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## Is Civilization a Good Thing?

David Wilkinson

### Wescott on Civilization

How do we feel about “Civilization”? What emotions does the idea of “civilization” evoke from us? Why are these emotions attached to that idea? In more technical terms, what are the “connotations” of “civilization”? Laudatory or derogatory? And why do we feel the way we feel about it? What makes us welcome civilization, fear it, praise it or shun it?

This article is in a sense a dialogue with the following article, written by former ISCS President Roger W. Wescott. He titled it “The Theoretical Status of the Concept of Civilization” and it was published originally in the *Comparative Civilizations Bulletin*, Vol. V, No. 4, of Winter, 1997.

Wescott was interested in the various meanings that were attached to the term “civilization.” To begin with, he asked if we considered that the word civilization is primarily denotative, referential — it refers to something objectively existing? Or do we use the word civilization in a way that is primarily connotative, that is, emotive, subjective — do we use it to tell others about our feelings?

In fact, Wescott finds that actual usage reveals a rich variety of connotative and denotative meanings of “civilization” — too many, indeed, for me to examine in a short article! So, this article will focus upon the connotations we give to “civilization” — how we feel about it!

Wescott next asks, “If the concept of civilization is primarily emotive, is its emotive force predominantly laudatory or derogatory in effect?” Do we like civilization? Do we despise civilization? (Or, we may add, do we, or should we, try to strike some “balance?”)

### Panegyrists of Civilization

For instance, John Ash (c. 1724-1779), a grammarian, lexicographer, and Baptist minister in England, found nothing but good to say of Civilization and its congeners in his 1775 dictionary, *The New and Complete Dictionary of the English Language*, (London: E. & C. Dilly, 1775), as we may see from the following minimal selections from a plethora of collected meanings:

Civilization: the act of civilizing

Civilize: to reclaim from savageness, to instruct in the arts of civil life

Civil: belonging to a community; not criminal

Civility: the state of being civilized, complaisance [sic], kindness, decency

Civilly: kindly, politely

Ash did not impose a personal bias upon his collection of meanings. Wescott notes some earlier uses of the term “civilize,” dating back to 1600; all are laudatory. To civilize was to refine, to tame, to train, to make moral, to lift out of barbarism.

So, it would seem that a Civilizer — one who lifts others out of savageness and barbarism — might well deserve high praise!

And some have indeed given such praise, sincerely or ironically. I shall cite two such, both, not entirely perchance, being Irish.

The ironic Irish source is a folksong group, The Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem, who applaud the civilizing work of their island neighbor in the song *God Bless England!* I shall cite two stanzas.

“When we were savage, fierce and wild  
She came as a mother to her child!  
Gently raised us from the slime  
And kept our hands from hellish crime!  
And she sent us to heaven in her own good time!”

“So now Irishmen, forget the past  
And think of the day that’s coming fast!  
When we shall all be civilized  
Neat and clean and well-advised!  
Oh, won’t Mother England be surprised!”

This song *God Bless England!* deserves a listen from the original voices, a side excursion that I now recommend: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1CySri9RAuQ>. Ukrainians, Moldovans and Georgians in the audience might want to substitute “Mother Russia” for “Mother England” in the second stanza.

My second and sincerely laudatory Irish source is a book by Thomas Cahill titled *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 1995). Per the book’s publicity blurb, between the fall of Rome and the rise of medieval feudal states, Irish monks diligently copied the manuscript books of Greece and Rome, whether pagan or Christian, and then disseminated them to Europe when Europe was once more stable enough to receive and prize them.

So much for the panegyrist of civilization. Civilization teaches  
Kindliness, Gentleness, Politesse, Cooperation Literacy and Reverence for Learning!

Or, as per the Irish singers, civilization makes us neat and clean and well-advised!

A compelling case indeed, or so it might well seem!

### **Contra Civilization**

What might then be said in derogation of civilization?

Quite a bit, it appears!

Indeed, the derogation of civilization is multifarious and multidirectional. Civilization is indicted as boring, destructive, enfeebling, unheroic, obsolescent, doomed, and dangerous. Of course, the chorus of critics is cacophonous; best to categorize and particularize.

Wescott cites several derogatory groupings. The first group is the Romantics with their lonely, alienated heroes. Notable among these is George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824), and his hero Childe Harold.

Byron and the Byronic hero of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* traveled through Europe, escaping boredom and artificiality, lamenting war and oppression, and praising heroic freedom fighters and the beauties of nature. Byron himself became a patron of national-liberation revolution in Ottoman Turkish-ruled Greece.

A differently Romantic refugee from civilization is James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo, who appears in five frontier novels:

- *The Deerslayer* (story date 1740–1755)
- *The Last of the Mohicans* (story date 1757)
- *The Pathfinder* (story date 1758-1759)
- *The Pioneers* (story date 1793)
- *The Prairie* (story date 1804)

Natty Bumppo prefers wildlands and keeps well ahead of the pursuing frontier of ignorant wasteful, destructive, arrogant civilization, while helping the hapless civilized innocents who meet dangers with which they do not know how to cope.

