In *The Empire of Civilization*, Brett Bowden, a professor of politics and international studies, presents a forceful, clearly written, and impressively learned case against what he calls the “ideal of civilization,” the “root” of a set of closely-related normative and historical concepts that have repeatedly driven Western states to intervene and reorder Nonwestern societies, usually in a process replete with violence, exploitation, and social dislocation. The book’s three parts describe the essential features of the concept of civilization and its origins in the philosophical histories of the Enlightenment, catalog the centrality of the concept to European, and, more generally, Western imperial projects from the medieval to the modern period, and, finally, explain the continuing relevance of the ideal of civilization in the present international order, especially with regard to the United States-led “War on Terror.”

The term ‘civilization’ first arose in eighteenth century French jurisprudence, where it described the transfer of a case from a criminal to a civil court, but was adopted into more general use by the middle of the century. ‘Civilization’ came to indicate both a state of affairs—a mode of social organization distinct from the state of nature, in which individuals can credibly commit to each other in order to act collectively—and the process by which this state of affairs comes into existence. Professor Bowden also points out that ‘civilization’ thus takes on simultaneously ‘descriptive’ and ‘evaluative’ connotations: to describe a society as ‘uncivilized’ was never a normatively ‘neutral’ act. Philosophers of the French and Scottish Enlightenments attached a theory
of history to this hybrid concept, positing that ‘civilization’ along the lines visible in the societies of Europe was the natural tendency of human social progress and thus the ultimate fate of all societies. In this project, theorists were substantially inspired by the experience, from the fifteenth century on, of European contact with Aboriginal Americans. Amerindian society was understood as a contemporaneous example of European societies’ past. This understanding, Professor Bowden argues, formed an important part of Europeans’ motivation to embark upon ‘civilizing missions’—imperial and colonial projects—throughout the rest of the world.

This association of the ‘ideal of civilization’ with ‘civilizing missions’ forms the basis for Professor Bowden’s critique. We can distinguish both factual and normative dimensions of Bowden’s argument, but as in the work of the theorists of civilization he studies, these tend to run together in his rejection of the concept. On the factual side, Professor Bowden’s claims are summarized by the slogan “uniform not universal”—by which he means to question the sociological assertion that civilization, the organization of political rule via the institution of the state, represents the natural end of all human societies’ evolution. To the contrary, as he details in the book’s second part, since at least the 11th century, something like the ideal of civilization has underlay a ‘standard of civilization’ in international legal thinking, which legitimated civilizing missions in uncivilized or barbarian societies by civilized states. This leads him to claim that whatever convergence we actually can see toward a European model is more the result of active, often violent, external imposition than it is of a natural, internal process of evolution.

The normative argument against the ideal of civilization is essentially the same. Professor Bowden insists that the association of this set of ideas with violent imperial projects implies that the ideas themselves must be rejected. But here, it is critical that we note that the argument rests upon a deeper, one is tempted to say methodological, commitment to a theory of history emphasizing the “power of ideas.” Bowden is less clear in the theoretical development of this concept—which includes references to the Cambridge School’s method of genealogy, Kant and Hegel’s idealism, Marx’s famous comments on men and the making of history from the 18th Brumaire, and John Maynard Keynes on academic scribblers—than he is in his use of it. Throughout the book, it is clear that by the ‘power of ideas’ Bowden has in mind a very strong thesis: the ‘ideal of civilization’ itself is responsible, in the sense of having caused, European civilizing missions and their concomitant violence. The balance of the book’s second part consists of a ‘catalog’ of such diverse imperial projects as Spanish American imperialism, English American and South Asian imperialism, European colonization of Africa, and American imperialism following the Spanish American war, each of which, in Professor Bowden’s
account, was driven by the ‘ideal of civilization.’ The book’s third part extends this thesis to the present day, uncovering narratives of progress and civilization in the ‘conflation’ of human rights law, democratic governance, and economic liberalism that, in Professor Bowden’s evaluation, motivated NATO intervention in Kosovo, and lingered on in rhetoric surrounding the United States’ ‘War on Terror.’

The ‘power of ideas’ also forms the premise of Bowden’s alternative prescriptions for the “future of intercivilizational relations.” “Until the West resolves to seek out a philosophy of history that is more accommodating of Nonwestern peoples and cultures, and treats them with greater respect as different yet of equal moral value, then there is a danger that we are destined to continue along the same misguided path.” 5 Presumably, this implies that if the West does adopt a different philosophy of history, or perhaps rejects altogether the project of a philosophy of history, we will follow another, less misguided path, but Professor Bowden does not supply a thick description of this happy prospect.

