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# French Discourses on the “West,” “Modernity,” and “Civilization”: The Example of *francophonie républicaine*

It is French principles that have won the day. Just  
as occurred 130 years ago, the new world has  
defeated the old world. 1919 continues, indeed  
completes 1789 and 1792 [...] 1918 marks the end  
of a world, and 1919 will see the beginning of a  
new era.<sup>1</sup>

This<sup>2</sup> passage is from a speech delivered in Lyon on December 8, 1918, by Edmond Besnard, a radical republican and ardent proponent of laicism. A month after the end of the First World War, he slotted that conflict chronologically into a longer history of events by recalling the ideas of 1789. Spatially, unlike the majority of his contemporaries, he directed listeners' attention beyond Europe: “In the Orient, France has long enjoyed a situation of privilege, economically as well as intellectually and morally. Its language is the most widely disseminated there of all foreign languages; it is like a badge of sublimity, a proof of culture and civilization.”<sup>3</sup> This perspective is explained by the fact that Besnard was the secretary general of the Mission Laïque Française (MLF), an organization whose goal was to spread French language and culture in the Mediterranean region and the Middle East. A radically laicist organization, it had been founded in 1902 against the backdrop of the internal French dispute over the separation of church and state, and it sought above all to compete with the many well-established Christian orders and their schools. The timing of his speech was likely also related to the League of Nations mandate for Syria and Lebanon, which France had long been eager to obtain and was finally

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1 “La France en Orient. Conférence de M. Edmond Besnard,” *Bulletin de la Mission Laïque Française* 15 (1918): 87. All French quotations were translated into German by the author and then translated into English for the present volume. In some cases, the original French passages are given in parentheses.

2 This present article was first published in German in 2018 (Silke Mende, “Französische Diskurse um ‘Westen’, ‘Moderne’ und ‘Zivilisation’ – Das Beispiel der francophonie républicaine,” in: *Zivilisatorische Verortungen. Der “Westen” an der Jahrhundertwende (1880–1930)*, ed. Riccardo Bavaj and Martina Steber (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2018): 44–56) and has not been revised for the English translation; the bibliography has not been updated.

3 “La France en Orient,” 87.

granted in 1920/22, formalizing its traditionally strong, informal influence in the region.

But how might this shed light on the place of the “West” in French debates at the turn of the century? The above quotes illuminate in exemplary fashion a number of dimensions and challenges – not least those of a semantic nature – associated with France’s discourses on the “West.” They also hint at certain substantive aspects and motifs that I elaborate below. Finally, they point to the angle from which this chapter approaches the issue of France and the “West,” namely *francophonie*. As the most important agent of the “educational task” (*tâche éducatrice*) that allegedly fell to France as the “schoolmaster of nations” (*l’institutrice des nations*),<sup>4</sup> Besnard identified the French language – “a badge of sublimity,” indeed the very “proof of culture and civilization.” This reflected the objectives of his organization but also the fact that the French language played a prominent, definitional role in the French self-image(s).

My approach here brings into focus actors who were particularly committed to French language policy and language cultivation, but who also associated with them a whole set of other ideas and concepts. In what follows, I focus chiefly on an intellectual republican elite that had emerged since the 1880s in the “Third Republic” and whose center of gravity lay in the Parisian bourgeoisie. This elite included politicians, scholars, and intellectuals whose engagement often overlapped, not least in the many charitable associations and scholarly societies founded in the name of *francophonie* in the final third of the nineteenth century. These bodies formed a tight-knit institutional network and were enmeshed – in terms of both personnel and finances – with a centralist and increasingly interventionist state and its institutions. The associated constellation of actors shaped French debates about language and language policy both inside and outside the French nation-state, and it also made an impact on the French empire and France’s role in international politics.<sup>5</sup> The perspective I have chosen here on *francophonie républicaine*, which was particularly dominant at the turn of the century, nevertheless represents only one, albeit important, aspect of this theme.<sup>6</sup>

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4 “La France en Orient,” 89.

5 See Pierre Singaravélou, “Aux origines coloniales de la francophonie. Le rôle pionnier des associations et des sociétés savantes,” in *Les associations dans la francophonie*, ed. Sylvie Guillaume and Noble Akam (Pessac: Maison des sciences de l’homme d’Aquitaine, 2006), 63–74. On the “Alliance Française” as an important language policy organization, see François Chaubet, *La politique culturelle française et la diplomatie de la langue. L’Alliance Française, 1883–1940* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2006).

