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## Readers: An Invitation to a Continuing Debate

Joseph Drew

For many years, the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations has debated a central conundrum: Can we even define “*civilization*?”

### Background

The organization was created in 1961, with a conference held at Salzburg, Austria. Scholars gathered there under the auspices of UNESCO for six days in October. Among those present were Pitirim Sorokin and Arnold Toynbee. The topics included the definition of the word “*civilization*,” problems in the analysis of complex cultures, civilizational encounters in the past, the Orient vs. the Occident, problems of universal history, theories of historiography, and the role of the social sciences and the humanities in globalization.

But civilization was not a new word in 1961 nor was it a new topic.

Arnold Toynbee begins his magisterial work, *A Study of History* with a first chapter, at least in the Somervell abridgement, entitled “The Unit of Historical Study.” He says that British national history never has been, and almost certainly never will be, an “intelligible field of historical study” in isolation; and “if that is true of Great Britain it surely must be true of any other national state *a fortiori*.” He then goes on to argue that one cannot study the city states of ancient Greece from 725 to 325 B.C. but rather the whole of Hellenic Society as the field in order to understand the significance of the various local histories. It is the same, he says, with the various small republics and cities of Northern Italy during the Middle Ages and with the differentiation between the national states of Europe in the Middle Ages and today.

So, he concludes: we must focus our attention upon the whole, because this whole is the field of study that is intelligible by itself. Then, he asks: what are these “wholes” in history? He finds most of Europe to be Western Christendom. And of the same species today he finds the Orthodox Christian society of Southeastern Europe and Russia; an Islamic Society, a Hindu Society, and a Far-Eastern Society. He then lists two sets of fossilized relics of similar societies, ones which are now extinct. One of these is that of the early Christians, Jews and Parsees; the second is Mahayana Buddhists of various countries and the Jains of India. His conclusion, he writes, is that the intelligible unit of historical study in neither a nation state nor mankind as a whole, but “a certain grouping of humanity which we have called a society.”

His next chapter is entitled “The Comparative Study of Civilizations.” He identifies 21 societies that he writes are in process of civilization. He cites G. Elliot Smith’s book *The Ancient Egyptians and the Origins of Civilization* and W. H. Perry’s work *The Children of the Sun: A Study in the Early History of Civilization*. To Toynbee, the comparable units of history are civilizations.

Probably the most popular work of the modern period on the subject of civilizations is Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. His book is divided into five sections:

1. A World of Civilizations
2. The Shifting Balance of Civilizations
3. The Emerging Order of Civilizations
4. Clashes of Civilizations
5. The Future of Civilizations

One interesting aspect to me is that in his theory development section he alludes to Thomas Kuhn’s great work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn shows that science has advanced with the displacement of one explanatory paradigm by another paradigm. The old one is not capable of explaining new facts, but the new paradigm can account for those facts in a more satisfactory fashion.

Huntington sets forth how various paradigms—incompatible with each other and full of deficiencies and limitations—have explained the modern world, the Cold War paradigm in particular. With the end of the Cold War came many competing maps or paradigms of world politics: the end of history thesis of Francis Fukuyama; Two Worlds: Us and Them; 184 States, More or Less; and Sheer Chaos.

But, says Huntington, viewing the world in terms of seven or eight civilizations avoids many of the difficulties each poses and is more compatible with the other competing theories than they are with each other. It sets forth a relatively simple map for understanding what was going on in the world as the 20<sup>th</sup> century ended.

Huntington’s Chapter Two is entitled “Civilizations in History and Today.” He says that “throughout history civilizations have provided the broadest identifications for people.” He cites as the great students of civilization: Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Oswald Spengler, Pitirim Sorokin, Arnold Toynbee, Alfred Weber, A.L. Kroeber, Philip Bagby, Carroll Quigley, William H. McNeill, Adda Bozeman, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Felipe Fernandez-Armesto. Later he cites Matthew Melko, noting in the back of the book that Dr. Melko’s work, *The Nature of Civilizations* is “an indispensable summary overview and introduction to the analysis of civilizations.”

You will notice that many, perhaps most of the individuals Huntington has listed who were alive from 1961 onward have participated actively in the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations, an organization that persists to this day.

In Chapter Two, Huntington states that the idea of civilization was developed by 18<sup>th</sup> century French thinkers as the opposite of the concept of “barbarism.” Civilized society, he writes, differed from primitive society because it was settled, urban, and literate. “To be civilized was good, to be uncivilized was bad.”

