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## *The Comparative Approach to the Survey of Western Civilization*

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ONE of the most challenging and yet most frustrating courses to teach is the survey of Western Civilization.<sup>1</sup> It is challenging because it provides an opportunity to introduce the college freshman to new ideas and concepts and to emphasize the role of the arts, literature, and philosophy as much as that of political, economic, and military activities in the development of Western Civilization. This very opportunity, however, introduces the element of frustration, for the material to be covered is enormous while the amount of time available in which to perform this task is quite limited. How can one present the material in such a way as to deal with the major movements in the development of Western Civilization without having the course become merely a catalogue of facts or a college version of the high school course in world history?

One possible solution is the comparative approach which has long been used by other disciplines. In the biological sciences an important area of study is comparative anatomy. Political scientists give courses in comparative government. Many departments of economics teach comparative economic systems. In each of these courses an effort is made to present similarities and differences, both in form and func-

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Louis E. Bumgartner, "For Teachers of Courses Called Western Civilization: A Lament," *AAUP Bulletin*, XLIX, (June 1963), 123-124; R. V. Sires, "Another Look at 'Chaos 101,'" *ibid.*, XLIX, (December 1963), 370-371; Duane Koenig, "Teaching the Freshman Civilization Section," *The Social Studies*, LVIII (April 1967), 159-161; Robert Hartje, "New Thoughts on Freshman History," *The History Teacher*, IV, (March 1971), 40-47.

tion, of the basic subject matter under consideration, whether it be animals, governments, or economic institutions. In many respects the survey of Western Civilization lends itself very well to this approach for its basic stuff is the examination of the history of several civilizations, states, or movements.<sup>2</sup>

In order to apply the comparative approach to the study of civilization, states, and movements, one must begin with a general theme which will give unity and coherence to this method. Such a theme may be provided by considering history as the efforts of man to adjust to his natural and social environment. Facing the problems of making a living, providing order, explaining the unknown, and expressing themselves artistically and philosophically, men in all periods of history have evolved solutions. Frequently two peoples in the same historical era have developed different answers to similar challenges just as the behavior patterns of one historical period have differed from those of an earlier or a later time. Thus the raw material for a comparative approach to western civilization is available.<sup>3</sup>

How may one apply this technique in the classroom? During much of the first semester of the course, which generally covers the period from the stone ages to the end of the Thirty Years' War, the effort is simplified by the fact that two of the major subperiods concern themselves with a variety of civilizations. The civilizations of the ancient world, dated roughly from 5000 B.C. to 500 A.D., include the Egyptian, the various Mesopotamian, the Hebrew, the Persian, the Hellenic, the Hellenistic, and the Roman, many of which existed simultaneously. The medieval period, ranging from 400 A.D. to 1500 A.D., focuses primarily upon the Byzantine, the Islamic, and the Western Christian civilizations. In these portions of the course the major emphasis can be placed upon the manner in which each of these civilizations sought to cope with basic human problems.

Following an introductory lecture which sets the geographical and chronological limits of the period under consideration, which indicates the major human movements, and which characterizes the leading civilizations, one can then begin to dissect these civilizations for the purpose of comparing and contrasting them. Subsequent lectures can deal with the civilizations topically—developments in economics,

<sup>2</sup>Robin W. Winks, "Comparative Studies and History," *The History Teacher*, I (May 1968), 39-43, discusses some of the problems of applying the comparative approach. C. Van Woodward, ed., *The Comparative Approach to American History*, (New York, 1968), applies this technique to selected topics or incidents in the history of the United States which may be compared to similar developments in the history of other countries. Norman F. Cantor describes three kinds of comparative history in *Perspectives on the European Past: Conversations with Historians* (New York, 1971), I, xv-xvi.

<sup>3</sup>Shirley H. Engle, "World History Based on the Problems of Mankind," *Indiana Social Studies Quarterly*, XVII, (Autumn 1964), 17-30, suggests the use of the comparative approach to the high school world history course.

politics and society, in art, thought and literature, and in the religious outlook of each—rather than through a discussion of these elements within a framework which deals completely with one civilization before proceeding to the next.

