

The sign is always political: 'barbarian' as burnt sign

As the ordeal went on, it became clear to certain of these balloonists, observing from above and posed ever on the cusp of mortal danger, how much the modern State depended for its survival on maintaining a condition of *permanent siege* – through the systematic encirclement of populations, the starvation of bodies and spirits, the relentless degradation of civility until citizen was turned against citizen, even to the point of committing atrocities like those of the infamous *pétroleurs* of Paris. Thomas Pynchon, *Against the Day*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2006, p. 19

A burnt word

After the November 2015 attacks in Paris that took the lives of 130 people, the philosopher Pierre Zaoui wrote against an emerging trend in the words chosen to condemn the perpetrators, ISIS, or *Daech*, according to the name more commonly used in France. The terms that troubled him were 'barbarity' and 'barbarian'; as used, among many others, by the French Prime Minister, the Pope, and opposition figures such as the ex-President Nicolas Sarkozy. The use covers different grammatical variants of the words, from barbarity to barbarism, barbarian and barbarous (the latter noun and adjective are both given as *barbare* in French).

Zaoui finishes his article ['The threefold embarrassment of the word "barbarian"'](#) with a powerful and strange expression when translated into English. 'Barbarian' is a *burnt* word:

... in almost every way, the term barbarian appears as a burnt word. It is burnt because it has been overused to designate the other in general, and, in particular, Muslims. It is burnt because it hinders accurate intelligence about the enemy, as required by every state of war. It is burnt, because it places the conflict precisely on the terrain chosen by *Daech*: of culture and values, rather than of politics, alliances and relations of force. It is also burnt because, in some sense, it hastens the attainment of the most obvious goal of such acts: to introduce a feeling for barbarity at the heart of French society, with inevitable consequences in terms of the confusion, suspicion and exclusion that will be felt by all French Muslims and French of Arab origin, thereby pushing them towards joining the jihad.

As an indiscriminate label for those who differ from a supposedly superior group, 'barbarian' is a word destroyed by overuse. It has become a hindrance, since its blunt generalisations obstruct deeper knowledge of the enemy.

Barbarian is also a treacherous word, because it takes up the conflict exactly where the enemy would wish. ISIS are comparatively weak in the fields of politics and force, with no democratic

presence, little influence and relatively limited numbers of combatants and supporters. They are stronger in the fields of culture and value, since they can inflict greater damage there; for instance, through the disparagement and dismantling of the pluralist cultural values and forms of liberty that have long contributed to the strength – through diversity – of mixed societies.

When the word ‘barbarian’ is used broadly and imprecisely, it leads to mistrust and misunderstanding of those we apply it to. Their subsequent alienation is a goal of the attacks, since it allows ISIS to grow among increased fragmentation and radicalisation. After the attacks, in suggesting removal of French nationality from criminals holding dual nationality, in a constitutional move that predominantly affects French Muslims, the French government added to this alienation by suggesting the creation of [a lesser tier of citizen](#).

I have used destruction and treachery in translations for the idiomatic expression ‘*brûlé*’ in order to convey its wider senses in French. ‘*Être brûlé*’ means to be found out, turned or unmasked, in the sense of a spy, undercover agent or member of a secret society. It also means to be destroyed by fire, to lose efficacy, to be reduced to ashes, and to be rendered inert and lifeless. Zaoui’s argument is then not that we cannot use the word ‘barbarian’ because it is meaningless. It is rather that its use is counter-productive and dangerous. The sign turns against those who use it. It spreads discord and destruction, instead of acting as a precise concept allowing for accurate descriptions and analysis. The noun ‘barbarism’ is a weapon for ignorance, rather than against it.

If we think of the word as a sign in process, to say that it is burnt is to detect a simplification in its multiple relations. Instead of portraying precise and complex relations around different things, the word draws broad lines between a few of them, relegating others to an indistinct background. The word then serves to move us towards a damagingly false and direct connection, while giving a blurred version of the state of a more complicated world. A brutal generalisation about a varied group of people, the burnt word ‘barbarian’ creates a dangerous sign, since it propagates violent confusion through the illusion of a simple cultural, moral and ethnic solution to a complex political problem.

Fear, tyranny and barbarism

Zaoui’s article is based on the historical uses and philology of the term ‘barbarian’. Over a year earlier, there is another article by him on [barbarism and savagery](#), and this in turn rests on earlier books that reflect on the savagery inherent to modern societies, as well as more ancient ones. Zaoui also reminds us of another philosopher he studies in depth, Spinoza, and of his wish – reported by Leibniz after conversations with Spinoza – to post the sign ‘*Ultimi Barbaorum*’ at the site of the

murder of the de Witt brothers (Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: a Life*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 306; Jonathan Havercroft, *Captives of Sovereignty*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 125).

