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Book Review: Inventing western civilization

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Patterson, T. 1997: *Inventing western civilization*. New York: Monthly Review Press. 144 pp. £32.95 cloth, £10.95 paper. ISBN: 0 85345 960 6 cloth, 0 85345 961 4 paper.

The theme of invention is understandably attractive to radical historians. Whether applied to nations, race, gender or, as in this case, the notion of civilization, it acts to denaturalize and debunk. Thus the claims to timeless authority of some of our most familiar constructs are shown to have been developed within the modern era and to be functional to the reproduction of ruling class power. Patterson's text follows this line of reasoning both closely and clearly. It is a simply and forcefully written book, oriented towards lower level undergraduate usage. Those people who have the power to dictate what undergraduates read need not worry about its accessibility. However, they do need to make a judgement about its use of history, more specifically the utility of its central conceit. I, for one, will be recommending it only with reservation.

Patterson's vision of civilization is almost entirely limited to its role as a tool of imperialist and capitalist European power. Charting what he calls its 'boosters' and its 'critics' he places radical and liberal sentiment as firmly in the latter camp. This enables Patterson effectively to distance the left from complicity with the concept. It is also a manoeuvre that distorts radical history. The concept of civilization has long been central to anti-capitalist ideologies in Europe, as elsewhere. By erasing this fact Patterson can evidence a harmony of interest between white and nonwhite 'critics of civilization'. But this attempt surely says more about his own agenda than the historical record. Indeed, I am also less than comfortable with Patterson's use of non-white intellectuals as another group of 'critics of civilization'. Of all people he uses W.E.B. Du Bois as an example, the man whose adherence to an Enlightenment model of modernity led him to suggest that Africa should be settled and developed by 'twelve million civilized Negroes of the United States' (Du Bois, 1970: 273).

Inventing western civilization is surely proof that the notion of 'invention' needs to be treated with some care. When applied to familiar and taken for granted concepts the word often carries a certain negative charge: it appears as a synonym for 'made up' or, indeed, 'cooked up'.

Hence, it becomes tempting to make light of historical complexity and to take aim at the 'invested' object as if it were little more than a clumsy lie. Yet 'civilization' cannot be approached in this fashion without considerable distortion. It is, moreover, an approach that severs radical critics from a proper understanding of their own past. Perhaps, it is time someone writes a book on 'The invention of invention: the uses and abuses of a radical cliché'.

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Du Bois, W. 1970: *W.E.B. Du Bois speaks: speeches and addresses, 1899–1963: Volume one*. New York: Pathfinder Press.

Richardson, B.C. 1997: *Economy and environment in the Caribbean: Barbados and the Windwards in the late 1800s*. Gainesville, FL: The Press University of the West Indies and the University Press of Florida. xviii + 294 pp. \$49.95 cloth. ISBN: 0 8130 1539 1.

In the aftermath of Columbus, the history and geography of the Caribbean islands have displayed a strikingly staccato series of episodes of development in which periods of relative quiescence were interspersed with more disruptive events of an immense magnitude, such as the genocidal killing of the former Indian population, the establishment on the land of a white plantocracy from European homelands, and the ecological shock which accompanied the removal of entire native lowland ecosystems to make way for sugar (and other crop) production, along with the racial and ethnic broadening of the population by, first, the imposed arrival of a black African slave workforce from across the Atlantic and, later, Portuguese, East Indian and Chinese indentees from elsewhere. None of these potentially dislocational events encouraged the evolution of virtuous circles in steady economies, though some islands became very rich for short periods of time; nor was the land environment anything other than unstable, subject as it was, more often than not, to large-scale deforestation, soil degradation and soil loss. Neither was slave emancipation (1833 in British islands), inevitable perhaps though it was, in the mores