The Nature of Civilization

Peter Stearns, World Civilizations

Unlike an agricultural society, which can be rather precisely defined, civilization is a more subjective construct. Some scholars prefer to define civilizations only as societies with enough economic surplus to form divisions of labor and a social hierarchy involving significant inequalities. This is a very inclusive definition and under it most agricultural societies and even some groups like North American Indians who combined farming with hunting would be drawn in. Others, however, press the concepts of civilization further, arguing, for example, that a chief difference between civilizations and other societies (whether hunting or agricultural) involves the emergence of formal political organizations, or states, as opposed to dependence on family or tribal ties. Most civilizations produce political units capable of ruling large regions and some, of course, characteristically produce huge kingdoms or empires.

The word civilization itself comes from the Latin term for city, and in truth most civilizations do depend on the existence of significant cities. In agricultural civilizations, most people do not live in cities. But, cities are crucial because they amass wealth and power, they allow the rapid exchange of ideas among relatively large numbers of people, thereby encouraging intellectual thought and artistic expression, and they promote specialization in manufacturing and trade.

Most civilizations developed writing, starting with the emergence of cuneiform (writing based on wedge-like characters) in the Middle East around 3500 B.C.E. Societies that employ writing can organize more elaborate political structures because of their ability to send messages and keep records. They can tax more efficiently and make contracts and treaties. Societies with writing also generate a more explicit intellectual climate because of their ability to record data and build on past, written wisdom. (One of the early written records from the Middle East is a recipe for making beer—a science of a sort.) Some experts argue that the very fact of becoming literate changes the way people think, encouraging them to consider the world as a place that can be understood by organized human inquiry, or "rationally," and less by a host of spiritual beliefs. In all agricultural civilizations—that is, in all human history until less than 200 years ago—only a minority of people were literate, and usually that was a small minority. Nonetheless, the existence of writing did make a difference in such societies.

Since civilizations employ writing and are by definition unusually well organized, it is not surprising that almost all recorded history is about what has happened to civilized societies. We simply know the most about such societies, and we often are particularly impressed by what they produce in the way of great art or powerful rulers. It is also true that civilizations tend to be far more populous than non-civilized societies. Therefore, the history of civilization generally covers the history of most people. But, the history of civilization does not include everybody. No hunting or nomadic peoples could generate a civilization—they lacked the stability and resources, and, with the exception of a limited number of signs and symbols, they never developed writing, unless it came from the outside. Furthermore, some agricultural peoples did not develop a full civilization, if our definition of civilization goes beyond the simple acquisition of economic surplus to formal states, cities, and writing. Portions of West Africa, fully agricultural and capable of impressive art, have long lacked writing, major cities, or more than loose regional government.

People in civilizations, particularly during the long centuries when they were surrounded by non-civilized peoples, characteristically looked down on any society lacking in civilization. The ancient Greeks coined the word "barbarian" to describe such cases indeed; they were prone to regard all non-Greeks as barbarians. As a result of labels like this, it is easy to think of much
human history as divided between civilizations and primitive nomads.

Such a distinction is incorrect, however, and it does not follow from the real historical meaning of civilization. In the first place, like agriculture, civilization brings losses as well as gains. As Catal Huyuk moved toward civilization, distinctions based on social class and wealth increased. Civilizations often have firmer class or caste divisions, including slavery, than do "simpler" societies. They also often promote greater separation between the rulers and ruled, monarchs and subjects. Frequently, they are quite warlike, and there is greater inequality between men and women than in "non-civilized" societies. With civilization, more fully patriarchal structures emerged. In cities, male superiority was even clearer than in agriculture, as men did most of the manufacturing and assumed political and religious leadership, thus relegating women to subordinate roles. "Civilization," then, is not a synonym for "good." By the same token, non-civilized societies may be exceptionally well regulated and have interesting, important cultures. Many non-civilized societies, in fact, have more regulations-in part, because they depend on rules transmitted by word of mouth than civilized societies. Some of the societies most eager to repress anger and aggression in human dealings, such as Zuni Indians in the American Southwest, are non-civilized. Although some non-civilized societies treat old people cruelly, others display more respect and veneration toward elders than most civilizations do. In other words, non-civilized societies are not all alike. They are not characteristically populated with cannibals and warmongers, but rather are often shocked by the doings of civilized peoples. For example American Indians were appalled at the insistence of European settlers on spanking their children, a behavior they regarded as vicious and unnecessary. A fascinating, although probably unanswerable, question involves determining whether or not the civilization form has left more or less good in its wake.

