The concept of “civilization” presages the ascent of global modernity while also challenging its apparent universality because it is bounded by both history (temporality) and place (culture). Civilization indeed once stood for world-historical progress and domination. Encounters and conflicts between civilizations acted as spurs toward processes of internationalization that prefigured the present vogue for spatial categories—the notion of the globe.

The term civilization stems from civilize, that is, to make civil that which implicitly is unruly or barbaric, hence, also implying an existing nature of some kind. A common term used broadly, civilization often elides proper definition and understanding, representing variously projected images of who we are and what we have become in different epochs. Its etymology gives some clue to its historical force and relevance, particularly as its genealogy is inextricably bound up with Europe and its imperial colonial expansions. To civilize a person or people, a phenomenon related to the earlier civilité (and civil), meant to institute a form of life that is closely associated with the political structure of the city or a settled complex society that the Latin civitatum once represented. This entry discusses several important features that characterize this type of existence that has been variously discussed by historians, anthropologists, social scientists, and thinkers.

One predominant characteristic of its trajectory is its inexorable unintentional encompassment of oppositions or contradictions, for example, civilized and “savage,” refined and vulgar, domesticated and wild, fraternal unity and estranged otherness, and advanced and primitive. Hence, under its canopy of complexity, there lie internal tensions and boundary delineations that forever attest to the essential contestability of the concept. Its inevitable contestability has once more prompted forms of resistance and self-assertion in the combat against perceived cultural grievances perpetrated largely by dominant Western (secular) philosophies and institutions.

Before 1750, civilization was associated with the practice of cultivating—derived from organic tilling and husbandry—carrying all the connotations of the Latin Cultura. (Kultura in German later becomes distinct from Zivilization as exemplified by the works of Immanuel Kant.) To cultivate is a deed involving nature, and this would later be extended, importantly, to the nature of civil life itself where human sociability (sociabilité) was enhanced by means of the rule of law, science, and the arts. Yet religion was pivotal to its conception from the beginning because sociability had to be preserved from the “false civilization” or evil that would inevitably develop. It is no coincidence that along with the Marquis de Mirabeau, Issac Newton, Benedict de Spinoza, and Immanuel Kant conceived their task of explaining the world in either philosophical or scientific ways as activity grounded in the religious worldview. After circa 1750, the bifurcation of civilization misleadingly led to the proposition that Cultura was something higher and superior to the base, materialist crudity of civilization. Letters, language, poetics, drama, theology, music, and mathematics were elevated in status to that which sustains and elevates the “spirit” of humankind—elements that were also previously encompassed by the older connation of civilization. Each of these elements was considered fitting for the task of refining or polishing what nature had endowed humans with. The dominion over other creatures, like the lower instincts and passions of humans, was integral to the formation of a civilized (or humanized) human animal; and the mark of such
an achievement was the degree to which one seemed polished and refined (thus also educated) in the company of others.

By the close of the 18th century, the courtier had surpassed both the knight and the hero in evaluative symbolic norms. Emerging from the grand courts of dynastic Europe—especially France—courtly behavior and standards of high culture eventually spread to the middle classes, which by means of revolution themselves incorporated such standards with modifications of their own. Hence, the much celebrated industrial revolution of western Europe was surmounted by the importance of other forces of self-transformation of a less materialist kind. The symbolic moral milieu was a realm of importance beyond merely the discursive exercises of moral philosophers, for it helped transform the understanding of individuals’ modes of conduct and their estimations of others (i.e., within and between classes, tribes, and societies). Manners, codes of presentation, and representation in complex networks of social intercourse—including the attendant disciplining of one’s instincts and passions—were also integral to modern notions of improvement and advancement and, therefore, civilization.

Civilized-Barbarian Dyad

Those dissimilar to one’s own kind, particularly when considered unpolished in their ways, were deemed uncouth and often barbaric foreigners. This refers to the second element of the concept: how symbolic frameworks and configurations of power form principles of division and distinction: the civilized-barbarian dyad. This dyad of two antagonistic groups represents a universal axis of sorts because it is found among almost every settled, complex political society on earth, and it was bequeathed to us from ancient tribes and cities that either vanished or became absorbed into dominant civilizations. We know from the hieroglyphic era that the alien was an important figure for the formation of distinctive civilizations (identities) as those who lie outside (the boundary of membership) were ipso facto untethered to the cosmic metaphysical vision of one’s kind. Norms of social and moral conduct were not applicable to the “barbarian” and as a consequence vicious violence was a common weapon against those who threatened the community.

