One Word Synonyms for "The Comparative Study of Civilizations"

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One of the topics discussed at the 1971 A.A.A.S. planning and organization session on “Crucial Transitions in Civilization” was that of the suitability of various shorter synonyms of the phrase “comparative study of civilizations.” None of the three synonyms proposed on December 29 seemed to command wide acquiescence. Yet the fact remains that, in purely terminological competition with such familiar expressions as “history” and “sociology” or even “historiography” and “sociometrics,” the expression “comparative study of civilizations” seems unwieldy and unlikely to gain colloquial currency in academic circles.

There are various ways to abridge four- or five-word phrases. One is by ellipsis, as in the case of the two-word phrase “comparative civilizations.” And another is by syllabic acronymy, as in the case of the student compound “Comp. Civ.” (analogous, except perhaps for its stress pattern, to the Orwellian compound “Ingsoc” or the Birchite compound “Comsymp”). But neither of these recourses seems likely to prove as attractive to academicians as such one-word disciplinary names as “anthropology” or “philosophy.”

In this brief excursus, therefore, I shall confine myself to single-word terms, constructed from familiar Classical bases by a process of affixation. The bases considered will be the following seven:

1. Latin cī(vi) – “town,” from the Proto-Indo-European root *kei-, “to settle,” as in Hittite keta, Sanskrit çete, and Greek keštai, “is lying down.” From this root, English derives, directly through Anglo-Saxon, the noun home; through Latin, the adjective civil; through French, the noun city; and through Greek, the noun cemetery.

2. Greek histor(i)-, “investigation,” from the Proto-Indo-European stem *(h)ueid-, “to see,” as in Sanskrit vēda, “knowledge,” Greek oîda, “I have seen,” and Latin video, “I see.” From this stem, English derives, directly through Anglo-Saxon, the adjective wise; through Greek, the noun history; and through Latin, the noun vision.

3. Greek pol(i)-, “fortress,” from the Proto-Indo-European stem *pelē-, “to fill,” as in Sanskrit pūr, “city” (whence the contemporary place-name Singa-pore), Greek pimplēmi, “I fill,” and Lithuanian pilis, “castle.” From this stem, English derives, directly through Anglo-Saxon, the noun folk; through Greek, the noun politics; and through Latin, the adjective com-plete.
4. Greek ἰδὲμ(ο)-, “people,” from the Proto-Indo-European stem *dāi-, “to divide,” as in Hittite damais, “foreigner,” Sanskrit dānam, “division,” and Old Irish dām, “retinue.” From this stem, English derives, directly through Anglo-Saxon, the noun tide; and through Greek, the noun demography.

5. Greek ἀστ-, “town,” from the Proto-Indo European root *ues-, “to dwell,” as in Sanskrit vastu, “settlement,” Greek ἀστυ, “city,” and Tocharian wast, “house.” From this root, English derives, directly through Anglo-Saxon, the verb preterit was, (originally meaning “did locate in”).

6. Greek ἕμερ(ο)-, “domestic,” from the Proto-Indo-European stem *hiēm-, “to control,” as in Sanskrit yāmati, “reins (his horse)” and Greek ἕμερος, “tame.” From this stem English may derive, directly through Anglo-Saxon, the adjective even.

7. Greek ἁςκ(ὲ)-, “training,” from an unknown (and perhaps non-Indo-European) source. From this base English derives, through Greek, the adjective ascetic.

These seven bases can be combined with a number of prefixes, medial suffixes, and terminal suffixes to produce technical terms. The prefixes are:

1. Latin multi-, “many” (as in English multiply)
2. Latin super-, “elevated” (as in English supercharge)
3. Greek macro-, “great” (as in English macrocosm)
4. Greek poly-, “much” (as in English polymath)

The medial suffixes are technically known as formatives. Though lacking in denotative meaning of their own, they serve the grammatical function of connecting the bases with the terminal suffixes. Of the medial suffixes that may be attached to the seven bases named above, only one is Latin in origin -- namely -il-, as in the English noun servility vis-à-vis the English verb serve.

The other five medial suffixes are Greek in origin. They are:

1. -ι-, as in English semasiology
2. -γ-, as in English ichthyology
3. -ικ-, as in English basically
4. -ιτ-, as in English politics
5. -οτ-, as in English neurotic

The terminal suffixes, however, do have denotative meaning. Of the seven that can be appended to the above-mentioned bases, only one is a Greco-Latin hybrid – namely, -ization, “process” or “condition,” as in English, organization. The others are of exclusively Greek derivation, as follows:
Combining the preceding bases and affixes in various ways, we find the following feasible one-word terms for “the comparative study of civilizations”:

1. multi-civics
2. civics³ (from Latin civis, “citizen”)
3. civistics
4. civilistics
5. civilogy
6. civilization
7. civilizations
8. civilizationistics
9. civilizationionology
10. super-history
11. macro-history
12. polyhistory
13. historiology
14. historionomy
15. historiosophy
16. macro-politics
17. polilogy
18. poliology
19. politology (from Greek politēs, “citizen”)
20. demology
21. demotology (from Greek dēmōtēs, “city”)
22. demosology
23. astology (from Greek astōs, “citizen”)
24. astyology
25. astiology (from Greek astikōs, “urban”)
26. hemerics
27. hemerotics (from Greek hēmerōō, “I domesticate”)
28. ascics
29. ascesics (from Greek áscēsis, “cultivation”)

1. -ics, “the study of,” as in English mathematics
2. -istics, (idem), as in English statistics
3. -logy, (idem), as in English mineralogy
4. -ology, (idem), as in English psychology
5. -onomy, “formulation of the laws of,” as in English astronomy
6. -osophy, “attainment of wisdom concerning,” as in English theosophy
Of the preceding thirty-one terms, only three have thus far been explicitly recommended by members of the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations. These three are:

1. civilizationology
2. macro-history
3. historiology

In addition, one other term has been casually used by several members with the same meaning. It is:

4. civilizations

Besides this, a well-known philosopher has employed another of these terms. It is:

5. Super-history

Of these thirty-one terms, my own preferences are, in order:

1. historiology
2. historionomy
3. historiosophy
4. polyhistory
5. macro-history
6. civilogy
7. civistics

But only feedback from other European and American members of the IS CSC can produce a consensus on this question.

Footnoted References

1 Although the pre-Greek meaning of Greek pólis may have been “a place filled with people,” it is more likely that it meant “a structure filled with building materials (such as earth, stone, or wood).”

2 The earliest reconstructable meaning of Proto-Indo-European *dāmo- is “ethnic division,” where the division may have been either that between noblemen and commoners or that between fellow-tribesmen and aliens.

3 It might be argued that the term “civics” has been preempted by secondary-school teachers to designate “courses in citizenship.” But this does not obviate more technical usages. The term “graphology,” for example, is popularly used to mean character-reading by means of hand-writing analysis – a procedure which, as practiced, is often on a par with palmistry. Yet it is also used by philologists and paleographers to designate the study of the history and structure of writing-systems.

4 Proposed by Prof. Othmar F. Anderle, President of the IS CSC, in his letter of December 7, 1971, to the writer.
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