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The Theoretical Status of the Concept of Civilization

Roger W. Wescott

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This paper may be regarded as an effort to answer some questions concerning the conceptualization of civilization.

1. Whether or not concepts are essentially verbal, is the concept of civilization primarily denotative (referential) or connotative (emotive) in meaning?
2. If the concept of civilization is primarily emotive, is its emotive force predominantly laudatory or derogatory in effect?
3. When the concept of civilization is derogatory, is it decadence or outdatedness that is primarily derogated?
4. If the concept of civilization is primarily denotative, is its denotation primarily abstract (referring to culture and associated mentifacts) or primarily concrete (referring to people and their artifacts)?
5. If civilization is an abstraction, is that abstraction a condition (what used to be called “civility”) or a process (the act of civilizing or the experience of being civilized by others)?
6. If civilization is a process, is this process gradient (continuous) or discrete (discontinuous) in nature?
7. If civilization is discrete from other cultural states, at which diachronic stage does it make its crucial transition from effective non-existence to effective existence? Is this point at the pongid-hominid interface, the hunting-farming interface, or the rural-urban interface?

Let us take up these questions in the order posed above, attempting, as we proceed, to deal not only with the explicit problems they present but also with their implications, both epistemological and empirical.

1. In 1775, “civilization” first appeared in *Ash’s English Dictionary* to refer to “the act of civilizing” persons or people of a lower social condition. (Three years earlier, James Boswell had complained that Dr. Johnson, even in the 4th edition of his more prestigious Dictionary, refused to list the term, regarding it as “cant” — a word that had for Johnson approximately the same connotation that “jargon has for us.”¹ Apparently, then, the term “civilization” had a marginal status academic usage, comparable to that of the bureaucratic term “finalization” in our own day.)

By 1790, however, “civilization” was not only a reputable term — freely used by Edmund Burke in formal addresses to Parliament — but also an accepted synonym for “civility,” a term which had, in turn, been used since the time of Sir Walter Raleigh to mean “freedom from barbarity” (or, in more positive and contemporary terms, “the state of being civilized”).

The verb “civilize,” dating back to 1601, meant “to refine” or “to lift out of barbarism.” But, until the late 19th century, this was only one of six senses in which the verb could be used. The other five were:

1. to behave civilly (1605)
2. to make moral (1640)
3. to train (1642)
4. to tame (1721)
5. to become civilized (1868)

2. Until the late 18th century, the word “civilization” and all its English cognates containing the base ci(vi)- were exclusively laudatory, it being taken for granted that cities were superior to villages, literacy to illiteracy, and settled life to nomadism.

The Romantic Movement, however, inverted this ethos, exalting the Noble Savage, scorning the artificiality of the “Augustan” Age, and fostering the Celtic Revival and other folk-movements. And, even after the death of Lord Byron and his spiritual confrères, latter-day Romantics continued to deprecate “civilized” values. In the late 19th century, for example, the self-exiled Pre-Expressionist French painter Paul Gauguin insisted that “civilization is paralysis.” In the early 20th century, the German meta-historian Oswald Spengler employed the term Zivilisation to designate the declining phase of the Great Cultures.² In India, he claimed, this decline began with Buddhism and the Maurya Empire; in the Greco-Roman world, with the Peloponnesian War and the spread of Stoicism; and in Western Europe, with the French Revolution and industrialization. In our own time, moreover, the Hippy Movement and the “drop-out” phenomenon seem to show that devaluation of civilization as an ideal is continuing. If anything, in fact, it appears to be intensifying.

3. Contemporary derogation of civilization as a value takes two very different forms. One is to disparage it as decadent and to propose, at least implicitly, a revival of pre-civilized culture-patterns. The other is to disparage it as outdated and to propose, explicitly in most cases, that the transition from civilization to whatever cultural stage is to supplant it be hastened and facilitated in every possible way.

Fascism in the broadest sense — from Mussolini’s Corporate Statism through Hitler’s National Socialism to Franco’s Falangism — looks like an attempt to turn back the cultural clock to the Heroic Ethos of the barbarian peoples who overthrew the ancient Mediterranean empires.

