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ANTICIVILIZATION

GORDON W. HEWES
FEBRUARY 22, 1982

FROM THE EDITORS:

When the poet Keats sang that he had traveled in realms of gold, perhaps he meant the feeling of joy that bursts through when we discover (or rediscover) a real treasure. And what could be more of a real treasure than an old manuscript written by a friend now gone?

As Prof. Matt Melko – our former IS CSC president and noted scholar of comparative civilizations – was leafing through the archives one day recently, he came across a wonderful essay by the late Gordon W. Hewes. Dr. Hewes, an anthropologist from the University of Colorado, was an active participant of the organization since its founding. He always attended meetings, giving excellent and insightful papers. He and his wife also bequeathed an Endowment Fund for the publication of this journal and that fact can be found on the inside front cover of every edition printed in recent years.

The editors were so thrilled by the discovery of “Anticivilization” – an essay written in February of 1982 – that it was decided to run it in this issue as the inaugural essay for a new series of outstanding papers which have illuminated fundamental aspects of the ever-evolving discipline of comparative civilizations.

The cultural stance of those societies which seem to have erected barriers against absorption into civilization I shall call “anticivilizational”. It can be distinguished from cultural mechanisms developed to maintain ethnic distinctiveness, since groups can remain ethnically distinctive without resisting civilization, or dropping out of it. The adoption of civilization, when the opportunity exists, by some previously non-civilized population, is neither automatic nor inevitable, even when the price for entering civilization is not high. “Failure” to advance from what used to be called savagery or barbarism to the civilized state, when conditions would permit it, may be seen in many cases as the outcome of deliberate, rational, informed collective choices, exercised over generations or centuries.

To limit the length of this paper, I shall simply accept the convenient, if somewhat unsatisfactory, criteria for civilization first advanced by the archaeologist V. Gordon Childe. Archaeologists, at least, are seldom in much doubt about whether to assign given cultural remains to civilized or uncivilized systems.

Many of the issues involved here have already been raised and discussed at length by Fredrik Barth and his collaborators in *Ethnic Groups*

and Boundaries, 1969, although without the specific focus of “anticivilization” to be pursued here. Acceptance of the features of civilized life has seldom been instantaneous, even in those cases where it has been symbolized by a ceremonial mass-conversion, as of King Clovis and his Frankish warriors, or submission to the Holy See, as by King Stephen I of Hungary, or by the formal breaking of tabus, followed soon by Christianization, in the Hawaii of Kamehameha II.

Usually the process is protracted, with only portions of a population making the change from uncivilized to civilized life over several generations. In any event, we cannot fairly speak of “anticivilization” where a group has had no practical opportunity to adopt it, owing to extreme geographical isolation, or conditions for submission so intolerably oppressive that most rational individuals would prefer to continue living marginally as “savages” or “barbarians”. Nor does it make sense to describe any group as having an “anticivilizational” stance because it failed to develop a pristine civilization on its own. The culture-historical frequency of pristine civilizations is so low, and so dependent on peculiar convergences of ecological, socio-political, and ideological factors, that we may assume that at the present level of human biological capacities, a previously uncivilized society will not become a civilized one unless it comes into fairly close contact with another civilization already in being. Independent invention of civilization is an exceedingly rare phenomenon, of which we have record of less than three or four confirmed instances in the entire human past.

The best examples of anticivilization are those in which non-civilized groups are found to be living in immediate geographical proximity to long civilized neighboring communities, in regular trade and other contact, and where it would seem to be to the advantage of the civilized population, at least, to annex or absorb the uncivilized group. Such circumstances prevail, or have prevailed until the very recent past, in a significant part of Southeast Asia, in a belt of mostly hilly to mountainous country extending from Assam and northern Burma, into South China, and southward into Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. In parts of this wide zone, there are villages of uncivilized “tribal” peoples literally overlooking the villages and fields of civilized valley-dwellers at distances of only a few kilometers, in easy and convenient walking distance. Southeast Asia is by no means the only area where this situation can be observed, and I shall mention several others below.

I do not wish to suggest that the origin and maintenance of anticivilization requires a conscious cost-benefit analysis, regularly reviewed,

on the part of those who choose to remain uncivilized. It is enough that various kinds of cultural beliefs, formal and informal institutions, and a body of effective public opinion, oral history, and the like, may combine to induce a community to continue to remain uncivilized. Historically, when an uncivilized population is sufficiently large, already able to establish a state, or a powerful confederacy of tribes, and has the wherewithal to sustain itself economically, and exercise strong military power, it may become civilized on its own terms, so to speak – that is, preserving its own religious system, and ethnic distinctiveness. I believe variants of this scenario have taken place in Central Asia during the past 2,500 years or so, but rarely elsewhere. In the end, to be sure, even the most successful Central Asian pastoral nomadic polities succumbed religiously either to Islam or to Buddhism. Their far western offshoots, in Hungary, became Christians, as did the Bulgars.

