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What is This?

Civilization in a Historical and Global Perspective

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abstract: This article focuses initially on the age-old differ-
ence between civilized and barbarian and the reification of
the term 'civilization', which came into existence only in
1756. The reasons why this neologism arose at the time are
examined, and various definitions of the term are given.
From this beginning in 18th-century Europe, the inquiry goes
in two directions. One explores how societies described
themselves before 1756: that is, what synonyms for civiliz-
ation we encounter in their self-conception; examples relate
to the Roman Empire, China and the Arab world. The second
direction involves the question when, and under what con-
ditions, does 'civilization' get adopted in other, non-western
societies.

keywords: barbarians ✦ civilizations ✦ culture

The term 'civilization' was invented and conceptualized only in the
second half of the 18th century, in France. In *L'Ami des hommes: Traité de
la population* (1756), Mirabeau the elder (father of the famous orator of the
French Revolution) used the modern term 'civilization' to designate a
society in which civil law had replaced military law; that is, a juridical
notion already present in the previous century. He also used it to describe
a group of people who were polished, refined and mannered, as well as
virtuous in their social existence.

Let me hazard an initial short list of characteristics; in fact we can grasp
the concept of civilization and thus the challenge it represents only in
terms of historical development. Police is one. It is essential to the notion
of civilization, as noted by Mirabeau in his stress on civil law. It entails
the subjugation of force and violence to public legality. This development
is a precondition of expanding trade and commerce, which requires a

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stable government and the protection of property rights. Cities, too, are essential for sustained commerce. In these cities, the cultivation of manners – civility – is facilitated. Norbert Elias (1978) has shown us one example of how the civilizing process occurred in early modern Europe, moving from the courts to the cities, and from the nobility to the bourgeoisie. In the civilizing process, women play an increasingly important role, and one measure of civilization is alleged by some thinkers, such as James Mill, to be the position and treatment of women in the society. And lastly there is, in the original formulation by Mirabeau, an assertion that religion was 'the principal source' of civilization, because of its softening of manners (Starobinski, 1993: 3).

Clearly, much has still been left out. The fact is that civilization is a deed, a movement, a process. It is necessarily always changing (sometimes regressing). Human consciousness, as I am arguing, became fully aware of its past in this regard only in the 18th century, mainly in Western Europe, and especially in France; thus the *concept* of civilization was formulated for the first time. Quickly after its introduction in 1756, the term's usage spread, though unevenly. And almost as quickly the problem arose of civilization being viewed as a universal, substantive form of secular perfectibility, based on the growth of reason (and thus on the European model, obviously thereby embodying a normative judgment), as the goal of all societies, *or* of its being recognized as a plural – civilizations – as a condition achieved by many different societies in different ways.

The word 'civilization' comes forth at roughly the same time as most of the other terms in social science make their appearance (in fact, the term 'social science' itself is first used around 1789). The idea arises in an efflorescence of modern, western reflection on the bonds that hold peoples together – or apart. For as the pace of change increases, just before the French and Industrial Revolutions, accompanied by an increasing consciousness, reflection on the different forms and stages of 'connections' linking humans together – or fraying and breaking – becomes obsessive (Mazlish, 1989).

In short, the emergence of the concept 'civilization' is overdetermined. For example, civilization is preceded by the concept of 'society', which itself emerges in the late 17th century. At that time, western man and woman realize that their society is not unique, but is only one among many, and will itself change shape over time (by the 19th century, Carlyle will coin the term 'industrial society' as the successor to 'feudal society'). Moreover, the new awareness carries with it the realization that society is created by humans, not gods, and that it can be consciously changed by human reason (although others see it as changed by unconscious, organic forces). By the 18th century, the notions of civil society, the public sphere and public opinion join that of society and take center stage. Earlier

notions of civility melt into the notion of sociability, and this is attached to the idea of democracy. Work in biology, with Buffon and culminating in Lamarck, provides an 'evolutionary' context (though pre-Darwinian) to the notion of secular perfectibility. Progress, whether by reform or revolution, is a keyword of the period. And lastly, I would argue, the concept should be seen as part of the battle of the ancients and the moderns, with even the Greeks now seen as 'savage', lacking in both the material and moral aspects of 'civilization'.

Now, we must note that the modern concept 'culture' arises a short while later in reaction to 'civilization'. Specifically, civilization comes to mean for many people the cold, calculating, mechanical and universalizing way of thinking embodied, supposedly, in the Enlightenment and in revolutionary France. Culture, on the other hand, as enunciated by the German philosopher Herder, in the 1780s, is seen as rooted in the blood, land and unique history of a particular people: the *Volk*. Between *Volk* and humankind a gulf is opened up, made specific with the invasion of the German states by the French revolutionary armies. On this account, civilization is merely material, while culture is mainly mental and moral, and as much about the individual's development as that of his or her society's. Though, in practice, often used as synonyms, the two concepts are just as often freighted with different meanings.

