Towards a Composite Definition and Classification of Civilization

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this investigation is to create a composite definition of civilization and its classification. This approach is based on the comparative method of reviewing existing definitions and extracting from them the key attributes, which later are incorporated in a new composite definition. Needless to say, this method is typical for the International Society for the Study of Civilizations, which has been and is still led by the authors cited. Some early definitions of civilizations have been collected by Matthew Melko and are quoted in this paper’s first section.

EARLY DEFINITIONS OF CIVILIZATION

Civilizations have distinctly different settlement patterns from other societies. The word civilization is sometimes defined as “a word that simply means ‘living in cities’” (Standage 2005:25). Non-farmers gather in cities to work and to trade. Compared with other societies, civilizations have a more complex political structure, namely the state. State societies are more stratified than other societies; there is a greater difference among the social classes. The ruling class, normally concentrated in the cities, has control over much of the surplus and exercises its will through the actions of a government, bureaucracy, technocracy, plutocracy, meritocracy, “ad-hoc-cracy,” and military.

The term civilization has been defined and understood in a number of ways in a situation when there is no widely accepted
standard definition. Sometimes it is used synonymously with the term culture. Civilization can also refer to society as a whole. To nineteenth-century English anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor, for example, civilization was "the total social heredity of mankind." In other words, civilization was the totality of human knowledge and culture as represented by the most "advanced" society at a given time.

Some popular definitions of civilizations will be reviewed and compared to find the most important components, which should be a part of a standard/composite definition.

Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975):
- "Civilizations are intelligible fields of historical study... which have greater extension, in both space and time, than national states or city or city-states, or any other political communities." (Toynbee 1935, I: 44-45)
- "Civilizations are institutions of the highest order— institutions, that is, which comprehend without being comprehended." (I: 455)
- New spiritual insights allow for the birth of a new religion and ultimately a new civilization (Toynbee 1935).

Oswald Spengler (1880-1936):
Spengler uses the term civilization to denote the later phase of what he refers to as high or great cultures.
- " Cultures are Organisms, and world history is their collective biography."
- "Culture is the prime phenomenon of all past and future world history." (Spengler 1980, reprint of 1932: 104-105.)
- The Decline of the West... civilizations rise and fall according to a natural and inevitable cycle (Spengler 1980/1932).

Pitirim Sorokin (1889-1968): The first president of the ISCSC (1964-1971) writes:
“...the immense and infinitely diverse universe of the total culture of Egypt or India, the West or China, consisting of many billions of cultural phenomena, is certainly not, and cannot be, integrated into one causal or meaningful-causal system. Assuredly it represents the co-existence of a multitude of cultural systems, of a super-system (not present in eclectic cultures), and congeries that are partly mutually consistent, partly meaningfully indifferent, and partly contradictory. The whole field of all the cultural phenomena of each of these ‘cultures,’ ‘types,’ or ‘civilizations’ is a sort of dumping ground where billions of cultural phenomena are thrown together” (Sorokin 1950: 209).

Alfred L. Kroeber (1876-1960):
Kroeber refuses to distinguish civilizations from other cultures. In the 1957 Style and Civilizations he elaborates: “Like many anthropologists, I use the word civilization almost synonymously with the word culture. At any rate I try to put no weight on the distinction.” Might one observe that Kroeber writes that civilization is culture in a more slanted sense?

Carroll Quigley (1910-1977):
“Civilization is a producing society with an instrument of expansion.” (Quigley 1979: 142). This definition does not mean very much until one understands that an instrument of expansion consists of varying social organizations that combine to satisfy human needs by providing group security, interpersonal power relationships, material wealth, companionship, psychological certainty, and understanding (101). This “temporary” definition adds that a society becomes a civilization only when it has writing and city life, a requirement not repeated in the replacement definition, since Quigley concluded that some producing societies had met
the six needs without necessarily having writing (Andean) or city life (early Western) (142).

**Rushton Coulborn (1904-1968):**

"Civilization, as a new kind of society to which I apply the epithet 'civilized,' began to come into existence from the fifth to the third millennia B.C. in the Old World and in the second millennium B.C. in the New World. I confine the word 'civilization' to the culture of those new, unprecedentedly large societies which then began to emerge and to similar societies which have succeeded them in later millennia. 'Civilizations' and 'civilized societies' are thus distinguished from each other. A 'civilization' is an intellectual construct. It is cultural—a vastly complex and always developing series of human thoughts and feelings, but not of actions, except those very limited actions required to form and express thoughts and feelings" (Coulborn 1966).