6 On other, sometimes competing actors and discourses, such as antirepublican movements or the numerous French, mostly Catholic missionaries, see James Patrick Daughton, *An Empire Divided*:

After (1) briefly examining French notions of the “West” from a history-of-concepts perspective, I turn (2) to the concrete dynamics characteristic of this and related concepts between metropolitan France and its colonial and imperial spheres of influence. This (3) prompts us to consider the scope of more far-reaching concepts, namely French universalism, and to ponder competing or even cooperative conceptions within the “West.”

## 1 The Relative Absence of the “West” and the Need for Complementary Concepts

In the French case, if we wish to get a handle on the ideas and concepts central to this volume and its core period of investigation, namely the “long turn of the century,” the “West” is not the most obvious term to explore.<sup>7</sup> At least in the sources reviewed here, “West”/“Western,” in other words *occident/occidental*, are comparatively little-used terms, though the multifaceted charge of these French words is significant in this context. Beyond its primarily geographical meaning, *occident* may stand for the (Christian) “West” in a narrower sense, while in the sense of “Occident” it is the concrete antonym of “Orient.”<sup>8</sup> In light of this, it is imperative to foreground – or at least include in our analysis – related terms that are often directly linked to *occident* in linguistic usage. Reference was often made to *civilisation occidentale*, that is, “Western civilization.” *Civilisation* is similar but not identical to *occident*, entailing a number of differing emphases – which may provide insights into the tensions indicated earlier, such as the question of France’s status as part of the “West,” its role within it, and its universalist aspirations. This leads on to the question of whether *civilisation* was generally construed as

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*Religion, Republicanism, and the Making of French Colonialism, 1880–1914* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

7 However, in a recent article, Georgios Varouxakis emphasizes the importance of French impulses to the idea of the “West,” specifically the influence of Auguste Comte (1798–1857), though he developed his ideas in the first half of the nineteenth century. Georgios Varouxakis, “The Godfather of ‘Occidentality’: Auguste Comte and the Idea of ‘The West,’” *Modern Intellectual History* 85 (2017): 1–31.

8 On the latter, see, for example, Desmond Hosford and Chong J. Wojtkowski, “Introduction,” in *French Orientalism: Culture, Politics, and the Imagined Other*, ed. Desmond Hosford and Chong J. Wojtkowski (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), 1–10. For a general account, see Helmut Hühn, “Die Entgegensetzung von ‘Osten’ und ‘Westen,’ ‘Orient’ und ‘Okzident’ als begriffsgeschichtliche Herausforderung,” in *Begriffsgeschichte im Umbruch*, ed. Ernst Müller (Hamburg: Meiner, 2005), 59–67.

a singular, that is, as a desirable benchmark, or whether several possible *civilisations*, plural, were imagined as existing in parallel, as co-existing, and as existing in opposition to each other.

In terms of conceptual history, “civilization” in our context can be traced back essentially to the late Enlightenment and the Revolution, when *civilisation* became “the outright epitome of long-term, irreversible and unlimited cultural progress.”<sup>9</sup> In the early nineteenth century, “a positive understanding of the concept of civilization [prevailed] that was rooted in a history of salvation and philosophy of progress.”<sup>10</sup> To these temporal and ideological dimensions, however, we can add a third, spatial one. Following Jon May and Nigel Thrift, *civilisation* can also be described as a dynamic, ideologically charged “time-space concept” characterized by its invariable dynamism.<sup>11</sup> Riccardo Bavaj and Martina Steber have made the same point about the related concept of “the West.”<sup>12</sup> Another closely related term also encompasses this triad of ideology, geography, and temporality. This is the enigmatic concept of “modernity” or “modernization.” In French, in addition to the noun *modernité*, it is above all the adjective *modern/e* that stands out here, often in combined forms such as *civilisation moderne*.<sup>13</sup>

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9 Pierre Michel, Rolf Reichardt, and Eberhard Schmitt, “Barbarie, Civilisation, Vandalisme,” in *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich 1680–1820*, ed. Rolf Reichardt and Eberhard Schmitt, vol. 8 (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1988), 22.