After the term 'civilization' is invented, when and under what conditions did it get adopted in other, non-western societies? Or even in other parts of the West? This process was clearly facilitated by western civilization seeking to define itself by excavating other civilizations, and recognizing them as earlier counterparts (though generally seen as inferior). Thus, diggings in Egypt and the discovery and translation of the Rosetta Stone in the 1790s uncovered a flourishing predecessor, whose ruins reminded the Europeans of the fleeting nature of power and civility. Here was found a whole civilization, manifesting itself in a distinctive art, religion, structure of authority and social system. Here, too, was found what we now recognize as the first alphabetic writing, dating to between 1900 and 1800 BC, one of the foundations of civilization itself.

Other ancient civilizations – the term now being used in the plural – came to stand beside the Egyptian. Mesopotamian, Babylonian and Assyrian, along with the Chinese and Indian, and then the Mayan and Aztec, took their place in the storyline of humanity's ascent to civilization in the singular. Although the term 'archeology' was not coined until 1856, its practice was already widespread; it embodies a European/imperialist exploration and excavation of 'others' in the effort to understand Europe's own self-image.

What about the European application of the term 'civilization' to earlier parts of western and non-western history itself? For example, Gibbon

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wrote about the 'Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire', not 'Roman Civilization'; when does that terminology, later enshrined in courses on Roman civilization, arise and become widespread? It is clear that by the early and mid-19th century in the West, the term had come into general use. James Mill, utilitarian philosopher and statesman, wrote of a 'particular stage of civilization' among the Chinese as early as 1809, and spoke of the 'true state of the Hindus in the scale of civilization' in his *History of British India* (Mill, 1806–16). His son John Stuart Mill commented on the topic of civilization in the 1830s. The Frenchman Guizot lectured and published his *Histoire de la civilisation en Europe* in 1828. Numerous other examples could be cited. What they all show is that other civilizations were to be measured (and found wanting) on the scale of the 'advanced' western example, and that 'civilization' was frequently juxtaposed with what was considered an inferior 'culture'.

What was the situation in these 'inferior' societies? Outside the West, the term 'civilization' was quickly adopted by nations wishing to 'modernize'. Thus, shortly after Perry's ships opened up Japan to western commerce and ideas, the word *bunmei* appeared. It has persisted, and, in the form of *hikaku bunmeiron* (the comparative theory of civilization), occupies Japanese scholars till this day. Thus, a major panel at the 1991 conference in Japan of the Social and Economic History Society devoted itself entirely to trying to define Japan as a civilization. Haunting the discussion, we are told, was 'a desire to escape from the Eurocentric worldview which has dominated the study of history since the 18th century'. The reason why this effort is so important is that, as one ethnologist informs us, 'if there is one concept that has a privileged place in the ethnocentric images through which Western peoples see themselves in relation to others, it is the concept of civilization' (Morris-Suzuki, 1993: 527–8, 531). Civilization, in short, is not a neutral term, but comes bearing value-laden meanings.

It also comes bearing a challenge. How do other cultures and societies, with their own claims to being 'civilized', respond? In what manner do they adapt, adopt, or reject? Again, the example of Japan is especially illuminating. Different elements in the society, of course, responded differently to Perry's ships in 1853. Some wished to close the doors, both materially and spiritually. Others recognized that material rejection was impossible, if Japan wished to survive as an independent nation. Consequently, there emerged the juxtaposition of 'Eastern morality and Western technology', as one conservative put it: claiming that while the West might be superior in science and technology, the East excels in its ethical teachings (Takeo, 1983: 134). Still others saw that a spiritual, or cultural, revolution was as necessary as a scientific one. Thus, in the Meiji period, some of the key figures in the government went to Europe to learn and returned home imbued with the idea that the only way Japan could keep

its independence *and* take its rightful role in history was fully to embrace western civilization. Theirs was a reverse 'missionary' expedition.

They undertook their task in the name of *keimo*, or Enlightenment. In their own terms, I would argue, they sought to repeat the early experience of European modernity, waging the same battle for a rejection of the binding authority of tradition and taking as their definition of civilization the Kantian notion of critique; as one scholar, Fukuzawa Yukichi, put it, 'Doubts generated from within oneself.' In more positive terms, they believed that by reason they could change the structure of society itself (Daikichi, 1985: 59, 61; see also Blacker, 1964). Repudiating their past as 'barbaric', they also sought to locate their own place in a larger pattern of history: the history of civilization. In doing so, they emphasized educational reforms, the abolition of feudal society and its ranks, and the need to involve all strata of society in the leap to 'civilization'. To a large extent, the result of their efforts was that a small island, with a limited population, was launched on a path that would bring it in the 20th century to a position of being the world's second or third most powerful entity, certainly in economic terms.