Barbarism lies within the heart of civilization even while “superior men” lay claim to divine providence, destiny, or learned wisdom to justify their claim to a higher existence. Violence and religiosity are therefore not necessarily antithetical to each other; yet religious worldviews also contest the exclusionary practices of states and war machines because their transcendental principles mostly embody an ethic of hospitality. The heathen or pagan unbeliever is also one’s “brother” (or sister); thus it becomes evident how both axes of the particular universal instance work to produce tensions within civilizational complexes. Instead of simply cultures or societies, one can more rightly speak of having complex constellations of underlying and formal logics of identification that produce particular tensions. Such tensions can best be conceived within the conceptual terms of processes rather than discrete entities or units in space.

Temple-Sacral Space

A third element of civilizations refers to a more primordial, premodern phenomenon that predates even the emergence of states: the temple-sacral space divined by religious guardians (priests) who mediate between the earthly and cosmic orders. In this sense, civilizations are not necessarily city or state centered, nor do they presuppose a post-tribal form of existence. When ancient astrologers, shamans, and mystics read the sky and its extra-mundane orders of reality, they were propelling the forces of human civilization. Nature and the divine order were incorporated into their radical revelations.
of the true origins of time, life, creation, and being; and their respective scriptural techniques and spiritual practices and rituals incorporated many former animistic, folklore, and sage beliefs of ancient peoples. Primitiveness is an outdated 18th-century concept—intimately connected with imperial power and Judaeo-Christian prejudices—that falsely denigrates the cosmologies and symbolic technologies of manifold communal-tribal societies.

The primitive-modern dichotomy that plagued anthropology, development studies, foreign policy, and art began to collapse only with the arrival of the magisterial work of Levi Strauss, the famous French structural anthropologist. It revealed simultaneously two points: The “savage” is needed for the aggrandizement of the “civilized” colonizer, who evinces a severe lack of knowledge, and every native society has a complex array of symbolic and material techniques (knowledge) that conjoin with complex cosmologies that are richly interwoven with intricate webs of social interaction and filial bonds. More contemporary understandings of civilizations emphasize the plurality of forms of civilization, dispensing with problematical traditional Eurocentric views of tribal (native) societies. Through numerous encounters, conflicts, and exchanges, the global perspective of civilizational difference has given rise to a renewed appreciable interest in world religions and nontheist belief systems. The groundbreaking work of the French sociologist Émile Durkheim in the early part of the 20th century showed how aboriginal peoples possess distinctive frames of meaning and cosmological orientations. Hence, before the Greeks, Persians, and Chinese, aboriginal peoples were developing formative ideas of how nature and the divine order intersect, sustain life, and imbue human life with purpose.

The denaturalization of the cosmos via the sacred and its concomitant symbolization of organic life led to adventures and breakthroughs that would reverberate for millennia. To that extent, civilization is irreducible to empire, state tyranny, domestication, and polished standards; it represents humankind under the canopy of extra-human elements (i.e., earth, sky, gods, fate, and spirit-souls) that mingle with the sublime unconscious of a group or individual. Destiny, future, and present are inextricably linked to the past, historical time, and ancestral being, hence giving the species Homo sapiens a radically different (yet also similar) trajectory to other natural beings. The animality of humans was a relatively late modern discovery that was made possible only after nihilism (“death of God”) cleared the way for natural science. Yet one kind of sciencing is not necessarily a timeless, abstract, universal activity of investigation.

Positivist science does suppose this, yet a civilizational studies approach would find sciencing to occur in different ways and methods at different times for variable purposes and ends (e.g., values). In this regard, the history and philosophy of science are akin to the history and philosophy of religions; an analogue exists between the two because world orientations are neither homogenous nor divisible into separate compartments of cosmological axioms. Religion and science, like nature and society, are wedded; it follows that the global predominance of one kind of science or (a)theism is not necessarily going to remain permanent; impermanence as the becoming of something new or different or merely temporal is the mark of civilizational analysis. By contrast, globalism presents itself as a permanent, irreversible phenomenon founded largely on a spatial rather than a temporal category. The “modern” is thus bound up with territoriality and its transcendence.

