

An Overview of Civilization



CIVILIZATION is a triumph of mind over matter, of reason over instinct, and of the distinctly human over mankind's animal nature. These are what have made possible civilization, as well as culture, its constant and necessary companion. A thorough understanding of what civilization and culture are requires a knowledge of all the qualities that make up human nature and a full understanding of all historical developments. Since this is not possible, it is necessary to explain these terms by the use of definitions and descriptions.

Some Basic Meanings

Both civilization and culture are fairly modern words, having come into prominent use during the 19th century by anthropologists, historians, and literary figures. There has been a strong tendency to use them interchangeably as though they mean the same thing, but they are not the same.

Although modern in their usage, the two words are derived from ancient Latin. The word civilization is based on the Latin *civis*, "inhabitant of a city." Thus civilization, in its most essential meaning, is the ability of people to live together harmoniously in cities, in social groupings. From this definition it would seem that certain insects, such as ants or bees, are also civilized. They live and work together in social groups. So do some microorganisms. But there is more to civilization, and that is what culture brings to it. So, civilization is inseparable from culture.

The word culture is derived from the Latin verb *colere*, "to till the soil" (its past participle is *cultus*, associated with cultivate). But *colere* also has a wider range of meanings. It may, like *civis*, mean inhabiting a town or village. But most of its definitions suggest a process of starting and promoting growth and development. One may cultivate a garden; one may also cultivate one's interests, mind, and abilities. In its modern use the word culture refers to all the positive aspects and achievements of humanity that make mankind different from the rest of the animal world. Culture has grown out of creativity, a characteristic that seems to be unique to human beings.

One of the basic and best-known features of civilization and culture is the presence of tools. But more important than their simple existence is that the tools are always being improved and enlarged upon, a result of creativity. It took thousands of years to get from the first wheel to the latest, most advanced model of automobile.

It is the concept of humans as toolmakers and improvers that differentiates them from other animals. A monkey may use a stick to knock a banana from a tree, but that stick will never, through a monkey's ingenuity, be modified into a pruning hook or a ladder. Monkeys have never devised a spoken language, written a book, composed a melody, built a house, paved a road, or painted a portrait. To say that birds build nests and beavers their dens is to miss the point. People once lived in caves, but their ingenuity, imagination, and creativity led them to progress beyond caves to buildings.

Civilization, then, is the "city" of human beings, at any given stage of development, with all of its achievements: its arts, technology, sciences, religions, and politics. The word city may seem strange, but it is used advisedly because the emergence of a civilization and its cultural growth have always originated in specific localities--in specific cities, in fact. To speak in broader terms--of modern Western civilization, for instance--is to gloss over the fact that before such a concept was possible there were first the civilizations of Jerusalem, ancient Alexandria, Athens, Rome, and Constantinople. These in turn were followed by the civilizations of Florence, Milan, Venice, Paris, London, Amsterdam, Vienna, Geneva, Munich, New York City, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and many more. If there is a Western civilization, it is made up of ingredients from all of these original city civilizations.

Economics and Civilization

Although not generally recognized, the role played by an economy in the formation of culture is crucial. Every human being has the need of food, clothing, and shelter. Providing for these needs is the function of an economy because these needs are satisfied through systems of production and distribution. Beyond needs most people also have wants--things they desire to make their lives more comfortable and pleasant. Throughout human history needs have remained the same: in the ancient world people needed food, clothing, and shelter--and they still do today. In fact, throughout most of history most people have had to be satisfied with meeting their needs, and desires for something more were unmet. Only the very wealthy and powerful were able to afford the extras--finer homes, better food, good medical care, enjoyment of the arts, and expensive clothing and jewelry.

In the 20th century this has changed for large numbers of the world's population. To be sure, there are still many people for whom the basic needs are difficult or even impossible to attain--especially in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and parts of Asia. But in the industrialized societies of North America, Europe, Japan, Taiwan, Australia, Hong Kong, and Singapore the needs are mostly met. And advances in technology have made possible production of a vast number of goods that can only qualify as wants. No one, to survive, actually needs a television set, an automobile, a stereo, a box of candy, or even a bar of soap. But, because the modern economic system--largely the result of the Industrial Revolution--has made such goods available, few are willing to be without them. The system has contributed enormously to the way modern civilization has developed.