The murder is rendered in all its violence, but also with a broad portrayal of its wider political and emotional context, in the 2015 Dutch film [Michiel de Ruyter](#). Spinoza's Latin means ultimate barbarians; this is translatable as last or most extreme barbarians. Perhaps it is best to retain both senses as one, since it is plausible that Spinoza meant to draw attention to the degree and type of barbarism together with the belief that it could be the last before a more rational age. Had he not been stopped from posting the note, the taunt would likely have cost him his life.

Jonathan Havercroft connects Spinoza's political philosophy to the de Witt murders through the argument that, in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza aims 'to develop an alternative means of accommodating the human tendency towards fear that avoids these two pitfalls [of tyranny and mob rule].' (126) Fear, tyranny and barbarism support one another. To react to violent acts with accusations of barbarism and tyrannical repression leads not to security but rather to the inflation of fear and increase in violent acts, on all sides.

This is why I have taken Thomas Pynchon's oblique reference to siege mentality and violence, at the time of the 1871 Paris Commune, as an exergue for my discussion of barbarism as sign. It is also why I believe that the critical study of barbarism as process sign is a step towards a more rational and just way of reacting to violence, in line with Spinoza's political philosophy. The *pétroleurs* referred to by Pynchon were accused of setting light to buildings using bottles of paraffin in the closing days of the Commune.

In fact, the accused were mostly women and the term is usually taken in the feminine, *pétroleuse*. After the fall of the Commune, in 1871, during the indiscriminate massacres of those assumed to have participated in it, to be suspected of being a *pétroleuse* could lead to the firing squad or to summary justice and exile: 'a milk jug or an empty bottle betraying a potential "pétroleuse".' (Pierre Milza, *"L'Année terrible": la commune*, Paris: Perrin, 2009, p. 420) These mass murders by the army far exceeded in number and violence any of the crimes of the Commune and were to serve as a warning against later popular and worker uprisings. Those in government and at the head of the army at the times of the mass murders (Thiers and MacMahon) were to continue to hold the highest offices of state for many years to come.

After reviewing evidence from Robert Tombs, Pierre Milza concludes that the murders after the fall of the Commune were a crime against humanity (p. 470). There is a recent and moving memorial book for the women of the Commune of 1871, listing names, trials and punishment, as well as describing the false accusations made against them: 'No one was able to prove that they set fire to

Paris.' (Claudine Rey, Annie Gayat and Sylvie Pepino, *Petit Dictionnaire des femmes de la Commune: Les oubliées de l'histoire*, Paris: le bruit des autres, 2013, p. 17).

The classical origins of 'barbarian' are also studied by Zaoui. He underlines its application to any outsider. A barbarian was someone whose language was incomprehensible to those of a supposedly higher culture. To Greek ears, the foreign tongue resembled an incoherent stammering and 'incomprehensible gibberish' (*bar bar*) or 'the twittering of birds' (Anna Morpugo Davies 'The Greek Notion of Dialect' in Thomas Harrison (ed.) *Greeks and Barbarians*, Edinburgh University Press: 2002, pp. 153-71, esp. 166). The rejection on the grounds of language and lack of culture was the basis for wider and more politically significant judgements: 'The distinction between Greek and barbarian overshadowed that between citizen and xenos. The Other par excellence was the barbarian, who was looked on with mingled contempt, curiosity, and occasional disquiet.' (Robert Browning 'Greeks and Others: From Antiquity to the Renaissance', in *Greeks and Barbarians*, pp. 257-77, esp. 261)

For Zaoui, the underlying logical move involved in the use of the label 'barbarian' can be summed up by the 'not-us' of indiscriminate negation: everything that is not us is barbaric. For the Romans, in the closing years of the Roman Empire, the term barbarian was applied generally to invaders and those of non-Roman origins. When suffering from a siege mentality, brought about by the collapse of Rome, Romans applied the word to the inchoate and unseen threat beyond the crumbling walls and shifting frontiers of the dying empire.

This indiscriminate negation can be rendered on the diagram of a process sign as a tight number of relations positioned in a circle surrounded by much more faint and disparate relations in a wide space around it. The process of negation is not a simple logical reversal. It is a movement of repudiation where the indistinct relations move away from the circle, as the inner relations draw tighter.

