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## THE HISTORIAN AND THE IDEA OF WORLD CIVILIZATION

AT THE END OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, the French *philosophe* Condorcet wrote that the spread of civilization to all parts of man's world would result in the ending of wars for conquest, and he envisioned our age as one in which an enlightened mankind would be able to provide for its needs so that poverty also would be fully abolished. Condorcet remained inspired by the *éclat* of the French Revolution, but died at the hands of the beast in the labyrinth at the centre of that revolution—a victim of the Reign of Terror. Civilization, as his generation understood it, *has* spread into the remotest corners of man's earth, brought there largely by nineteenth-century conquerors from Europe who were inspired by the same hope for progress as Condorcet. But no one will deny that the dilemma of our time is the fear that our progress has created the weapons to destroy all forms of human culture. Those who "protest", and intone moral warnings against these present evils, never stop reminding us that because the world's population has grown by nearly a billion people since the end of World War II, potentially explosive tensions are ever worsening, relentlessly driving us toward the final war. And nothing can be clearer in this year of the cinematographic genius of Expo '67, Centennial, Six-Day War, and famine in India: now as always, poverty is the daily bread of most mankind, all industrial revolutions and foreign aid notwithstanding.

It is perhaps both the horror of destruction and some inchoate drive to avoid obliteration that has driven us to hope for world unity. Since Woodrow Wilson at least, Western intellectuals have put their faith in global organization, world government, and world civilization. This may be because we do fear the future, and in so real a way that the medieval dread of the Last Judgment seems trivial by comparison. Thus we are anxious for the reassurance that there will *be* a future, and that the problems now oppressing us can be ended by taking constructive action. We assume that if we succeed we shall proceed to a higher stage of human civilization. And while economists, psychologists, and educators are sure to discuss the world's problems frequently,

the historian is seldom heard from. His role, if any, is priestly: to interpret mankind's dreams; to soothe away the fears of the anxious sceptic; and to affirm faith in tomorrow's progress.

But the progress we mean is a progress of civilization, and historians understand civilization mainly in terms of a development of ancient cultures known only by their ruins. Can we conceive of or discuss world civilization at all before it too is in ruins? If so, then we must simply accept the notion that civilization has to do with technology, lots of science, long histories, sophisticated religions or sophisticated denials of religion, higher education, and so on. Since such traits are diffused throughout the world, there are some who would say that world civilization already exists. But that would not offer us any hope for the future, since this world civilization in which we live is really very dreary. We know what it is about, and it is clear that we cannot easily solve existing problems. Certainly if we are to have the "courage to be" we shall need some belief about what *is* to be. This is itself a sign that we are civilized.

Primitive people have no sense of history. It is true that they have oral traditions, but their stories about the past are not clearly defined in terms of definite time and place. They also have no clear sense of tomorrow other than the tomorrow of the next sunrise. Still, we are actually more primitive than our ancestors at least in this regard, that we *do have* anxiety, even about the sun's rising again. We wish to be assured that there will be a grand new sunrise in the history of our time, and in the history of our children's children, down through endless generations.

There are several ways of defining civilization. They influence any dreams of future progress that we might have and affect our thinking on whether we really want a world civilization at all. We can mean the world "civilization" in the sense that there are certain characteristics of cultured behaviour which generally fulfill the acceptable requirements of civilized behaviour expected of people native to a given society. Civilization exists for them when laws, manners, civility, urbanity, and such attributes of social behaviour have become widespread among the group. If similar habits, manners, and mores spread throughout the world, then we can easily say that a world civilization exists. But that is only because we have restricted our definition to social behaviour: to manners, the enforcement of laws, to codes of morality. It was in fact this definition of civilization which first emerged in Europe towards the end of the eighteenth century when men looked to future moral progress, not to future material progress at all. Material progress did

not become important until the Industrial Revolution and after. In our time, we tend to look forward to a higher standard of living and something which is so much more than what is usually accepted as civilized behaviour, that even wars will become impossible.

In our era, Arnold Toynbee has become famous for his theory of civilizations. A civilization was, he said, "an intelligible unit of study". Most of the civilizations that he studied, however, had existed in the past. That nations can rise, live, and die—or that civilizations, empires, peoples, follow a life cycle—is an idea that goes back to antiquity, but one that has become popular again in the present century. If a world civilization is an "intelligible" entity with an organic life of its own, then of course, it must be born and it must also die. If civilizations, that is, can come into existence only by being born, after others have perished, then of course Western civilization and any and all other civilizations now existing must perish before any new world can be born. There is nothing necessarily more ethical, better, or more pleasing about such a new world. We cannot even belong to it.

In actual fact, most Western thinkers who have written on the problem of civilization have confused world civilization with our own Western civilization, and possibly not so much with that civilization as with the West's technology and moral codes. Albert Schweitzer believed in a spiritual renewal of Western values, and Toynbee in the revival of Western Christianity as means of saving this civilization from decline and disaster. Schweitzer, especially, believed quite simply that the most viable road to civilization was provided by the *Weltanschauung* (world view) of West Europeans at the end of the eighteenth century. He deplored the fact that Europeans fell away from these ideals in the age before and after World War I. His contemporary, Toynbee, was influenced by similar disillusionment with the generation of the early twentieth century. No one thought then that the catastrophic end which befell Rome could ever occur in the West. Yet his generation read Gibbon on the decline and fall, and asked themselves whether they too had not yet reached that degree of decadence necessary for the final collapse of their civilization.

