imperial and colonial histories, which are based on the theory of the civilizing mission—a systematic portrayal of non-European societies as stagnant, barbaric, or incapable of self-governance. This process explains how the dichotomies, such as civilized and uncivilized, cultured and uncultured, progressive and regressive, and us and them, were integrated into Western historiographical discourse five centuries ago.<sup>4</sup>

In the mainstream historical discourse particularly in the English language, the term civilization is derived from the French word *civilisé*, which means civilized. The term *civilisé* refers to cultural advancement and adherence to a particular set of social norms or values, often associated with European societies during the enlightenment era. However, from the historical standpoint under discussion, the term *civilisé* was used in a hierarchical view of cultures, deeming non-Western or non-European societies as backward, uncivilized, dogmatic, unenlightened, and savage.<sup>5</sup> European historians, philosophers, and theorists employed the term to justify their colonialization by calling for the colonization of non-European societies as a “civilizing mission”.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the civilizing process or mission was used alongside with this terminology by European historians and scholars between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries. The colonial genesis of *civilisé* and *mission civilisatrice* was developed through a set of scientific and race-based theories.<sup>7</sup> For instance, in his 1801 work, *Natural History of the Human Species*, French naturalist Julien-Joseph Virey proposed that human diversity went beyond surface-level variations and included significant moral and physical distinctions. He categorized human groups in a manner that reflected the Eurocentric and hierarchical perspectives common in his era.<sup>8</sup> In another work, *Natural History of the Negro Race* (1837), Virey, referring to black people, writes:

The features, characteristics, figures, and color of the Negro species are perpetuated in every climate, it does not undergo a peculiar change as long as it is not mixed with the other races. More disposed to sensual affections than to pure contemplation of the mind, the Negro has more feelings than thoughts, his intellect is not generally so extensive as that of the white man, his shape even bears some resemblance to Orang-Outang.<sup>9</sup>

This excerpt, taken from the opening pages of his book, illustrates how Virey’s analogy between individuals of African descent and orangutans exemplifies the deeply dehumanizing and racially prejudiced views prevalent during his time. This comparison reflects the broader

<sup>3</sup>Keith Gibbs, and Peter Jordan, “A Comparative Perspective on the ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ Neolithics of Eurasia: Ceramics; Agriculture and Sedentism,” *Quaternary International* 419, no. 17 (2016): 27–35, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.quaint.2016.01.069>.

<sup>4</sup>Carl Raschke, “Civilizing Mission,” in *Sovereignty in the 21st Century: Political Theology in an Age of Neoliberalism and Populism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2024), 79–95, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350446830>.

<sup>5</sup>Neagu Djuvara, *Civilizations and Historical Patterns: An Approach to the Comparative Study of History* (SA: Humanitas, 2019), 11.

<sup>6</sup>The term civilizing mission was used and employed by various European imperial powers like Spain: *misión civilizadora*; Portuguese: *Missão civilizadora*; French: *Mission civilisatrice* to justify their colonization and military intervention across their colonies.

<sup>7</sup>Mriganka Debnath, “The Invisible Agenda: Civilising Mission or Missionising Civilisation,” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 16, no. 3 (2012): 461–473, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2011.572550>

<sup>8</sup>Alain E. Reinberg, Haim Lewy, and Michael Smolensky, “The Birth of Chronobiology: Julian Joseph Virey,” *The Journal of Biological and Medical Rhythm Research* 18, no. 2 (2001): 173–186, <https://doi.org/10.1081/CBI-100103184>

<sup>9</sup>Julien-Joseph Virey, *Natural History of the Negro Race* (New York: New York Public Library, 1837), 1–2.

pseudoscientific efforts of the time to diminish the humanness of non-European peoples and reinforce ideas of racial hierarchy.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, by conceptualizing this terminology within the civilizational domain, European historians provided an ontological foundation for colonial expansionism and exploitation. By employing these concepts, non-European races were portrayed as less civilized, physically different, culturally backward and morally weak in ways understood as deficiencies in comparison to Europeans.<sup>11</sup> The entire discourse of civilization from the Western standpoint was and remains based on dichotomies between “us” and “them”, or between the civilized and the barbarians. This framework has long been instrumental in promoting and sustaining ideas of Western dominance—on the one hand Western ideology, political systems, and cultural traditions theorized as civilized, and on the other, non-Western societies, were theorized as inferior or uncivilized.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, phrases such as barbarians and savages became linguistic-rhetorical tools used to rationalize colonialism, imperialism, and the imposition of Western values under the guise of advancing civilization. These narratives systematically undermined non-Western or European systems of knowledge, governance, and culture, while elevating Western civilization as the fundamental standard and benchmark of progress.<sup>13</sup> This dichotomy also established the foundation for Eurocentric academic perspectives, which often excluded or diminished the intellectual and cultural contributions of non-Western societies. Postcolonial studies have emphasized that this binary framework oversimplifies the rich interconnections and reciprocal influences among civilizations, reducing them to polarized categories that primarily serve ideological and hegemonic agendas.<sup>14</sup> In this respect, despite many earlier studies on the 19<sup>th</sup> century European historiography, significant gaps exist. Most of the previous studies on the subject explore the discourse of European historiography in isolation by focusing on the role of historical discourses in this construction of intellectual concepts such as progress, racial ontology, or environmental determinism. One notable gap is the lack of comparative analysis of the European historiographies in a unified framework, which this article attempts to fill through critical textual analysis of the seminal works of three Western historiographers.