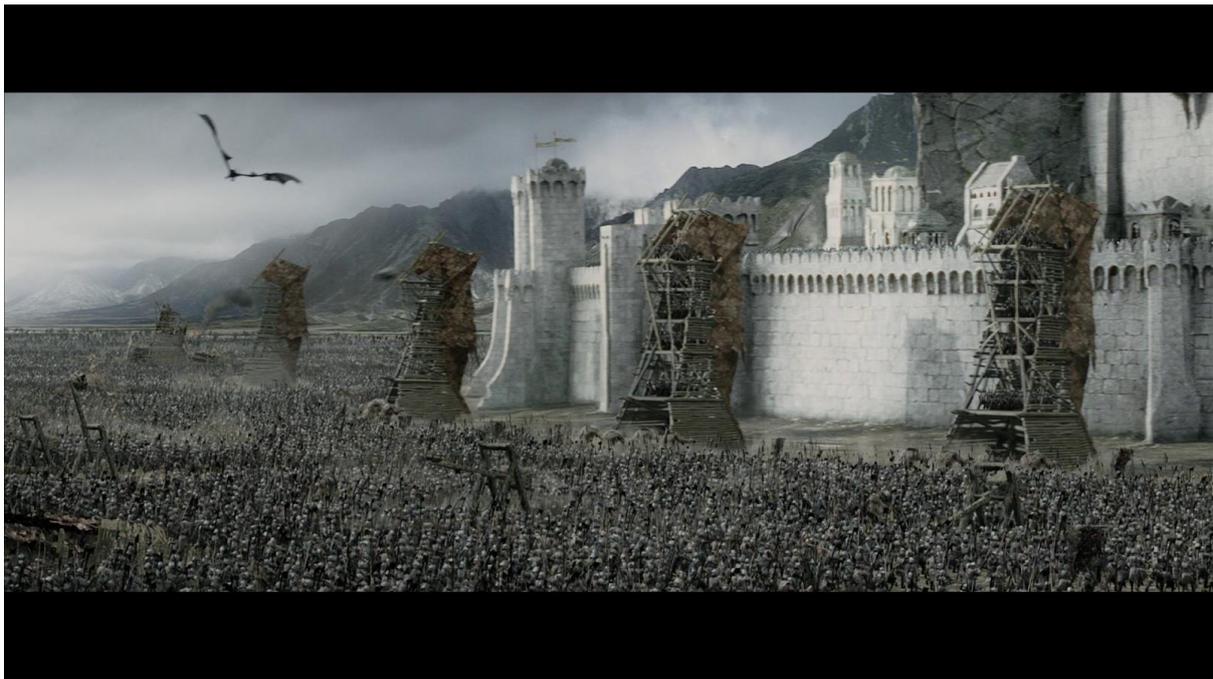
The diagram is helpful in understanding Zaoui's arguments, because we can turn to different perspectives on the diagram. From inside the circle, there is a sense of siege and of an indistinct and hard to comprehend mass, determined against those who belong inside its perimeter. There is also a sense where those on the inside protect the circle's boundaries by strengthening its internal relations. The search for internal cohesiveness means that all relations drawing the outside into the circle must be stopped; hence the suspicion of anyone with connection to the threatening barbarians.

The turn to identity politics and its worst forms, in reactionary and racist nationalism, that in turn lead to militant fascism, correspond to this desire to protect based on a false representation. It is false if we turn to another perspective on the diagram. From individual locations outside the circle,

many precise relations are made to fade into lack of distinction and into lack of intensity, when compared to the privileged inner sanctum.

The sign given by the simple set {barbarians, us, negation, values} should not be thought of as a static two-way relation: us and –us. Instead, the sign defines a space of siege and a field of indiscriminate repulsion where the inner core seems to collapse in on itself and outer reaches appear indistinct against that collapse. It is not the case when we visit both spaces, since the outer reaches are distinct and different, but the use of the burnt word barbarian fosters the illusion of a struggle of light against dark.

These spaces do not need to be given as a straightforward diagram of geometric shapes and vectors. The diagram can be rendered in more figurative images such as those of imagined sieges. White pure walls and beautiful higher people against the barbarian hordes, as represented in the form of popular art that feeds the barbarian myth most strongly:



The combination of conceptual analysis and historical study allows Zaoui to understand the negative power of the word. His earlier article draws on structuralist anthropology, through Lévi-Strauss's remark that to be a barbarian is to reject as barbarians and savages those who are not like us: 'This attitude of thought, in the name of which we reject as "savages" (or all those we consider as such) out of humanity, is in fact the most marking and distinctive attitude of those very savages' (Claude Lévi-Strauss, [Race et histoire](#), Paris: Denoël, 1952, p. 20).