**Constellation of Processes**

It is therefore of interest that civilizational analysis—while capable of explaining globalizing forces—is not locked into reductive schemas, including those centered on spatial units or substances. A fourth
fundamental element exists here: The unity of any civilizational identity is only temporally formed in and through several formative processes that manifest a coalescence into a complex. Instead of a whole organism or political unity, one can think of a civilization as a constellation of processes forming a temporally contingent complex. That is to say, civilizations are not substances extended in space such as cells within an organism: They vanish and appear and yet have a presence within historical time. Their formation results from a complex network of interlocking processes—material, moral, political, ecological, and metaphysical (spiritual). No singular landscape, language, or religion defines the unstable formative processes that give rise to civilizational complexes such as ancient Hellas and Rome, Ming China, and the Inca, among others. It is correct to say that heterogeneity marks the internal as well as the external constellation of relations of such complex societies. That being so, sociocultural complexes of this kind are in fact wholly porous things with extremely elastic margins of inclusivity and therefore moral exclusion. Yesterday's barbarian may rapidly become tomorrow's fellow citizen or neighbor—"it is only a matter of time," as the cliché has it.

Processes of national independence may, for instance, intensify and widen as a result of forces or changes specific largely to that civilizational constellation in time (e.g., Europe in the 1990s). Nation building and postcolonial independence are therefore not anathema to the project of civilization but integral to its modern operations. As processes, they can be understood as much more than mere "political" phenomena since the emergence of the Westphalian state-system resulted from the broader unity of an absolutist-Christendom-aristocracy constellation of Europa. This example of civilizational processes also exemplifies the fact that they cannot be bounded by a single constellation for too long; they thrust themselves beyond symbolic frontiers that often serve to define the insider-outsider boundary when ideology, belief, or political interest necessitates it. In this light, one can observe that the circumnavigation of the globe acted as an impetus to globalization but only from the proper vantage point of the agent—the phenomenon being the result of actions and ideas of concrete subjects who were acculturated by particular symbolic designs and logics. Processes—whether global or not—always require substantiation and agency, hence the critique of abstract globalism as espoused by lay and technical observers. Without agents of culture—valuation, sociability, or self-interpretation—there could not have been phenomena such as internationalization or globalization.

**Cyclic Worldviews**

Finally, the idea of civilization antedates the modern era; consequently, modern precepts such as "progress" should not be read back into them. Notable in this regard is the tension between the prejudice for progressive advancement—a legacy of 19th-century natural science—and the orientation of other ages and peoples that largely conformed to the movements of the cosmos and nature. The former inclination—traditionally Western and European—tends to confer an instrumental attitude toward nature onto other (or previous) civilizations. Power and appropriation have certainly been common to most complex societies, yet different cosmologies or belief systems incorporated and elevated the importance of cyclical seasons and forces within nature herself. Time was also cyclical, and the ravages of nature—as catastrophic science would later acknowledge—confirmed the decidedly fragile fabric of social life. Birth, growth, decomposition, death, and rebirth were all vital facets of the civilizational processes of expansion and contraction (akin to the patterns of the global economy today). The regeneration of the universe was commonly conceived to be intertwined with the life cycle of one's particular community—an insight regained today through ecological science.

Human development, not to mention technological innovations, occurred mostly within the symbolic...
parameters of such cyclic worldviews. Indeed, preceding the modern instrumentalist view of nature—a
domination of nature through predictive powers decreed as impartial knowledge—one finds two
essential elements of overcoming the dangers of wild animal life emerged: specialization and vertical
differentiation or social hierarchy. A heightened division of labor (including the creation of surplus and
relative organic stability through agriculture) and with it a greater differentiation between social
types/functionaries was propelled by worldviews other than the linear conception of time that
progress was thought to represent. Kings and palatial officials took care of civil matters on the basis of
divine authority, which itself explained earthly natural events in the terms of its own cosmology.

Higher specialization and divisions within society gradually altered religious world understandings even
while these understandings were originally foundational for the forming of complex civilized societies.
Each mutually influenced and (largely) reinforced the other—a point often forgotten in broad references
to so-called global phenomena. Complexity and differentiation in all kinds of spheres of life is a hallmark
of human civilization(s), as are also domination and the desire for increased power and security over
time. However, it is important to conceive of these phenomena as emerging from and manifesting
themselves out of so many discernible as well as indiscernible processes. Technological change, for
instance, may hold sway over our lives today, and yet not all of its (underlying) processes are clearly
known to us. Hence, the unconscious still plays its sui generis role in tamed, domesticated life, where
existence is no longer simply a given.

See also:
Colonialism, Culture, Notions of, Empires, Enlightenment, The, Global Religions, Beliefs, and Ideologies,
Global Village, Humanity, Concepts of, Modernization, Myths, Otherness, Pariahs, Global

Further Readings

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