Marxist Communism, on the other hand, is Janus-faced with regard to the dichotomy between decadence and outdatedness. Like its totalitarian rival, Fascism, Communism scorns decadence and lauds what Friedrich Engels called the “primitive communism” of preliterate peoples antecedent to the ancient slave-holding empires and their Medieval feudal successor-states.³ But, like Western futurists, Marxist theoreticians of “the Socialist Camp” see Capitalism of the type which sprang from the Protestant Ethic and supplanted Mercantilist economic policy as having served its global purpose — that of multiplying human industrial productivity — and standing in need of transformation before it devolves into suicidally militaristic monopolism. In contrast to non-Marxist futurists, however, Marxists believe that the crucial change needed is social elimination of the affluent bourgeoisie (which earlier displaced the 18th century aristocracy) by a politically aroused proletariat, no longer willing to serve as wage-slaves to industrial entrepreneurs.

Since 1961, when the American Ford Foundation subsidized the prognosticative efforts of Bertrand de Jouvenel’s “Futuribles” Project in Paris,⁴ a new assessment of civilization has appeared among scholars uncommitted — at least in formal terms — to any particular political or economic ideology. These students of the future are convinced that culture has, since the dawn of the Atomic Age in 1945 (if not earlier), entered on a metamorphosis into a new phase or stage as different from civilization itself as was civilization from the preliterate agriculturalism which preceded it. Since the nature of this new culture-type remains unclear, most futurists have contented themselves with describing it in terms of its antecedence. Thus, economist Kenneth Boulding calls it “post-civilization”;⁵ sociologist Daniel Bell calls it “post-industrialism”;⁶ and theologian Paul Tillich calls it “post-Christianity.”⁷ But all seem agreed that literate urban culture as we have known it since the days of the ancient Levantine civilization cannot last much longer and that attempts to perpetuate it in toto or even to maintain some of its major institutional procedures, such as international warfare, are foredoomed to failure.

4. Insofar as civilization may be denotatively described as literate, urbanized, metal-working culture, it remains a question whether such culture is an abstract collocation of ideas, attitudes, and traditions (what Irwin Sanders⁸ calls “mentifacts”), as described by Alfred Kroeber⁹ or a concrete mechanism for the systematic and efficient utilization of energy (what Sanders calls “artifacts”), as described by Leslie White.¹⁰

To complicate the picture, Sanders uses a third term, “sociifact,” to describe the social group that is formed to implement mentifacts, or cultural goals, by means of artifacts, or man-made tools. Insofar as a sociifact is a collection of people — specifically, of live human bodies — it is undeniably a manifestation of concrete culture as described by White. On the other hand, insofar as a sociifact is a network of psychological ties binding individuals into a collectivity, it is a manifestation of the abstract culture described by Kroeber.

Lewis Mumford, to be sure, would probably side with White in viewing culture-bearing social groups as concretions rather than as abstractions. For he coined the term “mega-machine” to describe a group of slaves or other social subordinates conscripted by political or religious authorities for employment as a living tool in the performance of monumental tasks, such as the construction of the Egyptian pyramids.¹¹

To some extent, of course, the question of the concreteness of behavior-patterns — up to and including civilization — is a philosophical rather than a scientific one. That is to say, its answer depends not so much on amassable data or adducible evidence as on the semantic and ontological definition of “concreteness.” If, for example, one makes the common-sensical assumption that matter is concrete but what the immaterial is abstract, then one must probably take the eclectic position that White is right about such artifactual manifestations of civilizations as irrigation-canals but that Kroeber is right about such ideological manifestations of civilization as religious doctrines (while such social manifestations of civilization as governing élites are at once biologically concrete and psychologically abstract).

5. Assuming, then, that the denial of abstraction is unprofitably simplistic, let us concede that civilization has significant aspects which are abstract rather than concrete in nature.

It still remains problematic, however, whether the impalpable aspects of civilization are better regarded as stative or processual in nature. Should we, that is, treat civilization as a state or condition, which any given human society may presumably be said either to manifest or not to manifest? Or should we rather treat civilization as an activity or process, in which every human society may presumably be said to be involved, so that our problem is reformulated as one of determining the extent or degree of that involvement?