Lévi-Strauss draws attention to the paradox in the use of the labels 'barbarian' and 'savage': it is barbaric to call the other a barbarian. In holding to a belief in barbarians we deny humanity to other beings and their cultures. That is where true barbarism lies. To be a barbarian is to reject as non-human the languages, bodies, practices and creeds of others: 'In denying humanity to those who appear as the most "savage" or "barbaric" of its representatives, we merely borrow one of their most typical attitudes. The barbarian is first and foremost a believer in barbarians.' (22) In the current struggle with ISIS, one of the manifestations of this paradox is through the shock at finding highly educated members of European and other nations [joining the 'barbaric' side](#). How can it be that those brought up among 'civilised' values turn to 'barbarian' ones?

I note in passing that Alain Badiou made similar points to Zaoui and Lévi-Strauss in his [response to the 13 of November murders](#). Like them, he criticises the 'opposition drawn between barbarians and civilised'. He questions the right of the 'civilised' side to use the term, as if their acts of aggression and war were not also barbaric, in drone warfare, in the terrible mismatch in war dead between Allied forces and Iraqi civilians, and in the civilian deaths in Gaza: 'If one is called barbarian for killing people for nothing, then Westerners are barbarians every day and it is important to know that.' Badiou's insightful analysis of the murders deserves a much longer critical analysis. However, his point about the misuse of the word 'barbarian' is less helpful than Zaoui's or Lévi-Strauss's, since it is restricted to a lesson about senseless violence, on both sides, rather than a more extensive understanding of how the word works and what it commits us to.

The historical approach of Zaoui's study of barbarism has similarities to Foucault's study of the complexity of power, as it is exercised through language and disciplinary techniques. There is also a debt to Deleuze and Guattari, in the understanding of how political structures and war machines form different kinds of assemblages. This is how a major power can be destroyed by a minor movement. The minor entices the major to self-destruct by mistakenly investing in unbalanced and counter-productive strengths which then become opportunities for opponents, thereby leading to later collapse. As shown by Zaoui's argument about internal alienation, the use of the term barbarian turns out to be a strategic error that fulfils the wishes of a much weaker enemy, because the divisive political acts and acts of war of the strong become recruiting tools for their enemies.

Niall Ferguson's misused 'barbarians'

Two days before the Libération article, the historian Niall Ferguson used the word 'barbarism' in the way denounced by Zaoui and analysed by Lévi-Strauss. In his *Sunday Times* article ['Paris and the fall of Rome'](#), reproduced in the *Boston Globe*, Ferguson argues that the Paris attack is a moment in the fall of European civilisation, similar to the collapse of Rome under barbarian invasions, as described by Gibbon and, in updated versions, by contemporary historians: 'Peter Heather, has raised the

possibility that the process of Roman decline was in fact sudden — and bloody — rather than smooth: a “violent seizure . . . by barbarian invaders” that destroyed a complex civilization within the span of a single generation... Uncannily similar processes are destroying the European Union today, though few of us want to recognize them for what they are.’

Ferguson conflates and demonises outsiders as economic migrants clinging to foreign values: ‘At the same time, [Europe] has opened its gates to outsiders who have coveted its wealth without renouncing their ancestral faith.’ The siege image, of the diagram of ‘barbarian’ as process sign, is reinforced by the rhetoric in this passage. The metaphors of gates and coveting create a sense of encircled population and besieging hordes. The idea of coveting is particularly violent in this context and it has long been used against immigrants and outsiders. I will return to the use of such images, for instance, in iconography for Jews in Europe in later sections of this essay.

In a particularly recondite argument, Ferguson groups all Muslims with the Paris attackers by claiming that, in retaining their faith and culture, Muslims make it easier to get access to weapons and plan assaults:

... Muslims in Europe hold views that are not easily reconciled with the principles of our modern liberal democracies, including those novel notions we have about equality between the sexes and tolerance not merely of religious diversity but of nearly all sexual proclivities. And it is thus remarkably easy for a violent minority to acquire their weapons and prepare their assaults on civilization within these avowedly peace-loving communities.

This passage fuses extreme violence, sexual prejudice and religious intolerance by ascribing all three to an extraordinarily varied and differentiated group of citizens across a wide range of different countries: ‘Muslims in Europe’.