To address the gap, the paper focuses on two major questions: 1). How was the Eurocentric conception of civilization during the 19<sup>th</sup> century ideologically constructed through intellectual determinism to portray Europe as the sole model of civilization? 2). How did civilizational frameworks of the prominent historians of 19<sup>th</sup> century like Guizot, Gobneau, and Buckle promote Eurocentric assumptions to limit the understanding of global civilizational discourses? To answer these questions, the paper critically analyzes the treatise on civilization through the work of three prominent Western historians; François Guizot, Arthur de Gobineau, and Henry Thomas Buckle. The paper is divided in five major sections.

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<sup>10</sup>Claudio Pogliano, “Rising Tide,” in *Brain and Race*, by Claudio Pogliano (New York: Brill, 2020), 62–145.

<sup>11</sup>Nicholas Harrisson, *Our Civilizing Mission* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), 171.

<sup>12</sup>Mark B. Salter, “Not Waiting for the Barbarians,” in *Civilizational Identity: The Production and Reproduction of ‘Civilizations’ in International Relations*, ed. Martin Hall and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 102, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230608924\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230608924_6).

<sup>13</sup>Anna K. Rafaela, *The Language of Human Rights: Who Gets to Speak It?* (New York: SPGI, 2023).

<sup>14</sup>Marina A. Llorente, “Civilization versus Barbarism,” in *Collateral Language*, ed. John Collins and Ross Glover (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 39–52, <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814723548.003.0007>.

The first section lays the theoretical framework of the research to critically analyze the Eurocentric narratives through a deconstruction lens. The second section explores the teleological model of civilization through the canonical works of François Guizot, particularly his seminal book *History of Civilizations and History of France* to critically analyze his Eurocentric construction of the concept of civilization. The third section engages with the textual analysis of the canonical work of Arthur de Gobineau to critically explore his racial ontological framework of civilization. Through the textual analysis of his seminal book, *The inequality of the Human Races*, the section critically engages with the race based ontological framework of the author. The fourth section critically examines the influential work of famous British historian Henry Thomas Buckle “*History of Civilization in England*” to explore his conceptualization of civilization through environmental determinism. The last section discusses the results of the research in order to critically decenter the concept of civilization from dominant Eurocentric epistemological frameworks.

## 2. Theoretical framework

For theoretical framework, the study employs a qualitative research design through textual analysis, which integrates intellectual history and critical deconstruction to investigate the construction of the Eurocentric conception of civilization during the 19th century. The primary data is gathered from the canonical works of the three prominent European historians; *General History of Civilization in Europe* (1828) by François Guizot, *Inequality of Human Races* (1853) by Arthur de Gobineau, and *History of Civilization in England* (1859) by Henry Thomas Buckle. These seminal texts are selected due to their intellectual influence on the development of European thought concerning the conceptualization of civilization as both a hierarchical and progressive phenomenon. Another major reason for the selection of these canonical texts is the time frame during which they were written and published, spanning from 1829 to 1859—which reflects a very significant period in European history in terms of intellectual, scientific and political transformation. In this respect, the aforementioned texts not only represent the intellectual construction but also the emergence of colonial epistemologies that shaped the European perception of the Orient.

In terms of methodology, the study uses three interpretive techniques.<sup>15</sup> First, a conceptual deconstruction of the narratives within the texts of the three prominent historians to unravel binaries such as civilized/barbarian, superior/inferior, white/black, which are embedded in ideological assumptions. Second, in-depth textual analysis of the selected texts to identify recurring themes such as the idea of race, progress, and cultural superiority. Third, the study conducts a comparative analysis to explore the convergence and divergence of the theoretical frameworks<sup>16</sup> within the writings of the three authors. Hence, by employing the interpretive approach to the textual analysis of primary texts and secondary sources, the research closely interacts with the writings of three historians to ensure transparency and rigor within the qualitative scientific tradition.

## 3. Civilization as moral-political teleology (Guizot)

François Guizot (1787-1874) was a prominent French historian and philosopher of history, who contributed significantly to the discourse of the history of civilization in Europe during the early modern era. During the early modern era, Europe existed more as an imagined construct than as a clearly defined geographic or political entity, divided into a large number of small states and polities, still ruled by dynasties—a condition Guizot called the emulation of nations and as “a sort

<sup>15</sup>Hayden White, “Interpretation in History,” *New Literary History* 4, no. 2 (1973): 281–314, <https://doi.org/10.2307/468478>.

<sup>16</sup>Timothy J. Martin, “Divergent Ontologies with Converging Conclusions,” *Comparative Education* 39, no. 1 (2003): 105–117, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050060302558>.

of great Republic divided in several states.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, in Western discourse, the concept of civilization is often regarded as problematic, as it does not rest on a coherent cultural, social, and political unity beyond a shared religious foundation.<sup>18</sup> Since the ascension of Christianity as a state religion in Rome during the late fourth century, pre-existing Greco-Roman traditions began to subsume themselves within a broader framework of Christian morality and culture.<sup>19</sup> However, with the fall of Rome (Western Roman Empire)<sup>20</sup> in the fifth century, Western civilization underwent a severe identity crisis until the ascendancy of the eighth-century emperor Charlemagne in what is now France, who laid down the foundation of the Holy Roman Empire in the West—thereby marking a new era of Christendom in Europe. This event later became the civilizational foundation for the West during the medieval and early modern eras.<sup>21</sup> As a French intellectual, Guizot considered France to be the epicenter and cradle of European civilization, both as imperium during the medieval era and as the site of political renaissance during the early modern era.