Lexical history, as we noted earlier, presents us with compelling reasons for adopting a “both-and” rather than an “either-or” attitude toward this question. For all Latin-derived nominalizing suffixes containing the element -ion have at some time exhibited, and most of them still do exhibit, the dual semantic function of designating both dynamic processes and the static results of those processes. Familiar examples are the verbal nouns union, junction, and creation.

6. Focusing, for the moment, exclusively on the processual aspect of civilization — and temporarily setting aside its stative aspect — we are still faced with the problem of defining that aspect. Although all processes might seem to partake of the presumably continuous nature of the time-flow in terms of which we identify them, we should not take it for granted that discreteness, or discontinuity, can be disregarded in any consideration of the civilizing process.

If we did, we would automatically render not merely invalid but absurd all historical periodizations, such as those by which we have traditionally trifurcated history into Ancient, Medieval, and Modern phases and are still inclined to trifurcate the history of pre-Islamic Egypt into Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom, and New Kingdom phases.

As it happens, the first of these trifurcations has been largely abandoned since Spengler ridiculed it, two generations ago. Furthermore, social scientists like William Sumner¹² and Franz Boas¹³ had already established canons of cultural relativity in terms of which later sociologists and anthropologists came to stigmatize the Ancient-Medieval-Modern triad (two-thirds of which was Western European in locale) as grossly ethnocentric.

Where such ethnocentricity is not saliently involved, however, periodization seems not only permissible but necessary — certainly in terms of analytical convenience and probably also in terms of the actual pace of cultural change.¹⁴ In the case of Pharaonic Egypt mentioned above, the three-fold division of its history into Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms seems as objective as such diachronic classifications can ever be, having been recognized by the Egyptians themselves as well as by Western Egyptologists, having been conspicuously marked by radical disruptions of the otherwise culturally monolithic character of its civilization, and having exhibited significantly different orientations in each of its three major pulses, as follows:

- I. The Old Kingdom (1st through 6th dynasties), c. 3100-2600 B.C.;¹⁵ Memphite focus, with architecture - especially pyramid-building - predominant
 - A. “The Feudal Age,” c. 2600-2200 B.C.: fragmentation of central authority
- II. The Middle Kingdom (12th through 17th dynasties), c. 2200-1800 B.C.: Theban focus, with non-architectural arts predominant
 - B. “The Hyksos Period,” c. 1800-1600 B.C.: domination by Asian invaders
- III. The New Kingdom (18th through 26th dynasties), c. 1600-500 B.C.: imperialistic expansion into Asia, with increasingly heretical religious tendencies — most evident in Atonistic monotheism

Yet, just as the difference between the relative and the absolute may itself be called relative, we can likewise maintain — without, I think, any resort to paradox-for-effect — that there is a gradient between the gradient and the discrete. In the preceding case of Pharaonic “Kingdoms,” for example, the discontinuity between the pre-Hyksos and the post-Hyksos (or “Imperial”) civilization of Egypt was relative, in the sense that Coptic continued to be spoken, the trinity of Isis, Horus, and Osiris continued to be revered by a majority of both the priesthood and the peasantry, and a recognizably Pharaonic sculptural style persisted throughout the Hyksos interregnum.

And even the sharper cultural discontinuity that separates preliterate agriculturalism from literate urbanism, which some prehistorians have pictured as a cultural “cliff” separating two cultural “plateaus” and literally diagrammed as two horizontal lines connected by an equidistant vertical line, is not strictly comparable to the lift between two stairs. Either way, the point being made is, in conceptual terms, that both cultural stagnation and cultural revolution are relative to some typological standard — implicit if not asserted — of “normal” cultural evolution. Given sufficient diachronic perspective, we can nearly always see that there is a slow but unmistakable metamorphic ferment at work in seemingly changeless periods, just as there is always some carry-over of earlier cultural traditions into even the most rapidly innovative cultural restructurings.

In the case of the transition just alluded to between preliterate agriculturalism and literate urbanism in the pre-Christian Near East, we note, first, that by about 5000 B.C. farm villages were already getting so large and so heavily fortified as to justify their being called “proto-urban” and, second, that throughout the five millennia that have followed Gordon Childe’s Urban Revolution of about 3000 B.C.,¹⁶ preliterate agriculturalism has persisted as a social encapsulation within most of the great civilizations known to history.