Modern historians no longer attribute the fall of empires to moral decadence. Usually they look for hard facts and find economic reasons. Both Toynbee and Schweitzer were the products of a belief system that had reached its peak during the French Revolution. They had not yet entirely absorbed a much more modern way of looking at life, a belief in humanity, which had emerged out of the chaos of the Napoleonic Wars. In that era too, men were concerned with catastrophic wars, but they did not in any way imagine that

civilization would fall. Instead they responded with a strident nationalism, a closer definition of the community of defence, and thereafter spent a century paying lip-service to higher concepts while making more wars in the name of nationalism. This quite clear-cut way of identifying with a smaller in-group and using its values to justify the existence of all humanity is very characteristic of the way in which the Western mind—if there is such a thing—works. The history of the word “civilization” itself is also, in fact, always tied up with the remedies proposed for the ills of society, whether in a national society or in the society of all humankind. What we *do* and *can mean* by world civilization becomes clearer as a result of a brief historical exposition.

Ancient Greek and Roman ideas about membership in a civilized group are the direct ancestors of our ideas about civilization. The Greeks tended to think of cultured men as living in a city, a *polis*. Very probably they had been influenced by Mesopotamian ideas going back before the Babylonians to the oldest civilization in the fertile crescent—the Sumerian. The peculiar city-state form of government of the Sumerians may have influenced the Greeks, probably through the Minoan civilization on Crete which also had an urban culture. Or perhaps influences spread to Greece itself along Turkish trade routes which have not been discovered. Certainly the Sumerians were conquered by 2000 B.C., and the most primitive Greeks did not arrive in the Mediterranean basin before about 1200 B.C. The Greek civilization that has influenced us the most reached its peak much later in the fifth century B.C.

The Sumerians had several ideas which seem to have come down to us. It seems clear that they were able to distinguish a theoretically civilized in-group from an uncivilized out-group. The superior people were those who had settled down to farming although they lived in walled cities and were regarded as belonging to the God of that city. Sumerian literature glorifies settled people and regarded nomads who grazed their livestock as barbarians. The ancient Hebrews appeared on the scene certainly no earlier than the collapse of Sumerian civilization around 2000 B.C. In any case, Hebrew thought as it is reflected in the story of Cain and Abel turns the Sumerian belief on its head. Abel, the nomad and sheep herder, was favoured in the eyes of God, and his farmer-brother Cain slew him in rage. Later, the Hebrews were able to consider themselves more civilized than the people around them, but not because they had begun to live in cities, and not by reason of their livestock raising or farming. (Commerce was an art they developed many centuries after Moses.) What set the Hebrews off from other people and created a non-material distinction between themselves and others

was the Law as given in the Ten Commandments. Civilization, then, did not depend on the way in which one earned one's livelihood, but on laws and religion.

For the Greeks and Romans, material distinctions remained important. Aristotle's ideal "civil man" was educated and courteous, and he participated in the political life of the city. He was better housed and fed and distinct from the savage in the woods whose aggression was not less than that of wild beasts. This is a distinction between town and country that has lasted throughout Roman and then European history. It was also carried over into American manners and mores, where the distinction became also more pronouncedly that of frontier and settled places. Actually it is not very different from the Sumerian preference for the farming and commercial pursuits of settled persons.

The Greeks and Romans also had some other distinctions which we have adopted. They placed great value on citizenship, the ideal of the *polis* (in Latin, *civitas*). Once Roman rule was established, Roman citizenship was extended to many subjects in conquered nations. When the Roman Republic fell, the distinction between citizens of a city republic and those who were not citizens diminished. The empire and membership in the great imperial community became more important. Rome was eternal, it was invincible, it could not fall. Those who lived beyond her borders were Barbarians. Yet Latin did not even become the common language of the empire. The use of Greek, spread by the conquests of Alexander the Great some centuries before Caesar, remained the language of science and of educated men in Egypt and the Middle East. There, in Palestine, the conquered Hebrews were still allowed a puppet king and a puppet government, although under the supervision of a Roman governor. The people themselves no longer spoke Hebrew, but the Aramaic dialect, and the land had for a long time been inundated with Greek traders and Hellenistic culture. Christianity was carried by Greek-speaking Jews to the Greek-speaking parts of the Roman Empire so that most of the early interpretations of the meaning of Christianity were permeated with Greek philosophy. The new religion defined a new identity, a new way of setting oneself off from other peoples. One could defend the Christian community if not the whole Roman Empire. Perhaps that is why it survived that empire.

