The latter half of the eighteenth century was marked by shifting attitudes about the social formation, especially its stability and class differentiation, in Britain and France. The potential for establishing new forms of governance because of the clear possibility of independent economic viability of colonial holdings of both countries fostered clear anxiety among the genteel and aristocratic, because of an overwhelming desire to preserve the status quo – and thus the status – of elite group persons. For many from this group, the enriching of whole groups of people whose origin was not genteel or aristocratic meant a change in the social formation that was unacceptable. Especially if the upstarts had been born in the colonies, any attempt to “pull rank” with European upper classes was troublesome and unacceptable, regardless of how wealthy the colonial was. Didn’t the colonials, after all, live among the Indians of America? And weren’t those same Indians savages and brutes, far from the level of civilization that Europeans were participating in?

The complexity of the social formation caused by colonial markets might be one reason why the discourses of savagism and civility lasted so long in European cultural circles, despite reliable information about the Indians of North America. What seems to have happened, among elites who wished to philosophize about such matters, was a differentiation of people that managed to place the colonials in a place somewhat beneath that of Native Americans. The complicated attitude seems to have been based on an assumption that dealing in the market was bad, because the market was driven by the interests and labor of the vulgar, whereas one ought to live one’s life free of troubles about labor, so as to create an independency of spirit that would enable a more “pure” aesthetic to emerge. Colonials were participating in markets – the source of their wealth – and so were sullied by being subjected to the day-to-day
manipulation of trade, the worries about wealth and its accumulation that could only negatively and irreparably affect their attempts to gain culture while gaining economic viability and thus the potential for status. American Indians, on the other hand, were living in a more ancient way of life, a primitive way, that kept them apart from the contemporary marketplace of value, placing them in a special status of person as more pure because unsullied by thoughts of money, more pure, too, because living close to nature. American colonials were thus placed into a status apart from Europeans, and below them, because lacking in birthright and the gentility that long-established coffers could presumably create in terms of “culture” and “civility.” American Indians were placed into a status apart from Europeans but above colonials and thus aestheticized as more “civil” because closer to a more primitive form of living from which Europeans anciently, it was thought, had emerged. If “better” and more civil people were going to emerge from the colonies, these would not be the Europeans who had let go of their status as Europeans in order to gain wealth in the colonies. The rise in the standard of living of European Americans, a rise clarified by a greater longevity and better health, caused havoc in Europeans’ conceptions about their own superiority over North Americans, whether of European or indigenous descent.

Contemporary insight into these cultural complexities is afforded by a close examination of Benjamin Franklin’s Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America, written originally for circulation among a circle of Franklin’s genteel and aristocratic friends in France, but then published in England shortly thereafter. Perhaps more than any other colonial, and certainly more than any other colonial whose roots were among working people, Benjamin Franklin was particularly well situated during the decades of the 1760s, 1770s, and 1780s to notice the cultural anxieties of those among whom he was circulating and to remark upon what he’d noticed in writings aimed to counter misunderstandings about English American colonials and to uncover prejudices held by Europeans regarding the presumed ignorance of colonial people and the greater civility of American Indians compared to European colonials.

Franklin’s Remarks takes up the tropes of “savagism” and “civility,” only, as Montaigne did centuries before, to turn the irony back on those who assumed they came from a more “civil,” because artificially developed, culture. Yet the Remarks carries a stronger critique than Montaigne’s Of Cannibals did, because, emerging as it did at a time when intellectuals presumed that the Enlightenment could provide