Vol 1, Issue 1, Ser 1 2026

Journal of Civilization History

Shiraz University

OPEN ACCESS

DOI: 10.22099/JCHR.2026.56516.1024

Civilization and Its Other: The Othering of Nomadism in Enlightenment Historical Thought

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Abstract

This article examines the epistemological mechanisms of Enlightenment philosophy of history through which nomadism was constructed as the Other of civilization. Enlightenment philosophy of history envisioned a teleological trajectory for humanity, positioning Europe at the peak of historical development. Within this framework, the existence of an Other was essential, for it was through the construction of this Other that the European narrative of itself as the ultimate stage of historical progress was consolidated. The central argument of this article is that the Enlightenment representation of nomadism was not simply a matter of knowledge, but rather the product of a structure of differentiation. This structure operated through two major intellectual currents, namely the Climatization of History and the Stadial Theory of History, both of which produced a distorted representation of nomadism as the Other of civilization. These two currents, respectively, portrayed nomadic life as a mode of existence lacking political stability, private property, and participation in historical progress through the analytical mechanisms of climatization and stadial classification. Within this framework, nomadism was understood not as an alternative form of social organization, but as a stagnant stage within the hierarchy of historical development. Adopting a deconstructive approach, this article argues that the central issue in Enlightenment thought was not nomadism itself, but rather knowledge about nomadism: a form of knowledge that, in the process of consolidating Europe's civilizational self-consciousness, produced and reproduced a distorted representation of nomadic societies.

Keywords: Civilization; Nomadism; Othering; Enlightenment; Climatization of History; Stadial History.

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