The development of civilization continued the process of technological change and political organization, of increasingly elaborate artistic and intellectual forms. It is in this context that the term has real meaning and in which it legitimately commands the attention of most historians.

**Human-Environment Interaction**

Civilizations also increased human impact on the environment. For example, the first center of copper production in Europe, along the Danube valley, led to such deforestation that the fuel supply was destroyed, and the industry collapsed after about 3000 B.C.E. The extensive agriculture needed to support Indus river cities opened the land to erosion and flooding because of overuse of the soil and removal of trees.

Having started in 3500 B.C.E., civilization developed in its four initial centers—the Middle East, Egypt, northwestern India, and northern China—over the following 2500 years. These areas covered only a tiny portion of the inhabited parts of the world, although they were the most densely populated. Such early civilizations, all clustered in key river valleys, were in a way pilot tests of the new form of social organization. Only after about 1000 B.C.E. did a more consistent process of development and spread of civilization begin—and with it, came the main threads of world history. However, the great civilizations unquestionably built on the achievements of the river valley pioneers, and so some understanding of this contribution to the list of early human accomplishments is essential.

**In Depth: The Idea of Civilization in World Historical Perspective**

The belief that there are fundamental differences between civilized and "barbaric" or "savage" peoples is very ancient and widespread. For thousands of years the Chinese set themselves off
from cattle and sheep herding peoples of the vast plains to the north and west of China proper, whom they saw as barbarians. To the Chinese, being civilized was cultural, not biological or racial. If barbarians learned the Chinese language and adopted Chinese ways from the clothes they wore to the food they ate—they were regarded as civilized.

A similar pattern of demarcation and cultural absorption was found among the American Indian peoples of present day Mexico. Those who settled in the valleys of the mountainous interior, where they built great civilizations lived in fear of invasions by peoples they regarded as barbarous and called *chichimecs*, meaning "sons of the dog." The latter were nomadic hunters and gatherers who periodically moved down from the desert regions of north Mexico into the fertile central valleys in search of game and settlements to pillage. The Aztecs were simply the last and perhaps most fierce of a long line of *chichimec* peoples who entered the valleys and conquered the urban-based empires that had developed there. But after the conquerors settled down, they adopted many of the religious beliefs and institutional patterns and much of the material culture of defeated peoples.

The word *civilization* is derived from the Latin: word *civilis* meaning "of the citizens." The term was coined by the Romans. They used it to distinguish between themselves as citizens of a cosmopolitan, urban-based civilization and the "inferior" peoples who lived in the forests and deserts on the fringes of their Mediterranean empire. Centuries earlier, the Greeks, who had contributed much to the rise of Roman civilization, made a similar distinction between themselves and outsiders. Because the languages of the non-Greek, peoples to the north of the Greek heartlands sounded like senseless babble to the Greeks, they lumped all the outsiders together as *barbarian* which meant "those who cannot speak Greek." As in the case of the Chinese and Aztecs, the boundaries between civilized and barbarian for the Greeks and Romans were cultural, not biological. Regardless of the color of one's skin or the shape of one's nose, it was possible for free people to become members of a Greek *polis* (city-state) or to become, Roman citizens by adopting Greek or Roman customs and swearing allegiance to the polis or the emperor.