A lecture entitled, “Political, Economic, and Social Developments in the Ancient World,” may be cited as an example. Four of the ancient civilizations can be used: the Egyptian under the Pharaohs, the Egyptian under the Ptolemies to represent the Hellenistic period, the Hellenic, and the Roman, especially the portion between 509 B.C. and 180 A.D. The tendency of the two Egyptian civilizations to regard man as a subject can be contrasted with the attitude frequently displayed by the Hellenic and the Roman civilizations that man was a citizen. From this comparison there emerges an awareness of the relatively greater efforts made by Greeks and Romans to achieve a voice in government. This, in turn, can be used as the basis for a comparison of the struggle by the lower classes in Athens and Rome to secure the right to equality before the law and the right to participate in the making and administration of that law. Topics such as the nature of the social groups seeking change in each *polis*, their demands, the phases of this internal conflict, the nature of the “democratic government” thus achieved, and the impact of overseas expansion upon the government and the citizens, can be examined in this portion of the lecture.

In similar fashion a lecture entitled, “Medieval Religious Developments” can be used to point out similarities and differences among the three major religious movements of the medieval world—Islam, Byzantine Christianity, and Western European Christianity. Consideration can be given to the basic beliefs of each religion, its ritual and organization, and the relationship between church and state, in such a way as to help the student see how three civilizations existing at the same time solved the problem of adjusting to and explaining the unknown, as well as understanding the role that religion played in each civilization.

The third major segment of the Western Civilization survey during the first semester covers roughly the period, 1400-1650, which might be described as the transition to the modern world. Since, at this point in the course, the emphasis is usually placed upon civilization in Europe rather than upon a variety of civilizations in the Mediterranean area, the basic unit for comparison and contrast must be modified. Two possibilities exist.

On the one hand, one may compare certain movements, whether religious, artistic and literary, or political and economic, in terms of the ideas contained within each. The nature of Roman Catholicism

and Protestantism with reference to their basic beliefs, the function of the church, the role of the sacraments, and the ultimate source of religious authority may be handled in this manner. The Renaissance in Italy and in northern and western Europe can likewise be used to show similarities and differences in a major historical movement.

On the other hand, one may use as a basis for comparison the development of a movement within specific countries or the efforts made by various states to solve the basic problems of mankind. Using England and France in the seventeenth century as examples and drawing upon their earlier history, one can study the success or failure of their efforts to establish an absolute monarchy.

The second semester of the course represents a continuation of the problem posed by the last third of the previous semester's work. Here also the comparison may be made by using the individual countries of Europe. Another approach is possible, however. If one adds to the theme of man's search for solutions to his problems that of history as a process of conflict and change, he can compare the old order which dominated a particular historical era with the challenges to it which frequently resulted in the emergence of a new order.

This conflict between the old and the new orders can be shown in each of the three major time periods into which the semester's work can be divided. The first, ranging from 1600 to 1815, can be used to illustrate the conflict between the *ancien régime* in Europe and the new order emerging as a result of the Enlightenment and the Atlantic Revolutions. The status quo established by the Congress of Vienna becomes the old order for the second period, 1815-1914. This outlook, characterized as nineteenth century conservatism, can then be compared with nineteenth century liberalism and nationalism, the major challenges to the Vienna settlements. Moreover, one can point out that even as liberalism showed signs of displacing conservatism as the dominant outlook, it, too, was being challenged by the rise of the proletariat. The third phase, beginning in 1914 and extending at least to 1960, has the liberal-democratic society of the western world as the old order which has been challenged by twentieth century totalitarianism and the revolt of the former colonial areas.

In each of these eras several topics provide the basis for comparison between the established society and the elements which seek to replace it. The nature of the socio-economic group supporting each point of view can serve very well as a starting point. The attitudes of each faction may then be analyzed with reference to its ideas about the nature of man and society, the type of government preferred, the role of the state in economic and social activities, and the

role of tradition in shaping the various aspects of society. One can also note the changes which took place within both conservatism and liberalism, 1815-1914.