In his seminal work, *General History of Civilization in Europe* (1828), Guizot defined civilization as a complex and progressive phenomenon shaped by the interaction of moral, intellectual, and societal factors. He argued that European civilization, in particular, was developed through conflict and interaction between various institutions, such as the church, the monarchy, and the rise of democratic governance.<sup>22</sup> This dynamic process of tension and resolution shaped Europe's unique path of progress and cultural transformation. According to Guizot, despite political and cultural differences among European states, the emergence of civilization in Europe evolved out of shared sources such as Roman Law, Christianity, and similar cultural values.<sup>23</sup> In the introductory Chapter of his book, Guizot writes;

I say European civilization, because there is evidently so striking a uniformity in the civilization of the different states of Europe, as fully to warrant this appellation. Civilization has flowed to them all from sources so much alike—it is so connected in them all, notwithstanding the great differences of time, of place, and circumstances, by the same principles, and it so tends in them all to bring about the same results, that no one will doubt the fact of there being a civilization essentially European.<sup>24</sup>

Here, Guizot argues that the very basis of European civilization resembles the interconnected nature of European societies in terms of cultural and historical patterns, despite the existence of

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<sup>17</sup>See Stephen Gaukroger, *Civilization and the Culture of Science: Science and the Shaping of Modernity, 1795–1935* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 20, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198849070.001.0001>.

<sup>18</sup>Salter, “Not Waiting for the Barbarians,” 85.

<sup>19</sup>Gerhard van den Heever, “Twilights of Greek and Roman Religions: Afterlives and Transformations—A Response,” *Journal of Early Christian History* 10, no. 2 (2020): 108–142, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2222582X.2021.1928526>.

<sup>20</sup>Due to the expansion of Rome in multiple dominions during the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, the Roman empire was divided into two major branches in 395 AD, the Western Roman Empire based in Rome, modern day Italy and Eastern Roman Empire known as Byzantine based in Constantinople. Although the decision to divide the Roman Empire into two major sections occurred under Emperor Diocletian in 286 CE, in an attempt to stabilize the empire both politically, strategically and economically. However, the final formal division occurred in the year 395 AD.

<sup>21</sup>Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages, 400–1000* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 89–91.

<sup>22</sup>Eugene H. Cave, *François Pierre Guillaume Guizot: An Intellectual Approach* (Portland: Portland State University, 1971).

<sup>23</sup>Anthony Pagden, *The Idea of Europe: From Antiquity to the European Union* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 26, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511496813>.

<sup>24</sup>François Guizot, *General History of Civilization in Europe* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1896), 1–2.

certain differences among them—a condition he calls uniformity (unité). In other words, despite turbulent relations among European societies all states in Europe shared a common foundation of values, principles, and institutions that gave their civilization a distinct and unified character. Guizot explained this uniformity as a civilization that “flowed to them all from sources so much alike,” referring to the shared historical and cultural influences of the European states.<sup>25</sup> In Guizot’s view, three major common sources formed the basis of European civilizational identity: the legacy of the Roman empire, Christianity, and the intellectual and moral traditions of the Enlightenment. These three common sources, in Guizot’s view, propelled a coherent trajectory of development across Europe, marked by the shared ambition for progress, liberty, and the refinement of society. For Guizot, this specific phenomenon makes the European civilization exceptional.<sup>26</sup>

### 3.1. Guizot’s Approach to History of Civilization

François Guizot (1787-1874), in his seminal book *General History of Civilization in Europe*, approaches civilization through a genetic lens. In this book, he traces the evolution and development of European civilization across the shared political, moral, economic, and cultural spheres. However, despite employing a moral-political theological framework, his perspective still maintains some reductive elements like declaring European civilization as a sole model of development towards equality and institutionalism. In this respect, Guizot’s work, particularly in *History of Civilization in Europe*, reflects a genetic approach because of three major reasons. First, Guizot believed that it was the interplay of various moral, intellectual, social, and political forces that played a crucial role in shaping European civilization. Second, European civilization did not develop in a smooth or linear manner but rather remained turbulent throughout history, marked by persistent tensions between liberty and authority, and between different institutions such as the Church and the State.<sup>27</sup> According to Guizot, it was this rigorous tension between the major institution that paved the way for the emergence of the modern European civilization. Lastly, in his seminal work, Guizot emphasized how the interplay of continuity (shared principles and values) and change (conflicts and transformations) contributed to the exceptional nature of the modern European civilization. Like many historical interpretations of the 19th century, France also appeared as a paragon of European civilizational progress, cultural superiority and prosperity in Guizot’s work— despite the fact that, these universal claims were often accompanied by strong elements of national preference.<sup>28</sup> Elsewhere in *History of France* (1848), Guizot highlights the ascendancy of France within the European civilizational realm:

Europe’s material achievements were secondary to the ‘firmness of political thought’ and liberty that characterized European societies. ‘All of Europe and notably France’, he maintained, ‘has marched along ... the same path of liberation and general progress. These paths have guided the people who have firmly engaged in a high degree of strength, prosperity and grandeur that we call and that we have a right to call modern civilization.’<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup>Aurelian Craiutu, “The Method of the French Doctrinaires,” *History of European Ideas* 30, no. 1 (2004): 39–59, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.histeuroideas.2003.08.005>.

<sup>26</sup>Maureen A. Perkins, *Christendom and European Identity: The Legacy of a Grand Narrative Since 1789* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 162, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110914610>.