The waste and destruction of civilization is perhaps well illustrated by a passage from Chapter XXII “The Slaughter of Pigeons,” *The Pioneers* (published 1823, story date 1793): “It is much better to kill only such you want, without wasting your powder and lead, than to be firing into God’s creatures in such a wicked manner.”

The critical words of Natty Bumppo may best be read after a glance at an encyclopedic entry on the extermination of the American passenger pigeon, in “civilized” slaughtertests that brought it from billions to zero between 1871 and 1914.

A differently lonely life was chosen by the monstrous and detested creature made by Mary Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein. Frankenstein’s monster fled from the hostile and incomprehensible civilization of Europe to the empty ice floes of the Canadian Arctic, pursued to the end by his equally lonely creator Frankenstein.

Another monstrous loner hero is Herman Melville’s Captain Ahab, master of the whaling ship *Pequod* in the novel *Moby-Dick*. Like Victor Frankenstein, Captain Ahab has lost all interest in the accoutrements of civilization, and he has come to exist only to do final battle with Nature, in the form of the great White Whale, *Moby-Dick*: “Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell’s heart I stab at thee; for hate’s sake I spit my last breath at thee.”

Another derogator of civilization is the French Primitivist artist Paul Gauguin, a self-styled “savage” who fled France for Tahiti, found Tahiti overcivilized, and fled to the even more remote Marquesas, declaring, “Civilization is Paralysis.”

Even as civilization pursued Natty Bumppo from the New York frontier to the prairie of the Louisiana Territory, so civilization has posthumously trailed Paul Gauguin, in the shape of an eponymous Tahiti-visiting cruise-ship the *Paul Gauguin!* ([www.paulgauguincruiseline.com](http://www.paulgauguincruiseline.com))

Wescott identifies as among other derogators of civilization Fascists, in a general sense, who see civilization as decadent and unheroic. Exemplary would be Hanns Johst (1890-1978), author of *Schlageter*, a play about the life of Albert Leo Schlageter (1894-1923), a nationalistic young German shot by a French firing squad for sabotaging the railways of the French-occupied German Ruhr in 1923. The play was performed for Adolf Hitler’s 44<sup>th</sup> birthday, and it contained a brief critique of “culture” spoken by the character Friedrich Thiemann, “Wen ich Kultur höre, entstichere ich meinen Browning” —“When I hear the word ‘culture’ I release the safety catch on my pistol!”

In a more general sense, admirers of heroic or aristocratic ages like those posited by the Neapolitan civilizationist Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) in his *New Science* (1725, 1744) may nostalgically regret the loss of stratified and violent societies with their patricians and plebeians, lords and subjects, linked in endless struggles for power.

In a more recent bit of cyclicalist heroic nostalgia cum anticipation we may place John Boorman's apocalyptic dystopian 1974 science fantasy film *Zardoz*. Boorman's post-nuclear class society of 2293 pits the violent sub-elite of Brutal Exterminators against, on the one hand, an exploited underclass of peasant Brutals, and, on the other hand, a feckless overlord class of Eternals who seek to rule by fraud rather than force, in the manner of L. Frank Baum's *Wizard of Oz*. The Eternals are mostly tired of life, from which they are at last freed in a *coup d'état* mounted by the Exterminators (to the sad music of the second movement of Beethoven's Symphony No. 7 in A major).

Marxists like F. Engels still differently derogate civilization. In *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Chapter IX, "Barbarism and Civilization," civilization is very critically compared to savagery and barbarism: "civilization achieved things of which gentile society was not even remotely capable. But it achieved them by setting in motion the lowest instincts and passions in man and developing them at the expense of all his other abilities. From its first day to this, sheer greed was the driving spirit of civilization...civilization is founded on the exploitation of one class by another class."

But Engels' derogation came not from a nostalgic but from a futuristic and purportedly "scientific" perspective: civilization as we know it has made itself obsolescent. Marx-Engels socialist doctrine judges affluent bourgeois capitalist society to have served its historic function and to be ready for replacement by its socialist-communist successor. "Bourgeois" of course is "urban," and the capitalistic cities of past triumphs are the future sites of a quite different society.

This futuristic utopia has been creatively imagined, for instance, by the prolific urbanist writer Andy Merrifield. In *Beyond Plague Urbanism* (Monthly Review Press, 2023) Merrifield avers that, long before COVID-19, cities were already "plagued" by "economic injustices and inequalities." To recover from such plague urbanism, Merrifield wants to resuscitate the city as "a vast open-air public library."

And Merrifield wants us subversively to imagine the eco-cities of tomorrow, thus recalling not Marx but Sir Ebenezer Howard.

Ebenezer Howard (1850-1928) was the founder of the utopian-socialist garden city movement, (*Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, 1902), which aimed to overcome the contradiction between city and country both by filling the country with small cities and by filling the cities with gardens!