It is noteworthy that one contemporary Japanese scholar remarks about Guizot that 'what he calls the "natural" meaning of "world" civilization is thus nothing "natural" but is constructed in his discursive act of excluding Asia from the category of civilization'. In the end, the particular way in which the Japanese achieved what I would like to call their 'asciviliz-ation' appears unique, though characterized by ubiquitous features. (The prefix 'as', incidentally, is related to the Latin 'ac' and 'ad', signifying 'toward' or 'goal of an implied action'.) Only in the light of a 'comparative theory of civilization', to use the words of another present-day Japanese scholar, can we tell exactly how unique that process has been.[1]

Meanwhile, if we return to the western usage, we should note that the concept of civilization takes on special features, or exaggerations of existing ones, as the 19th century wears on. It is the thesis of Michael Adas that while the emphasis on spiritual, or religious, superiority in the western usage continues, it is gradually overtaken by an emphasis on scientific and technological supremacy. His book title reflects the change: *Machines as the Measure of Men* (Adas, 1989). Now one is civilized not only in terms of the elder Mirabeau's original definition, but according to the level of one's material and techno-economic strength. The West's primacy in this regard is made manifest in its imperialistic reach to the far corners of the globe.

What is especially interesting to note is that while externally western civilization is conquering everywhere, internally it is itself undergoing a crisis of doubt. Such doubt had been manifested at the very birth of the concept of civilization in the 18th century. At that time, Rousseau (who

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is himself anticipated by Montaigne) had attacked the moral underpinnings of the notion from within, condemning what he saw as the artificiality and corruption of supposedly civilized French society. He did so in the name of an alternate morality, extolling the primitive. In a reversal of values, he accused Mirabeau's vaunted civilization of being, in fact, a new form of barbarism. A decade or so later, Charles Fourier advanced similar criticisms.

The proponents of civilization, however, pushed such views to the margins in the course of the next half-century and more. Nevertheless, these views lingered on, to emerge in new form at the end of the 19th century. As the 19th century ends, Sigmund Freud descends into the underground caverns of the mind, showing how thin is the veneer of civilization covering the human being's vaunted rationality.

It is in this same late 19th century that civilization's twin term, 'culture', takes on a new life. It moves in two directions. One is toward 'higher culture', the lofty life of the mind advocated by Matthew Arnold. The other is toward the anthropologist's conception: Edward B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* is published in 1871. This latter conception (though Tylor himself uses culture and civilization as synonyms) tends to view things holistically – it characterizes the whole of 'simple' societies, supposedly unified around a core of common values and rituals – and is contrasted with the complexity and complications of modern society – fragmented, disorienting and alienating. To understand the latter, the discipline of sociology comes into play, exemplified at first by works such as Tonnies' *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1887), positing a sharp divide between the organic and the mechanical, the traditional and the modern.

Aside from simply alluding to the developments sketched in the preceding paragraphs, I say nothing more about them here. Much scholarship has been expended on them; but for our purposes, we need only note the existence of these developments, as necessary background for our own further exploration in rethinking civilizational analysis. As can readily be seen, the latter topic – civilizational analysis – itself is an enormous one that can, and must, fly off into many directions. Civilization is a capacious term, covering many social attributes and referring at the same time to a very complicated form of social bonding. Our effort is, therefore, at this time only to project a map on which a few lines leading to further research and analysis can be shown.

We need, in the end, to be aware that civilization is only one concept among many to express the way humans seek social connections. Unlike, for example, a comparable term, 'nation-state', civilization is not represented in international institutions, does not, for example, send up rockets, and is not to be construed in terms of world systems (this statement is true even if we think of civilization in the plural – civilizations).

It is nations, not civilizations, that have votes in the UN, and act or inter-act daily with other nations, maintain armies and arrange cultural exchanges.

This is not to underestimate the extreme importance of civilization as a concept. As I have tried to show, it has a universal aspect, in the sense that all peoples, more or less, have regarded themselves as more 'civil-ized' than the 'barbarians' outside the city wall. Centuries had to elapse before human consciousness rose to the concept itself, a major effort of self-reflectivity that embodied many centuries, in many places, and only came to fruition a few hundred years ago. At that time, it claimed a differ-ent sort of universality – as being the latest stage in historical develop-ment, parochially identified with the European – but then immediately to be challenged by a relativism born from within its own civilization. Once in place, the concept can then be extended anachronistically back in time and to other places, leaving us with a research project as to how this actu-ally occurred. And carrying with it the task for all peoples, including the western ones, of what I have called 'ascivilization'.

I am aware that all of the assertions made above are debatable. A dia-logue is, indeed, called for. In discussing these matters, we must remem-ber that the term 'civilization', with its modern connotations, was coined as noted in the late 18th century, along with most of the other terms used in contemporary social science. All of these terms, though especially 'civilization' and 'culture', need to be re-examined both for their suit-ability to non-western parts of the globe (and also to the West itself), and for their continued usefulness in regard to a world undergoing a process of globalization in a new, global epoch.

Note

1. The quotation about Guizot is from Rumi Sakamoto (1996: 117); the second quote is from Morris-Suzuki (1993: 529). In coining the term 'ascivilization', I am aware that, while it resounds with the notion of assimilation, it differs from acculturation, which carries with it the notion of process in its ending 'tion'. The same is not true, unfortunately, for 'ascivilization', which already has the 'tion' as part of itself originally and thus may not imply process.

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