<sup>27</sup>Tatiana Gorbatiuk, “The Development of the Theories of Civilizations in the 18th–19th Centuries in Europe,” *Philosophy* 130, no. 1 (2009): 90–95, <https://doi.org/10.31548/hspedagog2019.03.090>.

<sup>28</sup>David Gordon, “Civilization and the Self-Critical Tradition,” *Symposium: Civilization and Its New Discontents* 54, (2017): 106–123, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-017-0110-4>.

<sup>29</sup>François Guizot, *Histoire Parlementaire de France: Recueil Complet des Discours Prononcés dans les Chambres de 1819 à 1848* [Parliamentary History of France: A Complete

Like other renaissance historians in Europe, Guizot believed that the superiority of European civilization was associated with its social and political achievements. According to Guizot, non-European civilizations, particularly in Asia and Africa, lacked the internal diversity and political contestation, which he considered essential for progress.<sup>30</sup> For instance, in his 1820s work, *General History of European Civilization*, he writes of India:

Immobility is the character of its moral life; and to this condition are fallen most of the populations of Asia, in which theocratic government restrains the advance of man: such, for example, is the state of the Hindoos. I again put the same question as before—Is this a people among whom civilization is going on?<sup>31</sup>

This demonstrates Guizot's linear and exceptionalist understanding view concerning non-European races particularly when it comes to the discourse of historical progress. For Guizot, non-European races and civilizations failed to achieve progress due to the lack of tension between Church and State in Europe. He contended that such conflicts played a crucial role in stimulating intellectual growth, fostering critical discussions, and driving political transformation, all of which were vital for societal advancement. In Europe, the interplay and competition between institutions created a dynamic environment that promoted innovation and continual reform. Conversely, Guizot argued that the absence of similar institutional rivalries in non-European societies resulted in limited adaptability and long-term societal stagnation.

#### 4. Civilization as Racial Ontology (Gobineau)

Since the dawn of modernity in the early sixteenth century, the subject of race became a cornerstone of Western civilizational discourse. Racial theories developed parallel to the expansion of European colonialism and imperialism as ideological tools to justify the subjugation of non-European races. There were two major reasons for scientific racial theories to be employed by various European historians to proclaim the superiority of European civilization.<sup>32</sup> First, racial theory was used to proclaim and profess the mental and intellectual superiority of European races over non-European ones. For racial theorists, Europe achieved social, cultural, and scientific progress due to its intellectual superiority. Second, racialist theorists contend that all the non-European races are backward and uncivilized; therefore, it is the moral duty of Europeans to colonize them and bring them civilization.<sup>33</sup> The early modern European historians employed racial theories to distinguish the civilized from barbarians. Within this broader European context, French-born aristocratic historian, Arthur de Gobineau emerged as one of the most prominent racial theorists, advocating for race to delineate the distinction between European and non-European peoples.<sup>34</sup> He is also considered as one of the founding fathers of scientific racism, because his theory of the history of civilizations went beyond the established frameworks of historians. For instance, his approach to the study of civilizations was fundamentally based on racial purity and impurity.

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Collection of Speeches Delivered in the Chambers from 1819 to 1848]. (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1863), cxi.

<sup>30</sup>Perkins, *Christendom and European Identity*, 164.

<sup>31</sup>Guizot, *General History of Civilization*, 10.

<sup>32</sup>Michael D. Biddiss, "Gobineau and the Origins of European Racism," *Race & Class* 7, no. 3 (1996): 255–270, <https://doi.org/10.1177/030639686600700303>.

<sup>33</sup>Steven Kale, "Gobineau, Racism, and Legitimism: A Royalist Heretic in Nineteenth-Century France," *Modern Intellectual History* 7, no. 1 (2010): 33–61, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244309990266>.

<sup>34</sup>Paul A. Fortier, "Gobineau and German Racism," *Comparative Literature* 19, no. 4 (1967): 341–350, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1769493>.

By contrast, apart from being an anthropological historian, Arthur de Gobineau primarily pioneered a comprehensive theory of race. In his seminal work, *The Inequality of Human Races* (1853), Gobineau developed a unique racial lens to define civilization. Race was not merely biological but also metaphysical; therefore, to understand a nation, society or civilization, one must think in racial terms.<sup>35</sup> Thinking through the racial context, he argued, allowed an understanding of social and cultural phenomena. For Gobineau, race constituted one of the primary determining factors of civilizations, but its usage was categorical, anthropological and even metaphysical, rather than ontological in the philosophical sense. Thus, race functioned as both a law of life and a causality –and a master key to the “enigma” (*le mot d'une énigme*) of humankind.<sup>36</sup> To further embolden his racial theory and framework, he divided the term race into a hierarchy. Among the major human races, he argued that the white race is the most superior one due to their natural aristocracy (*noblesse humaine*) and civilized manners. In Chapter X of *The Inequality of Human Races* (1853), Gobineau writes:

The white races are the nations of the day; the black those of the night; the yellow those of the Eastern, and the red those of the Western twilight. We may easily guess the ingenious comparisons suggested by such a picture. Thus, the European nations, owing to the brilliance of their scientific knowledge and the clear outlines of their civilization, are obviously in the full glare of day, while the negroes sleep in the darkness of ignorance, and the Chinese live in a half-light that gives them an incomplete, though powerful, social development.<sup>37</sup>

Here, Gobineau contends that the progress of European societies in science, technology, industry, the arts, diplomacy and culture demonstrates the intellectual superiority of European races over non-European ones. Moreover, Gobineau's racial thesis is not limited to biological features; for him, it was also connected to a spiritual matrix.<sup>38</sup> For instance, in Chapter XI, Gobineau attempts to justify the superiority of the white race through a theological standpoint. He writes:

We must, of course, acknowledge that Adam is the ancestor of the white race. The scriptures are evidently meant to be so understood, for the generations deriving from him are certainly white. This being admitted, there is nothing to show that, in the view of the first compilers of the Adamite genealogies, those outside the white race were counted as part of the species at all. Not a word is said about the yellow races, and it is only an arbitrary interpretation of the text that makes us regard the patriarch Ham as black. Of course the translators and commentators, in calling Adam the common ancestor of all men, have had to enrol among his descendants all the peoples who have lived since his time. According to them, the European nations are of the stock of Japhet, hither Asia was occupied by the Semites, and the regions of Africa by the Hamites, who are, as I say, unreasonably considered to be of negro origin. The whole scheme fits admirably together—for one part of the world. But what about the other part? It is simply left out.<sup>39</sup>

In this passage, Gobineau posits that the natural aristocratic traits and comparative beauty (*beauté comparative*)<sup>40</sup> of the European race demonstrates their genetic connection to Adam. To

<sup>35</sup>Gregory Blue, “Gobineau on China: Race Theory, the 'Yellow Peril,' and the Critique of Modernity,” *Journal of World History* 10, no. 1 (1999): 93–139, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2005.0003>.

<sup>36</sup>John Nale, “Arthur de Gobineau on Blood and Race,” *Critical Philosophy of Race* 2, no. 1 (2014): 106–124, <https://doi.org/10.5325/critphilrace.2.1.0106>.

<sup>37</sup>Arthur de Gobineau, *The Inequality of Human Races* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1999), 112.

<sup>38</sup>John Nef, “Truth, Belief, and Civilization: Tocqueville and Gobineau,” *The Review of Politics* 25, no. 4 (1963): 460–482, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670500006410>.

<sup>39</sup>Gobineau, *Inequality of Human Races*, 118.

<sup>40</sup>In Gobineau's view the physical and social traits of the European races makes them comparatively beautiful over other non-European races particularly, the Negro race or the Asians

further reinforce his argument, Gobineau attempts to employ the evidence from the Holy Scripture and proposes that distinctive intellectual and aristocratic nobleness of the white race certainly resembles its connectedness with Adam.

#### 4.1. Reductionism and Gobineau's Approach to the History of Civilization

Although Gobineau's views on history and civilization are based on a hypothetical racial framework, his approach is reductionist. This reductionism did not solely rely on biology; rather in his study of human races, Gobineau used religio-racial arguments to justify differences and divisions among humans.<sup>41</sup> For instance, he described the superiority of the white race by directly linking it to Adam within the theological domain. The ancestors of white European races were heroic and legendary figures who honoured the laws of nature and transmitted their heroic legacy to their progeny. Consequently, modern achievements of the white race in science, philosophy, the arts, economics, industry, and culture are the demonstration of the continuation of this heroic legacy.<sup>42</sup> In Gobineau's view, modern white European race are foremost transformative agents in the historical process, who altered the face of human history through their distinctive achievements in the field of science and philosophy.

On the other hand, according to him, the Negro race and the Asian races belonged to the lowest levels of the racial hierarchy, because of their physical and mental features, such as the shape of the pelvis in their skeleton, and their mental capabilities being "dull" (*médiocres*).<sup>43</sup> He further articulated that they had only developed "taste and odour" ("*le goût et l'odorat*") capabilities.<sup>44</sup> For that reason, according to Gobineau, the black and yellow races were unable to make the first step towards the establishment of civilization (*impossible de faire le premier pas vers la civilisation*).<sup>45</sup> In Chapter XII, referring to the tertiary races (black and yellow races), Gobineau writes:

Our actual knowledge of the life of these tertiary races is very slight. Only in the misty beginnings of human history can we catch a glimpse, in certain places, of the white race when it was still in this stage—a stage which seems to have been everywhere short-lived. The civilizing instincts of these chosen peoples were continually forcing them to mix their blood with that of others. As for the black and yellow types, they are mere savages in the tertiary stage, and have no history at all.<sup>46</sup>

According to Gobineau, among the major human races, the black (*negeroes*) and yellow (East Asians) races belong to the tertiary group, who due to their weakness of mental capabilities were unable to establish civilization. To reiterate, for Gobineau, due to weak mental faculties and intellectual knowledge, the black and yellow races were unable to become the cultural/civilization force in history.<sup>47</sup> The intellectual, moral, and cultural qualities of human civilizations were

who lack these qualities and traits. The *beauté comparative* of the European races is not just a hypothetical phenomenon rather it is obvious and vivid from the mathematical standpoint.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Biddiss, "History as Destiny: Gobineau, H. S. Chamberlain and Spengler," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 27 (1977): 73–100, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3679271>.

<sup>42</sup> Nicholas Martin, "Breeding Greeks: Nietzsche, Gobineau, and Classical Theories of Race," in *Nietzsche and Antiquity*, ed. Paul Bishop (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2004), 40–53, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781571136480-006>.

<sup>43</sup> Basically, with this biological description of brutes, Gobineau contends that the European race has the strongest mental and intellectual capacities within the human race, whereas, in case of the Negroes, their mental and intellectual capabilities are weakest within the hierarchy of human race—he attempts to prove this through archeological and anthropological evidence.

<sup>44</sup> Biddiss, "History as Destiny," 75.

<sup>45</sup> Milan Hrabovsky, "The Concept of 'Blackness' in Theories of Race," *Asian and African Studies* 22, no. 1 (2013): 67–88.