And to close the circle, we may note that it might take a Howard-model garden city to permit the rapid commuting necessitated by Marx's communist utopia "which makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind..." (Marx, *The German Ideology*). Such a diversified life cannot be accomplished in a society composed of overspecialized standard-model cities.

Still, I cannot help but note that within the City of Los Angeles I myself have encountered skunks, raccoons and foxes, and that within the County of Los Angeles one can fish the fish-stocked Los Angeles Aqueduct, while if it were legal one could actually hunt the intrusive bobcats who hunt pets and the bears that root through garbage cans!

But disregarding the mere reality of Los Angeles, California, Andy Merrifield and Ebenezer Howard join Marx and Engels to argue for us to view capitalist cities, like capitalism itself, obsolete, or at least obsolescent and needing to be ushered out of history! Are they in some deeper sense correct? Perhaps.... Or could it be that our urban planners admire Ebenezer Howard rather than Marx and Engels?

Who else derogates the obsolescence of civilization? The futurist Kenneth E. Boulding (1910-1993) forecasted and propounded a vision of a hopeful "Great Transition" to a condition of "post-civilization" in the first chapter of his book *The Meaning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Harper and Row, 1964).

Boulding hopes for a transition from a civilized to a post-civilized society, warns against three "traps" enroute (the "war trap", the "population trap", and the "entropy trap") and suggests strategies for evading each trap.

As a dedicated futurist, Boulding wants to safeguard the Great Transition, even as he worries about the future that he devoutly seeks! For Boulding visualizes a cityless future, a world population much at leisure, evenly spread out, every household solar-powered and algae-fed and all-recycling, its own little spaceship, video-linked to others and to libraries and cultural repositories.

But he wonders — will we miss the city when it's gone? Might we not want to maintain a few "stage-set" museum-cities where humans might relive the past, actually stroll real streets, and meet other humans and converse face to face rather than through media? ("The Death of the City: A Frightened Look at Post-Civilization," *Ekistics*, 1962, Vol.13 (75), pp.19-22)

Other derogators of civilization find it violent, destructive and deeply uncivil. Justin Jennings (*Killing Civilization: A Reassessment of Early Urbanism and Its Consequences*, University of New Mexico Press, 2016) contends that the laudatory “civilization” concept overlooks the fact that the nucleated population growth that constituted urbanism imposed unpleasant “scalar stress” in the form of unwanted social change, creating dependent “suburbs” and subordinate exploited “countrysides.”

William W. Eckhardt (*Civilizations, Empires and Wars: A Quantitative History of War*, McFarland 1992) examines 5000 years of history quantitatively, and finds that “civilization,” “empire” and “war” are a single phenomenon, a conceptual triangle, by which he means that they advance hand in hand in hand. The more advanced the civilization, the larger is the reach of its exploitative empires, and the more destructive are its inescapable wars.

And for whatever reason, though maybe Jennings and Eckhardt could offer a few, some groups have seen civilization go by, and have said “Thanks but no thanks, no sale — we don’t want any!” Gordon W. Hewes studied some such groups. To taxonomize them Hewes created the concept of “Anticivilization.” (See his article “Anticivilization,” *Comparative Civilizations Review* Vol. 55: No. 55, Article 3, 2006) “Anticivilization” entailed “deliberate, rational, informed collective choices, exercised over generations or centuries” when “non-civilized groups are found to be living in immediate geographical proximity to long-civilized neighboring communities, in regular trade and other contact” but refuse absorption, like a collectivity of Natty Bumppos.

The ambiguities and ambivalences we have thus far observed can be seen juxtaposed in Sigmund Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*. The sociopsychological duels of “pleasure principle” versus “reality principle,” and of “Eros versus Thanatos,” reflect the impracticality of full gratification of human erotic, violent and domineering inclinations within a peaceful and stable civilized society.

### **Balancing, Judging**

But, so as not to end this examination of connotations on a rueful note, we may balance Freudian pessimism with the Marxian optimism of Herbert Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization!* Consistently with Engels, Marcuse considers that the resources produced by modern advanced industrial (capitalist) society make it possible not only to dispense with capitalism but also to shape “man’s world in accordance with the Life Instincts, in the concerted struggle against the purveyors of Death.” (Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 2<sup>nd</sup>. Ed, 1966, Political Preface.)



Perhaps with the books of Cahill, Byron, Cooper, Mary Shelley, Melville, Engels, Marx, Merrifield, Howard, Jennings, Eckhardt, Freud and Marcuse, and side references to Ash, the Irish singers, Johst, Vico, Baum and *Zardoz*, we may have the makings of an independent study course on “Connotations of Civilization: How Do We Feel About Civilization?” that might be pursued anywhere in the world with satisfactory internet access! A task for ISCSC?

So how should we feel about civilization? Shall we laud and forward its civility and learning with John Ash and Thomas Cahill? Shall we seek change, back to a Heroic Age or forward to Post-Civilization? Flee, fight, ignore, trade, evade, suffer, transcend?

Each must judge.