Within each time span additional opportunities exist for the use of the comparative method. In the first period, for example, one of the challenges to the *ancien régime* was that presented by the Atlantic Revolutions. Three revolutions may be considered—the American, the French, and the Latin American. Instead of treating each one in its entirety before considering the others, the three may be dealt with simultaneously within a framework which sets forth elements which might appear during any revolutionary movement. These might include the factors which led to the beginning of the revolt, the revolution as an internal struggle for power, the international setting of the revolution, and the role of nationalism in the revolution. One must, of course, be careful that he does not stretch actual events in each revolution to fit the general pattern of revolution. Indeed, as one uses this approach, he is forced to admit that he can not speak about the Latin American revolutions as definitively as he can about the American and the French since, in many respects, the Latin American revolutions are still under way.

For the segment of the course beginning in 1914 one may compare the three major totalitarian movements—Communism, Fascism, and Nazism—which posed a challenge to the liberal-democratic society in the West. After an examination of the reasons why a totalitarian state took root in the areas of Russia, Italy, and Germany, one may consider the similarities and differences with reference to political structure, economic policy, the role of ideology, and foreign policy of each state. Attention may be given to the threat which each totalitarian state presented the West and the response of the West to each challenge. Finally, the question may be raised as to whether a general pattern of totalitarianism can be outlined which may be used as a measuring stick in studying states in the twentieth century.

While the artistic, literary, and philosophical developments of the first semester can be compared in terms of civilizations existing at the same time, those included in the second semester must be dealt with in a different manner. The various movements and trends in these fields can be used as the basis for comparison. In some cases two or more different movements, such as Classicism and Romanticism, may be handled in the same lecture. At other times it may be necessary to refer either back to a previous lecture or ahead to a future one in order to point out similarities and differences.

Obviously, there will be topics each semester in which the comparative approach cannot be used as the sole basis for the presenta-

tion of the material. Such topics during the first semester include the beginnings of Christianity, the decay of Roman power, and the medieval period from 1000 to 1500. In the second semester the discussion of international relations in terms of specific time periods (1600-1800, 1871-1921, the Second World War, the Cold War) does not lend itself completely to this method.

Even so, some comparisons may be made within certain of these topics. A lecture entitled, "The Hebrews and the Beginnings of Christianity" provides opportunities for a comparison of Judaism and Zoroastrianism and of Christianity and other oriental religions, especially Mithraism. The lectures dealing with international relations can include an examination of the system of states at the beginning and end of each period and an analysis of the forces which shaped the international politics of one period with those of an earlier or a later time. The changing nature of warfare since 1500 is equally adaptable to the comparative approach.

Using this method as the basis for many of the lectures does, of course, present problems for the student. Instead of a civilization-by-civilization or a country-by-country analysis, he is frequently confronted by a discussion of some aspect of several civilizations or countries within the same time period. Thus it is essential that he have a textbook which presents a thorough account of the chronological development of each civilization or country under consideration. He must be urged to correlate the material treated analytically in the lecture with the chronological discussion in the text. He must be encouraged to use the lecture in two ways. First, he must note the similarities and differences between the topics presented in the lecture. But he must also be urged to extract the information about each civilization or country from the lectures, develop his own picture of each, and compare his version with the account in the text.

Obviously, the comparative approach to the survey of Western Civilization described above does not solve all of the problems connected with this course, nor is it expected to do so. The first step toward dealing with the challenges and the frustrations posed by this course must be the realization by the instructor that the survey of Western Civilization must be more than a certain number of hours needed to complete his teaching load. He must admit that it presents an opportunity to open new concepts and viewpoints to the students, even those who had a good course in world history in high school. The comparative method is but one of the ways to present a subject which is relevant both to the present and to the future in which the students enrolled in the course will live.