<sup>46</sup> Gobineau, *Inequality of Human Races*, 148–149.

<sup>47</sup> Biddiss, "History as Destiny," 75.

determined by the racial characteristics of their populations. By this logic, he believed that some races were inherently superior to others, particularly the Aryan race.<sup>48</sup> In this regard, it can be said that Gobineau's idea and description of civilization is based on some kind of hypothetical racial thesis, which certainly lacks the ontological framework.

### 5. Civilization as Environmental Causality (Buckle)

Henry Thomas Buckle (1821–62) was a famous English positivist philosopher, aristocrat and historian, who wrote a two-volume, detailed account of the history of civilization in England. From an early age, Buckle showed a special interest in history, and aspired to write a detailed account of the English civilization. His initial plan was to write a fourteen-volume collection on the history of English civilization; however, due to his premature death only two volumes were completed.<sup>49</sup> Through his historical methodology, Buckle sought to employ inductive principles to study and conceptualize civilization, which in many ways aligns with theoretical currents of the empiricist framework associated with John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) and August Comte (1798-1857), yet the nature of their influence on Buckle's historiography remains a matter of scholarly interpretation. In his seminal work *History of Civilization in England*, Buckle attempted to approach the study of the history of civilization through a more deterministic and scientific lens.<sup>50</sup> According to Buckle, to develop the scientific study of history, it is quintessential to take into account not only how man modified the natural world but also how the natural world modified man. In his study of civilization, Buckle draws a causality between humanity and the natural environment, which he posits as one of the key factors behind historical development. However, the reciprocity of the casual relations is not limited to historical laws, rather, this substantiation moves beyond the domain of mere interaction.<sup>51</sup> For instance, in the first volume of his work, he asserts that the universal laws of social and intellectual developments are the key determinants of civilizational progress.<sup>52</sup> However, by overgeneralizing, Buckle sidelines the possibility of progress arising from individual agency or divine intervention, thereby oversimplifying historical trajectories and edging toward methodological reductionism.

To expand his thesis on progress, Buckle emphasizes the role of intellectual progress, climate, geography, and social institutions as the key drivers of historical change. He argues that human society progresses when it moves from superstition and traditionalism to rationality and scientific inquiry. From Buckle's perspective, the historical development and progression occur in accordance with the universal laws—meaning that the natural surrounding impacts both human action and behavior.<sup>53</sup> Particularly, Buckle believed that physical factors such as climate and food, among others, played a vital role in shaping the development and progress of civilization. In

<sup>48</sup>Hrabovsky, "Concept of 'Blackness,'" 69.

<sup>49</sup>"Buckle's History of Civilization; History of Civilization in England," *New York Times*, July 8, 1861, <https://www.nytimes.com/1861/07/28/archives/buckles-history-of-civilization-history-of-civilization-in-england.html>.

<sup>50</sup>Giles St. Aubyn, *A Victorian Eminence: The Life and Works of Henry Thomas Buckle* (London: Barrie Books, 1958).

<sup>51</sup>G. A. Wells, "The Critics of Buckle," *Past & Present*, no. 9 (1956), 77, <https://doi.org/10.1093/past/9.1.75>

<sup>52</sup>Fiona McIntosh-Varjabédian, "Henry Thomas Buckle's *The History of Civilization in England* in France (1865–1918)," *Reception* 11, no. 1 (2019): 40–57, <https://doi.org/10.5325/reception.11.1.0040>.

<sup>53</sup>P. Elliott, "The Origins of the 'Creative Class': Provincial Urban Society, Scientific Culture and Socio-Political Marginality in Britain in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Social History* 28, no. 3 (2010): 361–387, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0307102032000119065>.

Chapter II of his book, while referring to the role of physical factors in human history, Buckle writes:

If we inquire what those physical agents are by which the human race is most powerfully influenced, we shall find that they may be classed under four heads: namely, Climate, Food, Soil, and the General Aspect of Nature; by which last, I mean those appearances which, though presented chiefly to the sight, have, through the medium of that or other senses, directed the association of ideas, and hence in different countries have given rise to different habits of national thought.<sup>54</sup>

Here, Buckle contended that physical factors such as food, climate, and soil played an important role in the development of ideas, and hence, the development of national behavior. These factors play an important role in determining resource availability, the nature of labor, and the development of economic systems, all of which shape cultural values and intellectual growth.<sup>55</sup> For example, regions with fertile land and favorable climatic conditions often experienced agricultural prosperity, enabling population expansion and providing opportunities for intellectual and cultural advancement. Conversely, areas with challenging climates encourage resourcefulness and inventive solutions as adaptive strategies.<sup>56</sup> Buckle's perspective thus underscored the deep relationship between geographical conditions, economic structures, and societal evolution.

Using this framework, Buckle argued that civilizations such as England progressed and prospered due to harsher climatic conditions, whereas civilizations like India and Egypt failed to foster resilience due to the abundance of agriculture and warm climates.<sup>57</sup> India and Egypt, though pioneers of early civilizations, are often said to have lacked the conditions necessary to foster resilience. The fertile soils of the Nile Valley in Egypt and the Indo-Gangetic plains in India ensured an agricultural surplus with comparatively little effort. This consistent abundance, coupled with warm and predictable climates, shaped societies that prioritized stability and continuity rather than adaptability and transformation.<sup>58</sup> In regions where survival did not depend on overcoming severe environmental challenges or resource shortages, there was less pressure to develop the innovative or resourceful traits Buckle associated with resilience.