Until the 17th and 18th centuries C.E., the priority given to cultural attributes (language, dress manners) as, the means by which civilized peoples set themselves off from barbaric ones was rarely challenged. But in those centuries, two major changes occurred among thinkers in western Europe. First, efforts were made not only to define the differences between civilized and barbarian but to identify a series of stages in human development that ranged from the lowest savagery to the highest civilization. Depending on the writer in question, candidates for civilization ranged from Greece and Rome to (not surprisingly Europe of the 17th and 18th centuries.) Most of the other peoples of the globe, whose discovery since the 15th century had prompted the efforts to classify them in the first place, were ranked in increasingly complex hierarchies. Peoples such as the Chinese and the Arabs, who had created great cities, monumental architecture, writing, advanced technology and large empires, usually won a place along with the Europeans near the top of these ladders of human achievement. Nomadic, cattle and sheep herding, peoples, such as the Mongols of Central Asia, usually were classified as barbarians. Civilized and barbarian peoples were pitted against various sorts of *savages*. These - ranged from the hunters and gatherers who inhabited much of North America and Australia to many peoples in Africa and Asia, whom the Europeans believed had not advanced beyond the most primitive stages of social and political development.

The second major shift in Western ideas about civilization began at the end of the 18th century but did not really take hold until a century later. In keeping with a growing emphasis in
European thinking and social interaction on racial or biological differences, modes of human social organization and cultural expression were increasingly linked to what were alleged to be the innate capacities of each human race. Although no one could agree on what a race was or how many races there were, most European writers argued that some races were more inventive, moral, courageous, and artistic—thus more capable of building civilizations than others. Of course, white (or Caucasian) Europeans were considered by white European authors to be the most capable of all. The hierarchy from savage to civilized took on a color dimension, with white at the top, where the civilized peoples clustered to yellow, red, brown, and black in descending order.

Some authors sought to reserve all the attainments of civilization for whites, or peoples of European stock. As the evolutionary theories of thinkers such as Charles Darwin came into vogue in the late 1800s, race and level of cultural development were seen in the perspective of thousands of years of human change and adaptation rather than as being fixed in time. Nevertheless, this new perspective had little effect on the ranking of different human groups. Civilized whites were simply seen as having evolved much further than backward and barbaric peoples. The perceived correspondence between race and level of development and the hardening of the boundaries between civilized and "inferior" peoples affected much more than intellectual discourse about the nature and history of human society. These beliefs were used to justify European imperialist expansion, which was seen as a "civilizing mission" aimed at uplifting barbaric and savage peoples across the globe. In the last half of the 19th century virtually all non-Western peoples came to be dominated by the Europeans, who were confident that they, as representatives of the highest civilization ever created, were best equipped to govern lesser breeds of humans.

In the 20th century much of the intellectual baggage that once gave credibility to the racially embedded hierarchies of civilized and savage peoples has been discarded. Racist thinking has been discredited by 20th century developments, including the revolt of the colonized, peoples and the crimes committed by the Nazis before and during World War II in the name of racial purification. In addition, these ideas have failed because racial supremacists cannot provide convincing proof of innate differences in mental and physical aptitude between various human groups. These trends, as well as research that has resulted in a much more sophisticated understanding of evolution, have led to the abandonment of rigid and self-servings 19th century ideas about civilization. Yet even though non-European people, such as the Indian and Chinese, are increasingly given credit for their civilized attainments much ethnocentrism remains in the ways social theorists determine who is civilized and who is not.

Perhaps the best way to avoid the tendency to define the term with reference to one's own society is to view civilization as one of several human approaches to social organization rather than attempting to identify specific kinds of cultural achievement (writing cities, monumental architecture). All peoples, from small bands of hunters and gatherers to farmers and factory workers, live in societies. All societies produce cultures: combinations of the ideas, objects, and patterns of behavior that result from human social interaction. But not all societies and cultures generate the surplus production that permits the levels of specialization, scale and complexity that distinguish civilizations from other modes of social organization. All peoples are intrinsically capable of building civilizations, but many have lacked the resource base, historical circumstance or desire to do so.
Nature of Civilizations - Questions:
In which historical context(s) does the term “civilization” have meaning?
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Where does the word come from?
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Why are cities important?
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According to the Greeks, who were the barbarians?
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What are some negatives about civilization?
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Should we, as modern scholars of history, use the term civilization? If not, what other terms might be better?

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According to the Chinese, who were the barbarians? How could you stop being a barbarian?

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What did it mean to be “civilized” if you were Roman?

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How did European of the 17th and 18th centuries define civilized?

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What role did Charles Darwin play in defining civilization for the Europeans?
What factors discredited racist thinking when trying to define civilization?

Why is the word “society” probably a better term than “civilization” when trying to define a culture?