In France, a distinction can be drawn between practicing and believing Muslims (*pratiquants* and *croissants*). Many Muslims retain Muslim beliefs but not practices at odds with the French secular state (Jennifer A. Selby ‘France’ in Jocelyne Cesari (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of European Islam*, pp 23-63, esp. 42). Salafists, the highly conservative and militant branch of Islam, with roots in Saudi Arabia, backed by Saudi funding in European capitals, are a small minority of Muslims; they are far outnumbered by Muslims who adhere to the secular values of France (Selby 2015, 37). European Islam cannot be seen as homogeneous or counter to European values.

In her introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of European Islam* Jocelyne Cesari sums up the diversity of European Islam described by the authors of the handbook: ‘... the analytical reviews provided by the Handbook’s chapters draw a complex and rich web of meaning and behaviours both on what it is to be a Muslim *and* a citizen.’ (11) It is this richness and capacity to adapt to different ideas of religion and citizenship – as well as the converse capacity of ideas of democracy and rational

progress to take on new forms in response to this cultural richness – which Ferguson both denies and endangers with his inaccuracies.

Ferguson's ascription of violence to 'Muslim' is achieved by a non-sequitur that goes from views on religion and sex (falsely ascribed to a whole group, when in fact only held by some members) to ease in acquiring guns and planning of atrocities. Guns are bought from gun sellers and planning is aided by communication networks, neither have necessary links to tolerance or to intolerance, except in terms of society-wide gun laws and communication provision, and black markets in weapons and devices which cross between different parts of society and beyond the boundaries of war zones and nations.

In 2012, there were roughly '875 million small arms in circulation worldwide', most in the hands of civilians. Those arms were manufactured by 'more than 1200 companies in over 90 countries'. Small arms exports (for 2003) were worth \$2 billion (Asif Efrat, *Governing Guns, Preventing Plunder: International Cooperation Against Illicit Trade*, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 62) The major problem for European police forces in controlling access to guns is not European Muslims, but rather how to stop the illicit smuggling and selling of guns that are readily available throughout the world and in European nations: 'France has seen the same worrying trends [in the illicit trade of guns and of increasing gun crime], with weapons entering France in ever rising numbers particularly from the Balkans.' (Jana Arsovska 'Introduction: Illicit Firearms Market in Europe and Beyond', *European Journal of Criminal Policy Research*, Volume 20, Issue 3, 9/2014, pp 295-305, esp. 301)

In addition to his ignorance of the facts about European Muslims, Ferguson has not always lived up to the values of sexual tolerance that he refers to in order to distinguish different members of society. In 2013, he apologised in his [blog](#) for anti-Gay remarks on John Maynard Keynes made at a financial conference: 'I should not have suggested – in an off-the-cuff response that was not part of my presentation – that Keynes was indifferent to the long run because he had no children, nor that he had no children because he was gay. This was doubly stupid. First, it is obvious that people who do not have children also care about future generations. Second, I had forgotten that Keynes's wife Lydia miscarried.'

Ferguson's remarks, in response to an audience question, were lengthy, caused offense to members of the audience and expressed intolerant views about sexual orientation. They were reported on by Paul Harris in the Observer on 5 May 2013: 'Another reporter, Tom Kostigen of Financial Advisor, gave a longer account. Kostigen wrote that Ferguson had also made mention of the fact that Keynes had married a ballerina, despite his gay affairs.' Ferguson asked the audience how many children Keynes had. He explained that Keynes had none because he was a homosexual and was married to a ballerina, with whom he likely talked of 'poetry' rather than procreated," Kostigen wrote. He added that the audience at the event went quiet when the remarks were uttered.'

Ferguson issued an unreserved apology, but his initial words do not sit well with his later remarks on sexual tolerance, or they invite a different interpretation, where Ferguson associates sexual tolerance with the so-called fall of Europe at the hands of barbarians. This latter reading gains support from his remarks attributing corruption and softness to Europe: 'Like the Roman Empire in the early fifth century, Europe has allowed its defenses to crumble. As its wealth has grown, so its military prowess has shrunk, along with its self-belief. It has grown decadent in its shopping malls and sports stadiums.' Ferguson adopts a stance of tough militarism, critical of moral and physical decadence, cohering with intolerant views about those who are 'soft', and supportive of the worship of those whose strength fits a certain model of military machismo.