10 Michel et al., “Barbarie, Civilisation, Vandalisme,” p. 45. See also Lucien Febvre, “Zur Entwicklung des Wortes und der Vorstellungen von ‘Civilisation,’” in *Lucien Febvre, Das Gewissen des Historikers*, ed. and trans. Ulrich Raulff (Berlin: Klaus Wagenbach, 1988), 39–77; Georg Bollenbeck, “Zivilisation,” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter, Karlfried Gründer, and Gottfried Gabriel, vol. 12 (Basel: Schwabe, 2004), col. 1365–1379; Birgit Schäbler and Hans-Joachim König, “Zivilisierung, 2014,” in *Enzyklopädie der Neuzeit Online*, accessed October 25, 2017, [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/23520248\\_edn\\_a4904000](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/23520248_edn_a4904000).

11 See Jon May and Nigel J. Thrift, *Timespace. Geographies of Temporality* (London: Routledge, 2003); see also Bollenbeck, “Civilization,” col. 1365.

12 See Riccardo Bavaj and Martina Steber, “Introduction: Germany and ‘The West’. The Vagaries of a Modern Relationship,” in *Germany and “The West”: The History of a Modern Concept*, ed. Riccardo Bavaj and Martina Steber (New York: Berghahn, 2015), 1–37.

13 On this topic, see Christophe Charle, *Discordance des temps. Une brève histoire de la modernité* (Paris: A. Colin, 2011).

## 2 “Modernizing” and “Civilizing” through Language? Attempts to Create Uniform Spaces and Ideas

It is when we try to grasp the concrete dynamics of these concepts that the focus on *francophonie* comes into play. As the French nation-state was emerging, language-political questions and tasks closely linked to concrete ideas about the nature of a modern national society first rose to prominence in the wake of the Revolution of 1789. We need only think of the famous report by Abbé Grégoire of 1794 “on the necessity and means of eradicating the dialects and regional languages and universalizing the use of the French language.”<sup>14</sup> This and other key texts from the Revolutionary milieu gave rise to tropes that were to display an astonishing permanence. To put it in simple terms, these were grouped around the juxtaposition of “civilization” and “backwardness”. While the former was associated with the French standard language, the latter was linked with various dialects or regional languages. Veritable strategies of naturalization came into play here, as already described in the pioneering 1975 study of language policy during the French Revolution under the rubric of *une France sauvage*.<sup>15</sup> Here the “savage” or “barbaric” was posited as a negatively charged antonym to Enlightenment, “progress,” and “(modern) civilization.”<sup>16</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century, the early Third Republic in particular sought to build on the radical Enlightenment-centered aspirations of the French Revolution in many respects, not least with regard to the standardization of language. In 1873, for example, Léon Gambetta characterized those areas of the country “covered by a black stain of ignorance” and in which the “clerical spirit” ruled triumphant as linguistically untapped territory. What was needed, he declared, was not a teacher speaking a language whose true dictionary lay in the Vatican, but rather a schoolmaster who spoke the language of the *citoyens* and was devoted to the “ideas of modern society” (*idées de la société moderne*).<sup>17</sup> The “dictionary in

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14 “Rapport sur la Nécessité et les Moyens d’anéantir les patois et d’universaliser l’usage de la langue française,” in: *Une politique de la langue. La Révolution française et les patois: l’enquête de Grégoire*, by Michel de Certeau, Dominique Julia, and Jacques Revel (Paris: Gallimard, 2002 [1975]), 300–317.

15 “Rapport”; see also Schäbler and König, “Zivilisierung,” section 3.

16 See Bollenbeck, “Zivilisation,” 1365.

17 Léon Gambetta, “Discours prononcé le 16 mai 1873, à Nantes,” in *Discours et plaidoyers politiques de M. Gambetta*, ed. M. Joseph Reinac, vol. 3.2 (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1881), 367–391, quote at 378.

the Vatican” was more than a reference to Latin as the language of the liturgy. It also highlighted the fact that many priests used local dialects and regional languages. In the eyes of the republican reformers, these stood for backwardness and ignorance in a special way, such that it was vital to repress them in the name of the republic, Enlightenment, and “modernity.”<sup>18</sup> In the first instance, then, especially in the final third of the nineteenth century, “modernization” through language was a national project focused on the French regions, one intended to complete the process of internal nation building.