7. The question of the point in time at or near which non-civilization became civilization is basically, of course, a problem not so much of dating as of definition.

Some students of man’s development, such as Alexander Goldenweiser,¹⁷ have chosen to treat the terms “culture” and “civilization” as synonymous. For them, consequently, man became civilized when he began to chip stone tools, to bury his dead, and to talk - in short, when he ceased to be an ape.

Other scholars, such as Boulding,¹⁸ hold that, since the line between village-culture and city-culture is so hard to draw,¹⁹ civilization may be said to have made its effective appearance about 10,000 years ago, when Mesolithic food-extraction was given up by early West Asians in favor of Neolithic food-production. For him, then, it is agriculture and civilization which are synonymous.

My own preference is to accept the consensus of most exponents of the comparative study of civilizations that civilization is better identified with the urban, literate, metallurgical tradition that made its appearance in the Old World cradle of agriculture about 5,000 years after farming itself had begun.²⁰

The major question now facing both historians and futurists is that of whether civilization has become obsolescent and, if so, whether it will survive as an active encapsulation in man’s emergent cultural order or only as an amply and nostalgically documented memory.

Notes

¹James Boswell, The Life of Samuel Johnson, W. P. Nimmo, Edinburgh, 1882 (originally published in 1791).

²Oswald Spengler, The Decline of the West, translated by Charles Atkinson and abridged by Helmut Werner, The Modern Library, 1965.

³Friedrich Engels, The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State: In the Light of the Researches of Lewis H. Morgan, International Publishers, 1969 (originally published in German in 1884).

⁴Bertrand de Jouvenel, The Art of Conjecture, Nikita Lary, tr., Basic Books, 1967.

⁵"The Great Transition," Chapter 1 of The Meaning of the 20th Century by Kenneth Boulding, Harper and Row, 1964.

⁶Daniel Bell, editor and contributor, Toward the Year 2000, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1968.

⁷Paul Tillich, The Future of Religions, Harper and Row, 1966.

⁸Irwin Sanders, The Community: An Introduction to a Social System, Ronald Press, 1958.

⁹Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions, Vintage Book, Random House, 1960 (originally published as vol. 47, no. 1, of the Papers of the Peabody Museum at Harvard University, 1952).

¹⁰"Cultural vs. Psychological Interpretations of Human Behavior," Chapter 6, in The Science of Culture: A Study of Man and Civilization by Leslie White, revised ed., Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969.

¹¹Lewis Mumford, Technics and Civilization, Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1934; and The Myth of the Machine: Technics and Human Development, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967.

¹²William Sumner, Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals, Ginn and Co., Boston, 1906.

¹³Franz Boas, Race, Language, and Culture, New York, 1940.

¹⁴The same interpretive debate goes on among biologists, some of whom regard species as natural breeding-groups, while others regard them as useful taxonomic fictions.

¹⁵Egyptian, like Meso-American, chronology is a bone of scholarly contention. Early Orientalists like James Breasted tend to date the First Dynasty toward the middle of the 4th millennium B.C. More recent Egyptologists, like John Wilson, are inclined to date it nearly a millennium later. I have here pursued a middle course, while suspecting that Wilson's "short count" is more likely to be accurate than Breasted's "long count."

¹⁶See V. G. Childe, What Happened in History, M. Parrish, London, 1942.

¹⁷Alexander Goldenweiser, Early Civilization: An Introduction to Anthropology, Alfred Knopf, 1929.

¹⁸Kenneth Boulding, *op. cit.*

¹⁹In my doctoral dissertation in social anthropology (Oxford University, 1952), I sought to resolve this dilemma by recognizing an intermediate stage of "semi-civilization" or "town-culture" in the Near East of the 4th millennium B.C.

²⁰Toynbee, of course, is the most deviant of historical comparativists in his proneness to accept preliterate societies as "civilizations." Throughout his 12-volume Study of History, for instance, he recognized Viking Scandinavian culture as civilized. Till 1940, he granted the same recognition to Eskimo culture, and, after 1960, to Pueblo culture. (For details, see Roger Wescott, "The Enumeration of Civilizations," History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History, vol. 9, no. 1, 1970.)