The development was not planned. It was random and accidental. When Henry Ford began building automobiles, he was not intending to shape American culture; but he and the other automakers did so nevertheless. Without the automobile the United States would be a far different country. The same can be said about the founders of fast-food chains. They were businessmen who took advantage of certain opportunities, but they transformed much of the world's eating habits.

Economic systems, with their networks of production and distribution, have become the most potent forces for progress and development in modern civilization. This is as true in socialist and Communist nations as it is in capitalist societies. Where there are no advanced economic systems--as in much of Africa--civilization has tended to stagnate. Where the basic needs of populations cannot be met, people have slight, if any, opportunity to enjoy other facets of culture.

Origins

The 17th-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes asserted that the life of primitive mankind was "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." From what is known of primitive tribes that have survived into the 20th century, his statement seems to be correct. At some time before recorded history, however, people began to group themselves into settlements and, by cooperative endeavor, to make better lives for themselves (see Ancient Civilization).

These first settlements, so far as archaeologists have discovered, were in the river valleys of ancient China, India, Mesopotamia, and Egypt. These ancient peoples developed tools by a slow and tortuous process of trial and error. But with these tools came a true culture. The people devised implements with which to farm, dig irrigation ditches, construct housing, and make everyday utensils. To aid them in their endeavors, they must have achieved the use of the tool called language, first

spoken and later written. They also had to learn rudimentary mathematics: how to measure land and to count objects such as animals and possessions.

At some very early period, too, people developed the tools to engage in the decorative, musical, and literary arts. The decorative arts probably appeared first, even before any significant advances in technology. It is known, for instance, that the remarkable cave paintings of southern France and northern Spain are perhaps as much as 30,000 years old. Literary arts--poetry and song--could only come along once spoken language had evolved. It seems likely that before people wrote to each other they expressed themselves by drawings or pictograms such as the hieroglyphics used by the ancient Egyptians.

Popular Culture

Many people, when they use the word culture, mean a degree of refinement. They think of those who are cultured as having an appreciation for the arts--for good literature, painting, sculpture, and music. This is not a mistaken use of the word, but it is a restricted

definition. If culture and civilization are, for all practical purposes, inseparable, they signify the totality of a society's achievements.

Civilization, therefore, should be viewed as including all human activity and expression within a given society. In the United States, for example, the economic system, political institutions, educational systems, religious bodies, legal systems, television programming, motion pictures, sports, popular literature, rock music, shopping malls, the popularity of the automobile, the presence of a large middle class, the variety of ethnic backgrounds, and many other factors all must be taken together as constituting present-day American civilization.

Other aspects of American civilization have also found their way around the world. Rock music originated in the southern United States during the 1950s, featuring such performers as Elvis Presley, Bill Haley and the Comets, and Chuck Berry. Today rock music is in nearly every country, even in Communist societies that consistently denounce American values. Blue jeans are another instance of one small aspect of American civilization that has spread around the world. Their popularity is such that they are even counterfeited in other countries and given American brand names.

The transfer of 20th-century culture is not a one-way street. Other societies have an impact on the way life is lived in the United States. An obvious influence is on eating habits. The large number of

Italian, Chinese, French, Greek, and Japanese restaurants suggests that Americans are extremely fond of ethnic foods. Another example is foreign automobiles. Since World War II, many Americans have come to prefer driving cars made in Germany, Japan, England, Italy, and Sweden instead of those produced by Detroit automakers. Part of this preference has to do with the prestige of owning an expensive imported car, though much of it is a desire for better-made automobiles.

Sports offer another instance of cross-cultural influence. Skiing, which originated in Norway, is extremely popular with many Americans and has come to support a major tourist industry in Colorado, Vermont, Utah, and other states. Soccer, or association football, long the most popular spectator sport in the world, has also finally caught on in the United States to the extent that there is a professional soccer league and the game is played in high schools and colleges. Baseball, meanwhile, has gone the other way--from the United States to Japan, the West Indies, and much of Latin America.