The main attributes of early definitions of civilization are depicted in Table 1.
Table 1. Main Attributes of Early Definitions of Civilizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AUTHOR</th>
<th>CIVILIZATION IS</th>
<th>CIVILIZATION IS ALSO</th>
<th>CIVILIZATION IS ALSO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Toynbee</td>
<td>Greater extension in space and time</td>
<td>Highest order</td>
<td>Religion-oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spengler</td>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Prime phenomenon of history</td>
<td>Rising and falling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorokin</td>
<td>Cultural super-system</td>
<td>In city life &amp; writing</td>
<td>Six needs must be satisfied by a civilization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kroeber</td>
<td>Culture</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quigley</td>
<td>Expanding producing society</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coulburn</td>
<td>Civilized society</td>
<td>Unprecedentedly large society</td>
<td>Mental not action-oriented</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In conclusion, the early definitions of civilizations emphasize the following important attributes:
1. A large society in extended space and time
2. Culture-oriented
3. Religion-oriented
4. A rise, flowering and decline.

CONTEMPORARY DEFINITIONS OF CIVILIZATIONS

Matthew Melko, the president of the ISCSC (1983-1986):
1. “Civilizations are large and complex cultures, usually distinguished from simpler cultures by greater control of environment, including the practice of agriculture on a large scale and the domestication of animals" (1969: 8).
2. Melko says also that “civilizations are reifications in the sense that Europe and the Indian Ocean are reifications. There is a plurality of civilizations, some having existed for several thousand years. They vary in size, but many are large, and they have a varying degree of economic and cultural integration. Their boundaries are vague and vary over time, and they often overlap one another. They are remarkably persistent and once established, rarely terminate.”

Melko attributes his above statement to Andre Gunder Frank:

“In reality there are and have been no civilizations, societies, cultures, ethnicities and even states in and of themselves. There are NO essentialist intrinsically self-contained entities. To claim, identify, and to study any such makes NO sense whatever and only beclouds reality. There are only connections and relations within and among such alleged civilizations” (Andre Gunder Frank, 2001, quoted online by David Richardson).

3. “A civilization is a large society possessing a degree of autonomy and internal integration, an agricultural economy, religion, stratification, warfare, and usually cities and writing, or some other method of keeping long-term records, as well as central government at least at a regional or urban level” (Melko, Unpublished, 2007).

Lee Daniel Snyder, the president of the ISCSC (2004-2007):

Snyder uses the term “culture-system” approximately as others use civilization. He writes: “A Culture-System is a complex cooperative community of human beings in
a continuous process of 1) preserving its integrity and the integrity of its shared behavior patterns against internal disintegration (fragmentation) and external attack and 2) adapting its structures to changing historical circumstances” (Snyder 1999: 50).

David Wilkinson:
“A civilization” is “a city-state, cities-state, or tightly linked politico-military network of such states that are not a part of a larger such network” (provided for this review).

John Hord:
“Civilization (generic definition): The presence of a formal knowledge system, together with the people subscribing to it.”
“Civilization (individual specimen): a formal knowledge system or interacting group thereof, with the people subscribing to it/them, which as a group recognize the same procedures (rules and institutions of change) as valid and binding” (Hord 1992).

William McGaughey:
A civilization is a type of human community or society that has achieved a certain level of culture. It is contrasted with primitive communities lacking this culture. The culture must be comparatively advanced or developed. It would include large-scale political organization and sophisticated expression in a medium such as writing. The term “advanced” implies (perhaps wrongly) that the culture is superior to others. He emphasizes the role of communication in cultural advancement as follows (McGaughey 2000):
Table 2: McGaughey Taxonomy of Civilizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Civilization</th>
<th>Communication Technology</th>
<th>Institution of Power</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Civilization I</td>
<td>ideographic writing</td>
<td>imperial government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilization II</td>
<td>alphabetic writing</td>
<td>world religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilization III</td>
<td>printing</td>
<td>commerce and education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilization IV</td>
<td>electronic recording and broadcasting</td>
<td>media of news and entertainment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilization V</td>
<td>computers</td>
<td>the internet</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Steve Blaha:
“Effective working definition (especially by archaeologists): a grouping of at least several thousand people with a common culture, usually a common language, usually a geographic locale, some significant (usually monumental) buildings and architecture, and a political structure that is not necessarily unified” (Blaha 2002 and provided for this review).

Andrew Bosworth:
“Civilization is fundamentally a cultural infrastructure of information and knowledge that serves survival and continuity. What distinguishes a civilization from a culture is that this infrastructure, having reached a critical level of complexity, becomes autonomous from constituent cities, nations, and empires. In ordinary cultures, the passing of information and knowledge may depend upon imitation or oral communication; in civilizations, this cultural memory,
etched into clay or drawn into papyrus, takes on a life of its own" (2003: 9).