### 5.1. Reciprocal Relations between Man and the Nature

According to Buckle, there is a reciprocal relation between man and nature that played a crucial role in the development of human history and civilization. Humans reshape the natural world through agriculture, urban development, industrialization, and deforestation—transforming ecosystems to suit their needs.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, nature affects human societies by influencing cultural practices, behavioral patterns, and survival conditions through climate, resource distribution, and natural disasters. This relationship was dynamic and evolving; as humans modified their environment, they often encountered unexpected outcomes, such as resource depletion or climatic shifts, which forced them to adapt their technologies and ways of life.<sup>60</sup> This

<sup>54</sup> Henry Thomas Buckle, *History of Civilization in England* (Toronto: Rose-Belford Publishing Company, 1878), 19.

<sup>55</sup> Charles Konigsberg, and Henry David Thoreau, "Climate and Society: A Review of the Literature," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 4, no. 1 (1960): 67–82, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002200276000400105>.

<sup>56</sup> Bernard Semmel, "H. T. Buckle: The Liberal Faith and the Science of History," *The British Journal of Sociology* 27, no. 3 (1976): 370–386, <https://doi.org/10.2307/589622>.

<sup>57</sup> Elliot, "The Origins of the 'Creative Class,'" 362.

<sup>58</sup> Wells, "The Critics of Buckle," 80.

<sup>59</sup> Semmel, "H. T. Buckle: The Liberal Faith and the Science of History," 375.

<sup>60</sup> Solomon Diamond, "Buckle, Wundt, and Psychology's Use of History," *Isis* 75, no. 1 (1984): 143–152, <https://doi.org/10.1086/353438>.

interconnected cycle highlighted the deep interdependence between humanity and the natural world. Buckle writes:

we have what is called Nature, obeying likewise its laws; but incessantly coming into contact with the minds of men, exciting their passions, stimulating their intellect, and therefore giving to their actions a direction which they would not have taken without such disturbance. Thus we have man modifying nature, and nature modifying man; while out of this reciprocal modification all events must necessarily spring.<sup>61</sup>

In this respect, Buckle argued that the actions of man and the response of physical nature create a unique causality that plays a key role in the development and progress of civilization, and hence history. Differences among world civilizations in terms of progress and development largely depend on the distinct physical factors within which they emerged.<sup>62</sup> The advanced state of European civilization resulted from a unique combination of environmental conditions that fostered the full utilization of human intellectual potential. Ultimately, for Buckle, the driving force behind human progress was the expansion of knowledge, which enabled societies to understand and adapt to their surroundings more effectively.

## 6. Results and Discussion: Decentering Eurocentrism

Majority of the historical discourses of the 19th century framed the superiority of Western civilization from the standpoint of cultural and scientific achievement through a linear model of historical progress. However, the assumptions of most of the European historiographers are intertwined with a deterministic framework of inevitable advancement. By employing the concept of linearity (as a narrative structure) and scientific determinism (as a causal factor), most of the prominent European historians oversimplified the notion of civilizational progress by limiting its horizons to only European societies. Despite the variety of theoretical frameworks used to study civilization, a pronounced bias persists within these approaches at both the intellectual and methodological levels.<sup>63</sup> Let us take the case of Guizot's analysis of European civilization, who described civilization in evolutionary terms and through the lens of moral and political evolution. His prioritization of the evolution of political institutions and the development of liberty from the context of the Western civilization, invites critique, particularly from Ibn Khaldun. For instance, Ibn Khaldun traces the development of civilizations through his novel concept of "*Asabiyyah*", which he considers as one of the fundamental factors behind the cyclical rise and fall of civilizations.<sup>64</sup> In this respect, Ibn Khaldun might critique Guizot's approach from two perspectives. First, Guizot's focus on the progress of political institutions and liberty as a cornerstone of civilizational development is oversimplistic, which portrays the process of history as a unidirectional march towards equality and freedom. But with this oversimplification, Guizot ignores the inevitable cyclical patterns that contribute to the rise and fall of civilizations, particularly from the context of "*Asabiyyah*". Second, by solely focusing on the institutional and moral factors in sustaining liberty, Guizot underestimates the decisive role of "*Assabiyyah*" as a major force in social cohesion and formation of the statehood.<sup>65</sup> In Khaldun's framework, the strength of communal ties, and a solid economic foundation are crucial for the longevity of a

<sup>61</sup>Buckle, *History of Civilization*, 79.

<sup>62</sup>Elliot, "The Origins of the 'Creative Class, 363-367.

<sup>63</sup>Arthur Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 54.

<sup>64</sup>Haldun Karahanlı, "Transcending the Imperial Concept of 'Civilization': Recalling the Concept of al-'Umrān," *Mizanü'l-Hak* 2, no. 1 (2021): 77-402, <https://doi.org/10.47502/mizan.862043>.