Unity and Diversity

Regional differences in the United States developed long before the country was tied together by mass communications and rapid transportation. They have persisted, though in a modified way, into the late 20th century. Regional dialects of English persist, especially in the Northeast and in the South. People live somewhat differently in southern California from the way they live in New York or the Midwest. But these differences do not represent different civilizations. They are, rather, all parts of the totality of American civilization. People in the United States, wherever they live, tend to share certain values and attitudes that are not quite the same as those found in Italy, Germany, China, Russia, or even such close neighbors as Canada and Mexico.

The same point can be made about other countries. In France, for example, there are definite differences that distinguish Paris from Provence in the south or Normandy in the northwest. Yet, in spite of the differences, there is no doubt that there is a French civilization that is quite distinct from that found across the Rhine River in Germany--and markedly different from the civilizations of Egypt or India.

There are attitudes to work, religion, politics, recreation, economics, and other matters that set countries apart from each other in addition to differences in values and attitudes that may prevail within a society. Even these differences are components of a country's civilization.

Progress and Change

The words progress and change are often used interchangeably, but they are not alike. All progress represents change, but not all change is progress. A poor man may become rich; through misfortune he may become poor again. His circumstances have changed twice, but he has seen no progress. Real progress is the result of technology, a move forward that is not reversed. No army fights a war with bows and arrows when gunpowder, rifles, and artillery are available. Students no longer use slide rules with pocket calculators so inexpensive and easy to obtain.

Technological advancements that bring progress are the result of human ingenuity. But there are aspects of human creativity that do not foster progress, though they may inaugurate change-- permanent or temporary. Among these are the arts, politics, and religion. A political system, for instance, may change from an absolute monarchy to a democracy; but it can also change back again.

This difference between progress and change can be demonstrated by a visit to a museum. At the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., for instance, one can trace the technological development of flight from the earliest airplanes to space probes. Conversely, one can visit a museum of Roman antiquities in Cologne, Germany, and view ancient jewelry that was beautifully crafted by goldsmiths and silversmiths long dead. The work of those ancient craftsmen is in no way inferior to that of modern craftsmen, though styles and materials have changed.

Progress in technology moves steadily forward; once a discovery is made, it need not be made again. But in other areas of human endeavor there is always the possibility of making a change and then undoing it. Or there may be no real change at all--just a continuation of human creativity as in literature, music, painting, and the other arts.

Theories of Civilization

Most modern theories of civilization and culture place great emphasis on progress. But in the ancient world philosophers examined the events of history and compared them with the processes of nature. In so doing they concluded that civilizations went in cycles. Aristotle noted in his 'Rhetoric' that "In most respects, the future will be like what the past has been." The Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius stated in his 'Meditations' that "Constantly consider how all things such as they now are, in time past also were." This cyclic view was typical of the ancient world with a striking exception: St. Augustine of Hippo, one of the greatest of Christian theologians, was the first to enunciate a progress theory but one quite different from modern ones. His notion of progress was not technological. Rather it was the idea of a journey, from the city of mankind to the end of history and on to the city of God.

With only the exception of French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who regarded civilization as a decadence from the state of natural man, most modern theories of culture have emphasized progress. Here again the emphasis was not necessarily technological. The 18th-century Enlightenment focused upon mankind as comprised of rational beings who could control their own destiny and remake the world on their way to perfection. In the 19th century, especially after the publication of biologist Charles Darwin's works on evolution, there was the theme of natural and inevitable progress through the means of natural selection. The great socialist writer Karl Marx worked out a theory of progress that called for revolution growing out of class conflict. (See *also* Darwin, Charles; Evolution; Marx, Karl; Socialism.)

In the 20th century a reaction took place against evolutionary theories in the writings of two noted authors: Oswald Spengler, author of 'Decline of the West' (2 vols., 1918, 1922), and Arnold Toynbee, author of the 12-volume 'Study of History', published between 1934 and 1961. Both of these men rejected ideas of permanent progress in favor of cyclic theories. Spengler regarded civilizations as organisms that are born, mature, and decay. It was his belief that modern Western civilization had reached the stage of irreversible decay and would soon be replaced by another civilization. For Toynbee cultures arose through mankind's response to the challenges offered by the environment, declining through exhaustion because of decreasing ability to meet challenges. One of the more interesting views of culture was put forward by the American archaeologist Henri Frankfort. He argued that all comprehensive theories are probably futile because the forces that motivated the development of civilizations may never be known.