**Laina Farhat-Holzman:**

“A civilization must have a concentration of people in one or more urban areas. It must have (at a minimum) division of labor and specialization (people supported by the community to perform professional specialties), and it must have a surplus of food (wealth) to be used in support of such specializations (army, priesthood, centralized governance). At a maximum, it will have a large area influenced by its specializations (technological, military, artistic, and religious)” (provided for this review).

**Dario Fernandez-Morera:**

“A civilization is indicated by the presence of a city or cities, with constructions that are relatively long-standing, and also relatively long-standing public monuments of a religious or political nature. This would exclude groups of wooden houses forming a village or a group of villages forming an association of villages. That is not a civilization, but a culture of some kind which has not yet reached a civilization stage” (provided for this review).

**Felipe Fernandez-Armesto:**

“A civilization is an area or period distinguished, in the mind of the person using the term, by striking continuities in ways of life and thought and feelings. At a further level, the word ‘civilization’ denotes a process of collective self-differentiation from a world characterized implicitly or explicitly as ‘barbaric’ or ‘savage’ or ‘primitive.’ Societies which have achieved such self-differentiation can be called ‘civilized.’” (Fernandez-Armesto 2001).
Jaroslav Krejci:

Krejci resists giving a definition of civilization, but the following can be implied:

"Civilization ...starts with the division of labor and with the process whereby people become urbanized and literate. When used to designate a species...the term implies a certain advanced level of socio-cultural development. Conventionally, this is associated with the following facts of social life: division of labor, city life, some knowledge of how to make metal tools and, in particular, knowledge of writing. In the word (civilization) there is no particular value judgment except the general acknowledgement that the society itself is generally above the level of so-called ‘primitive societies.’" (Krejci 2004: 8-9).

Andrew Targowski, the president of the ISCSC (2007-present):

A civilization is an info-material structure developed by humans to cope effectively with themselves, nature, and their Creator (God or Big-Bang). It is a vibrant “interface” which differentiates civilized humans from animals and primitive tribes. The model of a civilization recognizes the following elements (dimensions, Figure 1) (Targowski 2004):

- **Human Entity** – organized humans in the pursuit of civilization; it is an existence-driven community,
- **Culture** – a value and symbol-guided continuous process of developing patterned human behaviors, feelings, and reactions, based upon symbols, learning from it and being a product of it. Cultures do not satisfy needs; rather, they demand values and define symbols,
- **Infrastructure** = a technology-driven additive process of acquiring and applying material means.

![Figure 1. A Model of Civilization](image)

The characteristics of the main attributes of contemporary definitions of civilization are provided in Table 2.
Table 2. Main Attributes of Contemporary Definitions of Civilizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AUTHOR</th>
<th>CIVILIZATION IS</th>
<th>CIVILIZATION IS ALSO</th>
<th>CIVILIZATION IS ALSO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Melko</td>
<td>Large society</td>
<td>Autonomous reification</td>
<td>Vague boundaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snyder</td>
<td>Cultural System</td>
<td>Preserving integrity</td>
<td>Adapting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilkinson</td>
<td>Politico-military network</td>
<td>Not a part of a larger such network</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hord</td>
<td>Knowledge system</td>
<td>Interactive group subscribing to the same knowledge system</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McGaughey</td>
<td>Society with advanced culture</td>
<td>Communication-driven</td>
<td>Power-driven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blaha</td>
<td>Minimum several thousand people</td>
<td>Sharing common culture &amp; unified by political structure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural infrastructure of information and knowledge</td>
<td>Aiming to survive &amp; continue</td>
<td>Cultural memory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bosworth</td>
<td>Cultural infrastructure of information and knowledge</td>
<td>Aiming to survive &amp; continue</td>
<td>Cultural memory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farhat-Holzman</td>
<td>Large urban area</td>
<td>Specialized in labor</td>
<td>Wealth accumulating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fernandez-Morera</td>
<td>Cities-oriented</td>
<td>In long-standing constructions</td>
<td>Larger than culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fernandez-Armesto</td>
<td>Distinguished area or period</td>
<td>striking continuities in ways of life and thought and feelings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krejci</td>
<td>In division of labor</td>
<td>Urbanized &amp; literate</td>
<td>Above primitive societies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Targowski</td>
<td>Info-material interface between humans and Creator and nature</td>
<td>Composed of humans, culture &amp; infrastructure</td>
<td>Cycle-driven</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From this review of the *contemporary definitions of civilizations*, one can emphasize these following important attributes:

1) Large society  
   a) Specializing in labor  
   b) Self-differentiating 
   c) Sharing the same knowledge system  

2) Space and Time  
   a) Autonomous blurry reification 
   b) Distinguished and extended area or period of time 
   c) Reification not a part of a larger entity 

3) Cultural system, values and symbols driven  
   a) Communication-driven (e.g.: literate and electronic media) 
   b) Wealth and power driven 
   c) Knowledge system 

4) Infrastructural system, technology-driven by at least one of the following:  
   a) Urban infrastructure 
   b) Agricultural infrastructure 
   c) Other infrastructures (Industrial, Information and so forth) 

5) Cycle-driven  
   a) Rising, growing, declining, and falling over time.
A COMPARISON OF EARLY AND CONTEMPORARY DEFINITIONS OF CIVILIZATIONS

In Table 3 the comparison of the main attributes of early and contemporary definitions is depicted.