But this program, which was bound up with the concepts of “civilization” and “modernity,” also played a role in the French empire, and increasingly so.<sup>19</sup> The conquest of large parts of the second French colonial empire took place, of course, in the early phase of the Third Republic. Even more than in the case of other colonial powers, the imperialist legitimizing ideology of a *mission civilisatrice* was of great importance to France. More explicitly than in the case of Britain, for example, it was also linked to a language policy agenda.<sup>20</sup> The French language was to be used to disseminate a whole set of ideas and conceptions to the supposed benefit of the colonized, especially the elite, who were to be granted access to modernity. Relevant statements are legion, so here I will cite only former French prime minister Jules Ferry:

But the moral conquest, the progressive civilizing of the native (*la civilisation progressive de l'indigène*), may take another form. One binds the conquered people to oneself not only by respecting their religion, their personal status, and their property rights, but attracts them above all by opening schools for them, by putting them in possession of the French language, the only vehicle of French ideas among these peoples, which we have set ourselves the goal of raising to our level.<sup>21</sup>

The stage model inherent in the civilizing mission and in the concept of *civilisation* is reflected not only in this quotation but also, though with a different emphasis, in a text by diplomat Jean-Jules Jusserand of 1888, in which he advocates educational

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<sup>18</sup> For a nuanced view of republican discourse and concrete practice, see Jean-François Chanet, *L'école républicaine et les petites patries* (Paris: Aubier, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> However, the attempt to relate actors and discourses in the metropole and in the empire naturally requires a differentiated approach, especially since the concrete relations of violence and hierarchy as well as the legal situation of the populations to be “modernized” or “civilized” in the French “motherland” and in the French colonial empire were quite different.

<sup>20</sup> See Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

<sup>21</sup> Jules Ferry, “Discours sur la question algérienne au Sénat (6 mars 1891),” in *Discours et opinions de Jules Ferry*, ed. Paul Robiquet, vol. 7 (Paris: A. Colin, 1898), 207.

reform in Tunisia because, as he argues, Tunisians are far more “civilizable” (*beaucoup plus civilisables*) than Moroccans or Algerians. Furthermore, “[w]hen the majority of Arabs speak French, they will no longer be dangerous.”<sup>22</sup>

The many contradictions clearly inherent in this program have been elaborated on many occasions and I therefore summarize them only briefly here.<sup>23</sup> First of all, there was the huge gap between discursive aspirations and concrete practice, which was bound to seem all the more glaring against the backdrop of French discourses which were generally of a universalist and republican character. Depending on which part of the empire one was in, there was great variation in the number of schools and in the will to “civilize” the indigenous population by imparting knowledge of the French language, and the civilizing mission was aimed primarily at the elites.<sup>24</sup> In addition, the idea of a unitary “target civilization,” which initially underlay the *mission civilisatrice*, clashed with the colonial aspiration to rule over the long term because achieving the civilizing goal would have removed the “need” for colonial rule as such. In this respect, it seemed far from desirable to acquaint indigenous populations with the model of “Western civilization.” Against the background of a racism increasingly justified in biological terms, the colonizers also doubted that this was even possible. Finally, many commentators expressed the fear that if indigenous actors engaged too vigorously with the ideas and pioneers of “civilization,” this might reinforce their critique of colonialism and foster anti-colonial emancipation movements. Indeed, many individuals educated at French institutions argued with reference to the core values of Enlightenment and human rights in order to highlight the inconsistency of discourse and practice and to question French colonial rule.

Independent of this, however, in the field of colonial policy, too, the concept of civilization was imbued with differing and competing meanings. In the French case, the intense debate about the “right” colonial doctrine at the turn of the century played a particularly important role here.<sup>25</sup> While the concept of “assimilation” had previously dominated, and with it the idea of a single modern “target

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22 Jean-Jules Jusserand, *La Tunisie* (Paris, A. Colin, 1888), 153.

23 On this and the following section, see Boris Barth and Jürgen Osterhammel, *Zivilisierungsmissionen. Imperiale Weltverbesserung seit dem 18. Jahrhundert* (Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft, 2005), especially the essay by Jürgen Osterhammel, “The Great Work of Uplifting Mankind: Zivilisierungsmission und Moderne,” 363–425.

24 Various case studies on language policy in the French colonial empire can be found, for example, in *The French Colonial Mind*, ed. Martin Thomas, vol. 1 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011).