When the uncivilized have come as conquerors, the outcome tends to be predictable, as Ibn Khaldun long ago observed with respect to the nomadic tribes which took over political control in areas of settled agriculture and city life in North Africa. The history of the Turkic peoples is almost a classic case. The Germanic migrations and conquests present a similar story, although the picture tends to be more blurred owing to the fact that the Germans were (despite Tacitus's warped account) long-established village farmers.

In the contacts between the uncivilized and the civilized, some important changes have taken place, and not only in the obvious technological and administrative aspects of such interactions. The earlier colonial conquerors did not seek to "uplift" their new subjects, religiously or otherwise. It was enough that they paid tribute, exhibited proper deference to their new overlords, and supplied slaves, useful goods, raw materials, or mercenary troops, and administrative posts for bureaucrats. The Christians and Buddhists introduced the notion of converting people to the true religion, and the Muslims were especially driven by a world-proselytizing mission. Nineteenth century Christian missionaries went even further in seeking to impose not only their faith, but much more of their civilization – from wearing proper European clothing to cricket, and other signs of thorough conversion, including the acceptance of Western medical procedures, schooling, and the rest. Conceivably, these additional civilizing aims in some cases may have made the prospect of becoming civilized even less attractive than in the days of simple colonial subjugation, since the new model for becoming civilized meant an almost total destruction of the indigenous value-sys-

tem.

There is no space here to go into great detail about even a few good cases of the anticivilizational stance. I can little more than mention some of the best instances. In North America, such groups as the Florida Seminole, the Mexican Kickapoo, and the Lacandones of southern Mexico, come to mind. South America has many such groups, such as the Guajiro, the Jivaro, the Motilonos, and the Bush Negroes of Surinam. Europe's anti-civilizationists are less clear-cut. The Gypsies are a special case. The Lapps may be a questionable instance, since their position vis-a-vis Scandinavian civilization has certainly not been systematically oppositional. The Vlachs of Southeastern Europe may simply be marginal and impoverished.

Asia, with its long history of established civilizations, has a long list of anticivilizational hold-outs, from such groups as the Kalesh Kafirs, numerous Indian hill and forest tribes, the wide belt of anticivilizational resistance in the Southeast, the Taiwan aborigines, and in northern Japan, the Ainu. Opportunity for the Ainu and their ancestors to become assimilated into Japanese civilization has been present for a millennium at least. Only in the late 19th and 20th century has the circle finally closed in on them in Hokkaido. Whether or not the numerous Bedouin and intransigent Berber-speaking tribes in North Africa represent good examples of anticivilization might be debated. These peoples have accepted Islam, though often in less than orthodox ways. There are similar problems with respect to several pastoral enclaves in the Middle Eastern parts of Asia, where civilization has its deepest roots, and yet where there are still to this day non-literate, non-urban nomads living in close proximity to areas where civilization has existed for nearly five millennia.

Only when we contemplate the persistent rejectionism of groups like the Dukhobors, now mainly settled in British Columbia, do we find a determined repudiation of the state, and a positive valuation of illiteracy. Most "cultist" rejection, whether in the modern Western world, or among such large groups as the followers of the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, does not go so far as to abolish writing, urbanism, the use of money, the construction or maintenance of monumental buildings, and so on. We cannot, therefore, classify the stance of such groups as the Hasidic Jews, Pentecostal Christians, the Rastafarians of Jamaica, Krishna Consciousness devotees, and so on, as "anticivilizational," since they generally retain the basic features of civilization – just as did the Anabaptists who for a time governed Munster, the followers of

Savonarola, or the Albigensians.

The historic instances of “hermit kingdoms,” likewise, are not examples of anticivilization, however xenophobic they may have been. Tokugawa Japan was certainly highly civilized all during the period of its deliberate national isolation, as was its peninsular neighbor, Korea, from the late 16th century down to the late 19th. Tibet was civilized, according to our basic definition, despite its long effective exclusivity. So, too, was the core region of Ethiopia, and for a long time also, Northern Yemen. On the other hand, one wonders about what the Albanians have been up to. Located on the edge of the Classical Greek world, the area of ancient Epirus which is now Albania seems to have managed a remarkable degree of semi-barbarism for a long time. With the Adriatic coastline, open to influences from Greece, then Rome, the Byzantine Empire, and later from Venice, and the Ottoman Empire, the Albanian hinterland presented until the early 20th century a fairly good facsimile of pre-civilizational barbarism. Evidently continuing to perceive itself as the victim of one oppressive neighbor after another, including the Greeks, South Slavs, and Turks, modern Albania, though presenting the standard attributes of a civilized polity, conveys an image of total xenophobia, even toward countries and cultures with which it briefly enjoyed ideological solidarity. Does the present-day condition of Albania continue to reflect the tribal isolation which characterized all but its Adriatic coastal strip well into the 20th century?

We may find some other disquieting modern exemplars of anti-civilization, or something approaching it. Pol Pot’s short-lived regime in Kampuchea comes to mind, despite the long historical record of Southeast Asian civilization there.