In all, Professor Bowden’s book makes an important contribution to the growing field of scholarship on the intellectual history of European imperialism even though, it must be said, many of its central insights can be found elsewhere: Uday Mehta, Sankar Muthu, and Jennifer Pitts have recently produced volumes exploring the relation of Enlightenment philosophy to nineteenth century European imperialism, highlighting the centrality of a progressive theory of history and a universalizing conception of social evolution to these projects’ ideological justification. 6 The writings of the seminal theorists of Spanish American Imperialism, including Francisco de Vitoria and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, have been plumbed for later relevance in fascinating work by scholars like Anthony Pagden, Richard Tuck, and Antony Anghie. 7 And the relation of the role and activities of the United States in the world today to previous imperial projects has been discussed from a number of different ideological perspectives. 8 Nonetheless, Professor Bowden achieves a clarity of style and covers such an impressive range of people, periods, and places that his book stands out even in this company. His work also brings two difficult issues—concerning the particular contributions of the Enlightenment to the development of an imperial ideology and the ‘power of ideas,’ generally, in the history of imperialism—to the fore, where they can be examined closely.

First, regarding the Enlightenment origins of the ‘ideal of civilization,’ in the book’s first part, Professor Bowden emphasizes the novelty of the Enlightenment’s conception of civilization, even tracing the use of the word, as we have noted, to eighteenth century France. However, in the rest of his book,
he proceeds to undermine this thesis, tracing ‘consistency and continuity,’ in at least the purposes to which the ideal of civilization has been put, from the 11th century to the present. We must ask, then, what exactly is at stake in this question? If the connection forged by the philosophical historians of the Enlightenment between ‘civilization’ as a mode of social organization and historical ‘progress’ represents an important break in imperial thinking, in what sense can it be said that the history of latter evinces a ‘continuity’ from the medieval period to the present? If there is no such continuity, why should reflection on past imperial apologists enlighten present-day consideration of the relation between Western and Nonwestern societies? Professor Bowden’s book is rather ambiguous on these important questions, which is unfortunate given that his is one of the only works to really attempt to describe imperial thinking over such a long time frame.

Second, regarding the “power of ideas:” I’m not sure that this thesis, central to Professor Bowden’s method and to his book’s central arguments is actually proven, nor am I sure of how it could be proven. If we grant that Professor Bowden does demonstrate that, at various points, when Western states have undertaken conquests, colonizations, or interventions in Nonwestern societies, these have been justified by reference to a roughly similar set of arguments (see above for caveats), we are not forced to conclude, with Professor Bowden, that it was because these arguments were made that these projects were undertaken. To the contrary, it is remarkable that all of Bowden’s theorists of civilization are apologists of ongoing imperial operations. The case of Sepúlveda is exemplary: he writes in the mid-fifteenth century, while the Spanish conquest of the Americas is in full-swing, in response to criticism lodged by observers of ongoing imperial operations. Now, it’s not impossible that the Spanish originally undertook their imperial project for reasons like the ones that Sepúlveda later produced, but that he produced them does not prove this point—and, indeed, may suggest the opposite. That the theorists of civilization Professor Bowden discusses are concerned with providing arguments for ongoing imperial projects and civilizing missions is at least as consistent with a materialist conception of the role of ideas in history, which conceives of imperial apology as an ideology, meant to shroud the particular interests of those that stand to gain from imperial projects in universalist claims. Professor Bowden’s strong claims regarding the ‘power of ideas,’ then, in either their historical or prescriptive forms, simply are not substantiated by evidence or arguments presented in the book.

Both of these problems in The Empire of Civilization may stem from a single issue, which, in fairness, characterizes most of the recent literature on the intellectual history of imperialism: the tendency to make monolithic categories out of quite varied phenomena, whether intellectual or material. Thus, a
single “imperial idea” evolves over centuries, consistently motivating “the West" to engage in violent imperial projects in the “Nonwest.” To properly evaluate these ideas and events, however, we would do well to break down these monolithic concepts, starting with “the West” and “the Nonwest.” If we recognize that both the West and the Nonwest are, and always have been, internally divided entities, it becomes clear that the violence of civilizing missions was not perpetrated by the entire West upon the entire Nonwest, but by select groups of the former upon select groups of the latter. Indeed, we have to note that many inhabitants of the West have been both completely innocent of any notion of “civilization,” Eurocentric or otherwise, and completely excluded from the practice and the rewards of Western expansion and empire. Similarly, while many inhabitants of the Nonwest, including displaced Nonwestern elites and exploited Nonwestern working classes have good grounds to complain about the realities of actually-existing imperialism, other Nonwesterners may, as a result of Western interventions, have escaped violence being perpetrated upon them by fellow Nonwesterners, or even risen to social positions and material wealth unavailable to them in the status quo anti Western intervention. Now all this must, I think, confound any straightforward condemnation of imperialism or of the ideas associated with it, including, if we follow Professor Bowden, the ideal of civilization. □

NOTES

2 Ibid. pg. 26.
3 Ibid. pgs. 97–100.
4 bid. pgs. 5–12.
5 Ibid. pg. 230.
7 In Spanish Imperialism and the Political Imagination (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) and Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain, and France c. 1500–c. 1800 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), The Rights of War and Peace: Political Thought and the International Order from Grotius to Kant (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), and Imperialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), respectively.