In the article on barbarism and in the retracted remarks on Keynes, Ferguson spreads kinds of confusion and misunderstanding that lead to the alienation of different groups in our societies. For example, he draws a necessary connection between migration and political problems: '...they cannot stream northward and westward without some of that political malaise coming along with them... convinced monotheists pose a grave threat to a secular empire.' The same argument would apply, not only to Christianity, but also to the founders of secular states. The majority of the Founding Fathers of the United States were convinced monotheists. So there is no direct causal relation between political malaise and the religion of immigrants. It is rather that social malaise follows from political failures around tolerance and integration. These are failures Ferguson encourages with his unsound arguments.

Ferguson bemoans decadence in the fighting capacity of Europe, but he contributes to the strategic errors of misrepresenting the enemy and misjudging its aims, forces, strengths and weaknesses by assuming that the conflict is brought about by military decadence and the rise of barbaric monotheism. However, the failure of EU and other European or UN military operations is not based on a lack of simple *military* power (hardware, troops and supply lines). Instead, *political and civilian* weaknesses are the main problem.

We have evidence for such failures, in 2011, with the inability of the UN to secure forces on the ground in Libya due to worries about Chinese and Russian objections (Katarina Engberg, *The EU and Military Operations: a Comparative Analysis*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2014, p. 161). Another example would be the failure of civilian and policing operations to support military success in Chad by EUFOR Tchad/RCA, thereby leading to later and ongoing reversals (Per M. Norheim-Martinsen, *The European Union and Military Force: Governance and Strategy*, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 167). Ferguson's reductive and inaccurate dichotomies around civilised and barbarian, and military force and decadence, contribute to the weaknesses he decries.

Part of the problem is military force has contributed to the destruction of states across the Middle East and involved accommodations with states that have directly funded the rise of Salafism in Europe. The commanders, training, field experience, funding and motivation of many of those guilty of attacks in Europe stem from this collapse of Iraq, Syria and Libya. Though the great majority of attackers in Europe are from Europe, the circumstances of their acts can be traced to the disasters that have befallen the Middle East after the dismal failure of the use of great military power in Iraq and the skies of Libya.

The problem is also elsewhere than ideas of decadence and religious war. First, it is in getting a good understanding of the rise and attraction of ISIS, of its funding networks, state supporters and detailed methods of communication and recruitment. Second, it is in understanding its negative effect on governments and citizens in European states. Third, the problem is in identifying a strategy to resist the violence without strengthening its causes. The label 'barbarous' hinders the response to the problem because it obstructs accurate identification of causes of radicalism and detailed understanding of how ISIS and other jihad organisations operate.

Europe has long been home to convinced monotheists of many different faiths. Across different epochs and types of state, they have contributed positively to aspects of their diverse and changeable cultures and polities. They have done so without renouncing their faith, though this did not always protect them from massacres and exile, or protect their enemies from similar crimes. The finances, causes, state and individual supporters, tactics and training of ISIS are complex but at least partially known and knowable. That knowledge will help in the fight against them. The struggle is only hindered by Ferguson's crude analysis of the fall of empires and his clumsy use of the burnt word 'barbarism'.

History and the political sign

Zaoui is not the only thinker to react to the damaging use of 'barbarian'. Citing Ferguson, Paul Krugman highlighted such 'bad history' in his [blog](#) for the New York Times. He then followed this up with another [post](#) on the differences and similarities between the fall of Rome and Arab conquests, and the lack of evidence that either of these could be taken as support for the argument that barbarian immigration leads to the downfall of empires. For these points, he draws on books by Robert G. Hoyland and Tom Holland, as well as a [letter](#) to the Financial Times by David Potter on barbarians and Rome. This letter drew a [response](#) by George Horsington on the downsides of immigrants for Rome.

I draw attention to these debates about the truth and dangers around the word barbarian for two reasons. First, irrespective of which camp is right about past and present barbarian threats, both

sides recognise the potency of the use of the word. On the one hand, those who support the use of the label barbarian after the Paris attacks and as a description of the threat to European civilisation, claim that it is accurate and justified. On the other hand, their opponents deny the accuracy and decry the unnecessary increase in violence brought about by the false label.

Second, the conflict around 'barbarian' rests on different claims about its meaning and effects. Zaoui recognises how the word has changed in some of its associations over time. In particular, he is worried about its current use for internal populations in a time of conflict. He sees this change as raising its potential for causing counter-productive violence. We should not be using the terms barbarian and barbarity.