Table 3. The Comparison of Early and Contemporary Definitions of Civilizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ATTRIBUTES</th>
<th>EARLY DEFINITIONS</th>
<th>CONTEMPORARY DEFINITIONS</th>
<th>ADDITIONAL CONTEMPORARY DEFINITIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Space &amp; Time</td>
<td>Extended space &amp; time</td>
<td>Autonomous, distinguish, blurry area/network or period</td>
<td>not a part of a larger such network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elements</td>
<td>Large society, culture</td>
<td>Society, culture, infrastructure</td>
<td>Advanced culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main driving idea</td>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Self-differentiation, labor specialization, wealth creation, communication-driven</td>
<td>Sharing the same knowledge system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second driving idea</td>
<td></td>
<td>Urbanized &amp; literate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life-cycle</td>
<td>Rising and falling</td>
<td>Rising and falling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With progress in education and research over the second part of the 20th century, particularly in its last quarter, one can see that contemporary definitions of civilization recognized more elements. This should be expected since similar discoveries and advances take place in physics, medicine, and other scientific disciplines. It is needless to say that at times,
civilization accelerated its own development, triggered, for example, by the Information Wave that followed the Agricultural and Industrial Waves.

TOWARDS A COMPOSITE DEFINITION OF CIVILIZATION - 2008

Perhaps it is the time to combine early and contemporary definitions of civilizations by emphasizing these following important attributes:

1) Large society
   a. Specializing in labor
   b. Self-differentiating
   c. Sharing the same knowledge system

2) Space and Time
   a. Autonomous blurry reification
   b. Distinguished and extended area or period of time
   c. Reification not a part of a larger entity

3) Cultural system, values and symbols driven
   a. Communication-driven (e.g.: literate and electronic media)
   b. Religion, wealth and power-driven

4) Infrastructural system, technology-driven by first at least one of the following:
   a. Urban infrastructure
   b. Agricultural infrastructure
   c. Other infrastructures (Industrial, Information and so forth)

5) Cycle-driven
   a. Rising, growing, declining, and falling over time.
Based on these attributes, a composite definition of civilization is as follows:

Civilization is a large society living in an autonomous, blurry reification (invisible-visible) which is not a part of larger one and exists over an extended period of time. Labor is specialized and a civilization is differentiated from other civilizations by the development of its own advanced cultural system driven by communication, religion, wealth, power, and the sharing of the same knowledge system within complex urban, agricultural infrastructures, and other infrastructures such as industrial and information ones. It also progresses in a cycle of rising, growing, declining and falling.

Figure 2. A graphic model of civilization
CLASSIFICATION OF GENERIC CIVILIZATIONS

Civilization can be investigated as one Planetary Civilization, which can be broken into World Civilization, ETI Civilization, or no civilization. From our current level of knowledge, the most visible civilization is the World Civilization, which can be broken into several civilizations as is illustrated in Figure 3 (Targowski 2008). This classification includes also world-systems in order to differentiate them from typical civilizations which, needless to say, are impacted by these world-systems.

Figure 3. The 2008 Classification of Civilizations of the Planet Earth (ETI-Extraterrestrial Intelligence) (Targowski 2008)
Of course, other kinds of civilizations can also be explored, if a certain criterion of classification is applied for some specific reason. For example, one can mention civilizations such as an Imperial Civilization, Post-Imperial Civilization or Manual Civilization; or also, Electronic Civilization, Societal Civilization, Cultural Civilization, Infrastructural Civilization, and so forth.

EXAMPLES OF CONTEMPORARY CIVILIZATIONS

According to Samuel Huntington (1996) the following civilizations exist in the post-1990 world: Western, Latin American, African, Islamic, Sinic, Hindu, Orthodox, Buddhist, and Japanese. A slightly updated set provided by Targowski (2008) contains the following civilizations in the post-2000 world: Western (Western-West, Western-Latin, Western-Central, and Jewish sub-Civilizations), Eastern (Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Bulgaria, Moldavia), Chinese, Japanese, Islamic, Buddhist (Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Tibet, Mongolia, Bhutan, and Nepal), and African.

CONCLUSION

The process of defining “civilization” is continuous in nature and evolves along with the development of civilization (civilizations) and our knowledge and wisdom on the subject.
REFERENCES


**Endnotes**