He discusses civilization versus culture, a topic that has been very popular among our readers, noting that for Braudel, it is “a space, a ‘cultural area.’” In the chapter he makes five arguments about civilization and then proceeds to list as major contemporary civilizations ones he labels as the Sinic, Japanese, Hindu, Islamic, Orthodox, Western Latin American, and African—this latter he defines as “possibly.”

In the Spring 2006 issue, Number 54, of the *Comparative Civilizations Review*, we carried a fifty-page section called “Bibliographical History and Indices of the Comparative Civilizations Review.” The section was authored by Michael Palencia-Roth, a former president. After a brief history, the index lists articles indexed by author; book reviews, indexed by book’s author or editors; and book reviews, indexed by book titles. Many of the names cited by Huntington are present in this index, either as subjects of study themselves or as authors.

I often refer to a great collection, *Theories of Society: Foundations of Modern Sociological Theory*. It was put together by Parsons, Shils, Naegle and Pitts. Selections written by many of those mentioned by Huntington are in this book, as well.

A number of popular works have long addressed the meaning of “civilizations.” Here are six such books:

- One is “The Outline of History: The Whole Story of Man”, by H.G. Wells. I count in the index 30 citations of civilizations; the third book in the outline is entitled “The First Civilizations.”
- Another is “The Story of Civilization” by Will Durant. Durant opens with six chapters called “The Establishment of Civilization.” The titles are: The Conditions of Civilization; The Economic Elements of Civilization; The Political Elements of Civilization; The Moral Elements of Civilization; The Mental Elements of Civilization; and The Prehistoric Beginnings of Civilization. To Durant, civilization is a social order promoting cultural creation.

- A popular scholarly set of books is “A History of Civilization” by Brinton, Christopher, and Wolff. It slides over the definition, arguing only that man moved from prehistory to history, and from a culture to a civilization, saying only that the point at which a culture becomes a civilization is to some degree a matter of individual opinion.
- In his widely read book, “History of the World” J. M. Roberts wrote that “Civilization is the name we give to the interaction of human beings in a very creative way, when, as it were, a critical mass of cultural potential and a certain surplus of resources have been built up. In civilization this releases human capacities for development at quite a new level and in large measure the development which follows is self-sustaining.” But, he says, this is somewhat abstract and so he turns to examples.

He makes several arguments about what causes civilization and then states that it is easier to say something generally true about the marks of early civilization than about the way it happened. He concludes that thought: “Again, no absolute and universal statements are plausible.”

- Freud, in his monumental work “Civilization and Its Discontents” wrote that civilization describes “the whole sum of the achievements and the regulations which distinguish our lives from those of our animal ancestors and which serve two purposes – namely to protect men against nature and to adjust their mutual relations.” This is only problematic because the editor of the English version simply writes in a footnote: ‘Kultur.’ Then he states, “For the translation of this word see the Editor’s Note to The Future of an Illusion.”
- Finally, we have “The Boundaries of Civilizations in Space and Time” by Matt Melko and Leighton R. Scott. This work collects the results of discussions in many sessions over the years of the topic at hand. A total of 56 individuals are listed as participants. Matt identifies Oswald Spengler, Toynbee, and A. L. Kroeber as initiators during the period following World War I but observes that much criticism of the idea that civilizations followed certain courses rendered the topic less central to academic discussion.

In Chapter Two of the book, Leighton R. Scott says that the “complication of the subject” “guarantees no more than a measure of certainty and may indeed inhibit realization or understanding of ultimate desiderata or objectives.” Nevertheless, he writes, members of the ISCSC have been driven to evoke whole definitions, theories replete with lists of “criteria” and disclosure of “qualities.” The book then goes on for hundreds of pages discussing the subject.

As a result of this interesting topic, and of the formation in 1961 of the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations, there have been over the years at the annual meetings many sessions dealing with definitions of civilization and the formulation of lists of them. Hot debates have marked many of them, but no definitive conclusion has been reached. What we can say for certain is that the study of civilizations has waxed and waned. Today, it is once more a major topic of public discourse.

### **The Challenge**

So, readers, the question before us is: Is it possible to define the word “civilization” in English and in a way that the majority of scholars will accept it?

Please submit your answer and we will publish it in the Spring 2020 issue.  
Thank you.

Joseph Drew  
Editor-in-Chief