Four weeks after the Paris attacks, amid an increase in the use of inflammatory and generalising language and policy suggestions, at the time of another attack in the US, the historian Sara Lipton wrote in the *New York Times* about the [following lesson from the past](#): 'For the rest of the Middle Ages, this pattern was repeated: Preaching about the crusades, proclamations of Jewish "enmity" or unsubstantiated anti-Jewish accusations were followed by outbreaks of anti-Jewish violence, which the same shocked authorities that had aroused Christians' passions were then unable to restrain.'

Even if there is no direct link, in the sense of an intention to cause violence, between the use of dangerous and intolerant images and words, there is still a correspondence between that use and mob violence. The portrayals encourage and facilitate attacks and division. Lipton draws the following conclusion: 'Today's purveyors of anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, anti-police and anti-abortion rhetoric and imagery may not for a moment intend to provoke violence against Muslims, immigrants, police officers and health care providers. But in the light of history, they should not be shocked when that violence comes to pass.'

Lipton is a specialist in the Middle Ages. Within that period her further specialisation is on the rise of anti-Jewish imagery and caricature in religious texts. The expression 'rise' is important. Her arguments and research trace historical changes in the portrayal of Jews. These changes then partly explain the increase in violence against Jews and the further development of such imagery and violent discrimination in later periods. Here is Lipton's explanation of her genealogical approach, written in [response](#) to a [review](#) by Eric Christiansen of her 2014 book *Dark Mirror: the Medieval Origins of anti-Jewish Iconography*:

Nineteenth-century anti-Jewish caricatures were drawing on—and their viewers' responses were shaped by—a six-hundred-year-old-tradition of portraying Jews with certain negative features, postures, and symbols. In the thirteenth century, when Jews were first depicted this way, no such tradition yet existed. Unless we assume that (1) all or most Jews looked like their caricatures, and (2) the goal of medieval artists was to accurately portray Jews – neither of which is the case – we must ask what inspired the creation of such images, and

what influenced their interpretation. And most importantly, how the development of medieval anti-Jewish iconography affected the way people viewed Jews, and so helped plant the seeds of Western anti-Semitism.

By genealogical, I therefore mean that Lipton studies the emergence and evolution of anti-Jewish iconography as a way of also studying a factor in past and present anti-Jewish violence. Like Zaoui, her argument underscores the political power and variability in words and images, in signs operating as processes across times and fields.

Lipton is careful not to ascribe direct causal power connecting the sign to violent acts. In her earlier book on religious iconography and representations of Jews in the medieval *Bible moralisée*, she denies such causal links: 'I will not at any point be arguing for direct or even indirect causation.' (Sara Lipton *Images of Intolerance: the Representation of Jews and Judaism in the Bible moralisée*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, p. 3) Instead, the argument is about changes in the power and diversity of signs: 'No individual roundel or text conveys a radical change in ideology or doctrine; rather, it is the cumulative effect of the piling on, broadening, and deepening of the anti-Jewish themes and their use as signs for new and diverse activities that create the impression of a powerful and innovative anti-Jewish program.' (139) These changes between and within signs which then influence later signs and the emergence of more virulent and violent forms of anti-Semitism.

In *Dark Mirror: the Medieval Origins of anti-Jewish Iconography*, Lipton refines her earlier arguments about causality and influence by focusing on the emergence of new images within different kinds of continuity of ideas, beliefs and practices. This continuity provides a ground for the emergence of the new, which is in turn fostered by changing techniques and social conditions, such as the emergence of painting as important medium for the religious representation in the Middle Ages. These innovations then shape and influence other ideas and acts, including the shifting continuities that gave rise to them, such as ideas about visions and visibility in Christianity and Judaism, and in Christian ways of thinking about and representing the Jews.

Lipton argues that new images create new attitudes. Negative images therefore have the potential to lead to later violence and danger, even if no direct causal link can be drawn between any particular image and act:

... anti-Jewish imagery was a significant factor in the *creation* of the attitudes and conditions it is often held to reflect. Art can be a powerful force in shaping the way we see and think about the world. This has become dangerously clear in our own image-saturated, commercialized culture, where pictures teach us to despise bodily imperfections and crave glamorous pleasures we didn't know existed until we were shown them. (Sara Lipton, *Dark Mirror: the Medieval Origins of anti-Jewish Iconography*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014, p. 10)

It could be claimed that the use of the idea of force commits Lipton to causal explanations. This is not the case because her argument depends on breaking direct causal links between an image and an act.