25 On this and the following, see the classic account by Raymond F. Betts, *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890–1914* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005 [1960]).

civilization” to which the supposedly inferior peoples were to be gradually introduced, the concept of “association” that was now attaining dominance was linked with the idea of several coexisting “civilizations.”<sup>26</sup> The aforementioned Mission Laïque Française exemplifies this shift toward “association” and the corresponding pluralization of the concept of civilization. Hence, in the speech quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Secretary General Besnard explicitly emphasized that:

It is not, of course, a question of replacing Arab civilization with French civilization, for that would be against our principles, but of associating the two civilizations (*associer les deux civilisations*), and [...] of developing the Syrian native within the framework of his own civilization (*de développer l'indigène Syrien dans le plan de sa propre civilisation*).<sup>27</sup>

For the most part, hierarchical gradations were still inherent in such statements. Moreover, the concept of civilization in the singular continued to be used in parallel, just as “assimilationist” ideas did not completely disappear. For example, no less than thirty years after the change in colonial policy strategy, former French foreign and colonial minister Gabriel Hanotaux, who was also a member of the Académie Française, was still postulating that: “These peoples, forgotten by civilization but thoroughly civilizable, have found their modern soul by spelling French.”<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, in the spirit of “association,” the practice of schooling, for example, increasingly featured multilingual instruction. In Syria and Lebanon, French continued to occupy an important place in the curriculum, but Arabic and other modern foreign languages were taught concurrently. In addition to the influence of debates on the right colonial and language policy, which were conducted in the metropole, the forces at play locally and the dynamics associated with them were also of key importance, as elaborated by Esther Möller in her nuanced account of developments in Lebanon. There, the indigenous elites in particular increasingly acted as “customers,” and many of the organizations originating in France sought to do more to accommodate their linguistic desires.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> The coexistence of these two concepts of “civilization,” especially since the second half of the nineteenth century, is observed beyond the colonial context by Febvre, “Entwicklung,” 70–71.

<sup>27</sup> “La France en Orient” (see footnote 1), 89.

<sup>28</sup> “Congrès de l’Alliance Française, Séance de Clôture, 11 juillet. Discours de M. Gabriel Hanotaux de l’Académie française, Président du Comité France-Amérique,” *Revue de l’Alliance Française* 71 (1937): 185.

<sup>29</sup> See Esther Möller, *Orte der Zivilisierungsmission. Französische Schulen im Libanon 1909–1943* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 177–213.



### 3 “Western” or “French” Modernity? France, the “West,” and “the World”

But to what extent were “civilization” and “modernity” conceived as primarily French or as generally European, “Western” concepts? And what of intra-European or intra-Western competition or cooperation? First of all, the French concepts of “modernity” and “civilization” usually had a strongly universalist connotation, due in part to the specifically French Enlightenment tradition.<sup>30</sup> In line with this, historian of philosophy Gabriel Séailles, for example, remarked in 1920: “By extending the influence of France, by spreading its language and its ideas, [the Mission Laïque Française] not only serves the national interest and economic expansion, but is working for peace among men and for the progress of the entire civilization (*la civilisation toute entière*).”<sup>31</sup> This statement is exemplary of the conviction that France was acting in the interest of all humankind.

At the same time, various competitive but also cooperative relationships came into play. For our context, an intra-Western rivalry, especially with Britain, is of primary interest. Analogous to the two countries’ different Enlightenment traditions, we can observe continued attempts by French thinkers to distance themselves from first British, then Anglo-American ideas about “modernity.”<sup>32</sup> Both rhetorically and programmatically, as well as in terms of real-world competition for influence, this was again reflected in the politics of language. In part, this involved the “correct” interpretation of core liberal and democratic values, the basic principles of which the two cultural spheres had in common. This is exemplified in a speech by Louis Herbette, president of the propaganda committee of the Alliance Française, an organization founded in 1883, which – much like the Società Dante Alighieri founded six years later and the Akademie zur Wissenschaftlichen Erforschung und Pflege des Deutschtums founded in 1925 as predecessor to the Goethe-Institut – was tasked with disseminating a national language and culture internationally. In a 1904 essay on the French language and French literature in Canada, Herbette highlighted the qualities of French in comparison to English and ultimately deduced from this the superiority of French *civilisation*. He began with a back-

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30 See Tyler Stovall, *Transnational France: The Modern History of a Universal Nation* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2015).

31 Gabriel Séailles, “La Mission Laïque,” *Mission Laïque française. Revue de l’enseignement français hors de France* 17 (1920): 6.