<sup>65</sup>Bassam Tibi, "Islam and Modern European Ideologies," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 18, no. 1 (1986): 21, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743800030191>.

society. Without these elements, a civilization is vulnerable to internal decay and collapse, as social cohesion and economic sustainability are what enable societies to endure and thrive over time. Moreover, for Guizot, the superiority of the Western civilization lies in the development of social and political institution, which were the result of the intellectual achievement of the white race<sup>66</sup> Political development and development of institutions, according to Ibn Khaldun, is frequently the result of underlying social and economic forces. He would also argue that civilizations begin to decline when excess and complacency weaken their core social bonds. This process, which leads to the erosion of the foundational unity and strength within a society, is a concept that Guizot's analysis largely overlooks.<sup>67</sup>

Arthur de Gobineau went beyond the evolutionary lens, thereby describing the success and achievements of European civilization through a racial lens and the theory of race. His racial theory which linked the rise and fall of civilizations to the superiority or decline of particular races, could be critiqued through the historical perspective of Amold Toynbee.<sup>68</sup> In case of Gobineau, he frames race as a fundamental factor in historical progress while decisively dismissing other factors such as social, political and economic aspects. In his view, racial influence is the fundamental force behind the rise of civilization, and its decline is the result of blood mixture, which he explains theoretically by integrating metaphysical elements such as moral/intellectual energies with cultural patterns of homogeneity and vitality. In contrast, Toynbee argued that the progress of civilizations depends on their unique spontaneous response to challenges and adaptability to new circumstances, rather than the reliance on any inherent racial superiority. Moreover, Gobineau's historical framework fails to consider the importance of cultural exchange, innovation, and the contributions of what Toynbee termed "creative minorities"—key groups that drive societies forward during times of crisis.<sup>69</sup> By neglecting these critical aspects, Gobineau's racial determinism fails to capture the complexity and diversity of historical development.

Buckle, for his part, emphasized scientific knowledge, rationality and environmental determinism as the major factors of civilizational development and progress. His emphasis on environmental determinism as the main force behind human progress arguably stands in direct opposition to Oswald Spengler, who saw civilizations as living organisms with unique life cycles of birth, growth, and eventual decline.<sup>70</sup> Spengler argued that civilizations are shaped by internal cultural and spiritual forces, rather than being solely determined by their physical environment.<sup>71</sup> While Buckle attributed variations in culture to environmental influences, Spengler argued that each civilization possessed a unique and distinct "soul" or inherent essence, which shapes its development independent of its physical surroundings.<sup>72</sup> In short, Guizot, Gobineau, and Buckle

<sup>66</sup>Anoush Ganjipour, *Reinventing Islam, Sublating Modernity: A Conflict of Enlightenments* (London: Trivent Publishing, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.22618/TP.PJCV.020204.1.203002>.

<sup>67</sup>Samah Selim, "Languages of Civilization," *The Translator* 15, no. 1 (2014): 139–156, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2009.10799274>.

<sup>68</sup>Biddiss, "History as Destiny," 71.

<sup>69</sup>John Thornhill, "The Philosophical Assumptions, Implicit and Explicit, of Amold J. Toynbee's Philosophy of History," *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 25, no. 2 (1962): 202–251, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tho.1962.0012>.

<sup>70</sup>Zaza Khintibidze, "Towards a Novel Interpretation of Stanzas from the Prologue to *The Man in the Panther Skin*," in *Proceedings of the Seventh International Symposium on Kartvelian Studies* (Tbilisi: Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, 2016), 367–372.

<sup>71</sup>Herman Paul, "Everything Is Tottering: Why Philosophy of History Thrives in Times of Crisis," *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 127, no. 4 (2012): 105, <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lehr.8230>.

<sup>72</sup>Thomas D. Odle "The Uses of Historical Theory," *The Social Studies* 46, no. 4 (1955): 134–137, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220973.1939.11017907>.

can be read critically through the works of Ibn Khaldun, Toynbee, and Spengler respectively. The latter theorists emphasize the multidimensional nature of civilizational development, and challenge the reductionist approaches that rely solely on environmental, racial, or institutional factors.

### 6.1. Conclusion

To conclude, the research has revealed that the Eurocentric conception of civilization emerged out of the historical framework of three 19th century influential historiographers; Guizot, Gobineau and, Buckle. This conception is both ontologically and epistemologically reductive, ideologically biased and overly generalized for two major reasons. First, their theoretical underpinnings framed Western civilization as exceptional and culturally superior while marginalizing the multifaceted dynamics of global historical discourses. Second, their canonical texts discursively ignore the patterns of the evolution of non-European societies and formation of statehood within these societies. In this respect, the theoretical frameworks of the 19th century European historiography not only limits the scope of civilizational analysis but also marginalizes the structural analysis, such as the critical role of various aspects such as social cohesion, cultural exchange, economic stability and non-European contributions to the development of human realm across time and space. For instance, through moral-political teleological framework, Guizot frames civilization as the product of rational advancement, which he believed occurs through the progressive process of political institutions, scientific achievements and the interplay of cultural elements. Likewise, Gobineau employs a racialist framework to explain the rise of civilization through the lens of racial purity and attributes its decline to racial mixture, which demonstrates the oversimplification of civilizational analysis. This oversimplification not only narrows the structural analysis but also reduces the complex nature of historical processes.

Similarly, Buckle approaches the discourse of civilization by emphasizing the role of geography, climate, food, and soil as major forces behind the rise and fall of civilizations. For Buckle, the superiority of Western civilization is closely linked with its unique escape from subordination to nature, which is the product of scientific development and knowledge accumulation. Conclusively, most of the frameworks of the 19th century European historiography analyze civilization through limited and singular factors such as political progress, insitutionalization, racial context or environmental determinism, while systematically excluding the role of structural forces in social, cultural, and transnational spheres. In this respect, by deconstructing the Eurocentric narratives, the present study contributes to the ongoing literature of post-colonial theory and global history, thus exposing the Western approaches to civilization as normative measures. Such a shift not only enriches our understanding of historical processes but also holds implications for contemporary debates on cultural diversity, global inequalities, and the writing of inclusive world history.

#### **Author Contribution**

**Shahzada Rahim Abbas:** sole author

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