Instead of direct chains of cause and effect, image and act are separated by intermediate ideas of 'attitudes' and 'conditions'. The power of signs is indirect. According to my definition of the process sign, it should be seen as operating through increasing and decreases in the intensity of relations, in and around places and directions. A diagram for Lipton's anti-Jewish signs would therefore show increases in the intensity of relations around anti-Jewish attitudes and conditions such as the production of further images, choices of words, designation of spaces, framing of laws and social interactions.

It is the *context* of later acts that is forcefully shaped by new imagery. A good example for thinking about these distinctions is language. The use of a taboo word causes offence but, in order to be able to have this effect, we must be in possession of the word. We can distinguish between direct causes, such as the use of an order word ('Load your muskets and track down all infidels!') and the possession of a linguistic context that enables us to choose such words or not, such as the signs to use in order to recognise infidels and the associations we need to make in order to think of them as subhuman and deserving persecution.

Signs are forces in two ways. First, they introduce new potential through the variation of contexts, for instance, in the potential release by negative images which allow us to think of others in negative ways hitherto unimagined. Second, this potential is varied in terms of strength and relations to other ideas and social organisations, for instance, when there is an increase in the potential for discriminatory violence as a group of citizens is repeatedly characterised through predominantly derogatory and negative imagery. There is a particularly worrying recent trend in Europe for leading politicians to resort to such negative terms [for short-term political gains](#).

Each new sign involves a selection of a set of elements against a background, such as the novel selection of hats for Jews in the iconography of the Middle Ages, as described by Lipton in *Dark Mirror* (p. 21ff). These selections change the context for the signs, that is, they change the intensity of relations in and around all things; for example, by making the relation between blame, guilt, vision and Jews stronger in Christian theology. Academics like Lipton are drawing up diagrams of these changes in intensity; in her words, she is observing how an iconography shapes and influences later ages. This shaping through signs then provides the enabling context of attitudes and conditions for acts.

An ethics for the use of signs as process

When taken together, Zaoui's lessons on the 'burnt' nature of the word 'barbarian' and Lipton's study of the birth and influence of negative iconography are important warnings about the incautious and indiscriminate use of words in current political debates and descriptions of events. By way of conclusion, I will suggest some ethical principles around the use of signs to add to their wisdom and caution.

Zaoui writes as a political philosopher engaged in social problems. He has a long record of political engagement, notably in his many texts for the journal [Vacarme](#). It is often repeated that French philosophy retreated from political engagement after Sartre. This is not true and a wide range of thinkers are engaged across many social and political fields, as we can see from articles in [Vacarme](#) but also [Multitudes](#).

This engagement means that Zaoui's attribution of 'burnt' to 'barbarian' has a practical element. It is a precise recommendation aimed at a particular problem and situation. This practice directs his reflection on the dangers of the sign to a connection between a problem in the here and now and its historical context. Slightly differently, as historian, Lipton gives us a very precise historical study, a hermeneutics of images and expressions, as cautious explanation for emergent trends through history which have warnings about influences and changes in power for our present actions. She has also used her historical research to criticise contemporary assumptions about sex and gender; for example, in an amusing and sharply ironic set of remarks on changes in ideas of male self-dominance [or lack of it](#).

The frame for an ethics of the sign as influential process can be taken from the definition of the sign. The sign is a selection, changes in multiple intensive relations, suites of diagrams of those changes, and debates with general theories and sciences making claims over the sign. Each of these facets comes into play when we use a sign. When we coin, or simply repeat a sign for a particular nationality – the stiff upper lip of the Englishman, for example – we make a particular selection (of the lip with Englishness), we initiate changes in intensive relations (greater ideas of fortitude but also repression, say), we consciously or unconsciously draw a diagram (the remote Englishman pulling away from the warmer Mediterranean, for example), we call into question other diagrams and invite new ones, and we begin a dialogue with general theories that run counter to the selection (behavioural studies of the English gentleman).

In selecting a sign and hence selecting its constituent set of elements we should therefore:

1. Always pay attention to the effects of that selection on a wider diagram of increasing and decreasing investment in a multiplicity of different points and directions
2. This means we should also suggest such a diagram for ourselves and for others

3. In addition, we should attempt to conceive of and search for other such diagrams and selections of signs that enter into a counterfactual relation to ours
4. We should also consider and enter into critical debate with positions that deny the possibility of the sign we suggest
5. Finally, in making these selections and suggestions we should always pay attention to the violent implications of our selection of signs and attempt to minimise them

James Williams, Edinburgh, February 2016