32 On the different traditions and discourses, see Michael Hochgeschwender, “Was ist der Westen? Zur Ideengeschichte eines politischen Konstrukts,” *Historisch-Politische Mitteilungen* 11 (2004): 1–30, esp. 9–13.

handed compliment: “Admittedly, the English language, whose use is universal chiefly in shipping, commerce, and travel, has a fairly wide catchment area. It is the language of simple exchange. Let us suppose that the French [language] is one of complicated productions, not a language of luxury, but a language of more refined culture.”<sup>33</sup> He later stated: “The revolutions of the English were conducted among themselves and for themselves. Those of the French were for everyone; rather than crying out ‘God and my right,’ that dualism which is nothing but egotism, these [revolutions] proclaimed human rights, [embodying an] altruistic humanism.”<sup>34</sup>

By declaring the French revolutions a project of emancipation benefiting all of humanity and disparaging those of the English as spatially limited events merely for their own benefit, Herbertte expressed the tension between different models of “the West,” “modernity,” and “civilization.” At the same time, this reflects a situation of concrete power-political competition, in this case in Canada, for which the linguistic-political skirmishes sketched out here were evidently merely a cipher.

Depending on situation and context, however, other actors championed intra-Western cooperation between the “flagship languages” of Western thought. During World War I, for example, French linguist Albert Dauzat extolled the *entente cordiale* between France and the United Kingdom, which supposedly found reflection in the linguistic field. The “alliance of the French and English languages,” he averred, would eventually achieve the collapse of pan-Germanism and render its hegemonic ambitions forever impossible.<sup>35</sup> If, Dauzat continued, the language question was considered solely from the scholarly point of view, regardless of current circumstances, German was obviously and unalterably inferior to its French and English rivals. A plethora of supposed linguistic peculiarities made the German language seem unsuitable as “the instrument of precise and rapid exchange necessary for modern thought (*la pensée moderne*) in an ever more active and refined civilization (*une civilisation toujours plus active et raffinée*).”<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, he, too, emphasized the differences between the French and English languages, which ought to divide their influence both geographically and in line with different fields of application. Here he was arguing in a way not dissimilar to that of Louis Herbertte a decade earlier, albeit without the latter’s aggressive undertones. Thus, as Dauzat likewise argued, English was primarily the language of commerce,

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33 Louis Herbertte, “Introduction: La langue et la littérature française au Canada. La famille française et la nation canadienne,” in *Études de littérature canadienne-française*, by Charles ab der Haldden (Paris: F. R. de Rudeval, 1904), xxiii–xxiv.

34 Herbertte, “Introduction,” lxxviii.

35 Albert Dauzat, *Le français et l’anglais. Langues internationales* (Paris: Larousse, 1915), 5.

36 Dauzat, *Le français et l’anglais*, 9–10, quote at 10.

whereas French, among other domains, was not only the language of diplomacy and culture, but also of the ideas established by the Revolution.

## 4 Conclusion

When it comes to French debates around the turn of the century, as we have seen, other terms are better suited than the “West” to illuminate the ideas about order central to the present volume. These are, above all, the concept of “civilization” and, with some qualifications, that of “modernity.” “Civilization” and “civilizing,” closely linked to “modernity” and “modernization,” were in the first instance essentially target concepts. From the point of view of the “center,” what mattered was to connect and ultimately standardize various spaces, as well as different actors and ways of life. These could be supposedly “backward” regions in one’s own “motherland,” which was to be integrated into a unified nation-state. Above all, they were regions within the empire that had been declared “backward” and that, in the spirit of the *mission civilisatrice*, were not only to be “civilized” but also integrated in the long term by means of language. With the semantic shift from the colonial-policy concept of “assimilation” to that of “association,” the notion of civilization was pluralized within the imperial framework. To an even greater extent than in the metropole, however, and depending on the region there remained a wide gap between aspiration and reality. Moreover, the indigenous population and especially its elites were more than mere addressees of linguistic and “civilizing” programs: they appropriated their content and thereby changed them.

An ideal connecting link across the different spatial levels was the quasi-missionary belief in French universalism, a notion fed by the legacy of the Enlightenment and the Revolution and that equated France’s interests not only with those of its empire, but to some degree with those of humanity as a whole. Competing notions of “modernity” and “civilization” within the “West” also came into play. Parallel to the rise of English as the leading world language, from the turn of the century onward the pioneers of *francophonie* placed emphasis on competition with the English language and thus with Anglo-American concepts of the “West,” “modernity,” and “civilization.” Depending on the context, however, the ideas and concepts assigned to the French or Anglo-American traditions could also be thought of in cooperative terms, especially when – as in the context of the First World War – “Western civilization” seemed to be facing an aggressive antagonist in the form of the German Empire.

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