The idea that Christianity had created a new people goes back to the first great church historian, Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, and friend to Emperor Constantine. Eusebius had also had a hand in formulating the Nicene Creed, although the emperor's final version of it, accepted by the

Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325, was not entirely to his liking. But it was not the Trinity but the new religion itself that had made it possible to form a new people. Anyone could join by believing and becoming baptized. All people of the empire could become Christian and be welded into a single Christian folk. Actually this only created a new in-group, because not all citizens of the empire became Christian as Eusebius had hoped. But a Christian civilization had its beginning, and it later absorbed the peoples of Western Europe even after Rome fell. Its chief apostle was St. Augustine. Its bible was his *De civitate Dei*, A.D. 426.

Augustine's focus was not on the ideal of urbane citizenship, but on the problem of the moral merit of the individual in the eyes of God. Morality was necessary and essential for all definitions of "civilized". Man could love good or evil, and free will allowed him to make a choice. In choosing which he loved more, he could become a member of the good city of Jerusalem—which was the city of God—or the evil city of Babylon. A man who chose evil could not be considered among the elect members of the invisible Church of true believers. Augustine's stress on membership in a moral community later influenced Western thinking on the matter of distinguishing civilized from uncivilized, and Western Christian civilization from others.

The Reformation divided the West. The Roman Church considered Protestants as outside of the community of true believers. The Protestants regarded the Catholics as corrupt, fallen away from the true teachings of Christ. Every man could now find his way to God by reading the Bible, and so the Protestant ethic created more room for intellectual expansion. Yet the notion of civilization developed in Catholic France.

Although Descartes expressed the idea of being "civilized", in regard to the establishment of law and order, in his *Discourse on Method*, he used only the verb "to civilize", and not the noun "civilization". The noun emerged in France only after the middle of the eighteenth century, and as the result of Boulanger's study of ancient civilization, in his *Antiquity revealed by its usages* (1766).

Although Voltaire never used the noun "civilization", he did develop one of the first modern philosophies of it in his *Philosophy of History*. Morality, said Voltaire, was the same among all civilized nations. This immediately excluded Rousseau's noble savage and St. Augustine's community of those who chose to live a Christian life. Not religion or any one religion now became the basis of civilized existence, but a general moral perfecting of all humankind. This was the common denominator.

Later, Voltaire's contemporary *philosophe*, and biographer, Condorcet, wrote in his biography *Voltaire* (1787) that Europe's best defence against the invasion of barbarian peoples (and the fate of Rome) was the enlightenment of its thinkers, a far greater strength than the power politics of her princes. It was also Condorcet who affirmed the Enlightenment faith in the indefinite intellectual and moral perfectibility of man in his *Sketch for the Progress of Mankind*, a book written from memory while he was in the prison in which he died.

Like Condorcet, the German thinkers of the end of the eighteenth century also believed that mankind was driving on towards greater moral and intellectual perfection. Kant, for example, was convinced that civilization (in German, *Kultur*) emerged when man rose from barbarism. This occurred when he left absolute ignorance behind him, and when his society placed great value on humanity. But for Kant, culture or civilization was not the ultimate goal of human existence. It was merely a preparation for a still higher epoch of morality and, eventually, of universal peace.

The chief exponent of the German ideal of humanity was Herder, a philosopher and clergyman who, in 1784, published a work on moral progress, *Ideas Toward a Philosophy of the History of Mankind*. His premise was that God put only one human race on the earth and promised it indefinite moral perfectibility. A clearer definition of "civilization", "culture", and "education" (*Bildung*) was worked out a generation later by the Prussian political philosopher, Wilhelm von Humboldt. An academic reformer, he understood civilization to mean material order as well as social mores which could modify behaviour. (The Germans still use "civilization" to refer to material progress and prefer to use "culture" to mean intellectual progress.) Von Humboldt did not, however, divide learning into C. P. Snow's "Two Cultures", and he used culture to mean a refinement resulting from the study of both art and science. The third component of the German idea of civilization as it emerged in von Humboldt's time is *Bildung*. We may translate it loosely as "education". Perhaps Voltaire's use of "cultivated", "civilized", is better. Certainly, intellectual and moral accomplishment is meant.

Oddly enough, the Humanity philosophy of the Germans was advocated by the same men who extolled national values. The individuality of a human being, and the humanity of the individual, could be developed by identifying with that State peculiar to one nation. Yet the ideal of a common humanity remained as a goal, even as the reunion of all Christian religions had remained a goal in previous centuries. But Herder was less explicit than St. Augustine

had been. At least Augustine had left the choice of the good city to the free will of the individual. Herder left the choice of good humanity to education, but allowed no means of getting to the point where one could elect humanity. Man's development could take place only in his national encasement.

By the middle of the last century, European historians had developed such a strong national consciousness that it became impossible to study any other kind of history except national history. A few historians had their doubts about where that would lead; some were even concerned with the philosophical problems raised. Was world history merely the sum of its parts, namely, merely the sum of all national histories, or was it something more? We can see in this a trend of thought very like the one we are expected to comment on in discussing the possibilities of world civilization. Is it to be the sum of its parts, that is, the sum of all existing civilizations, past and present—or something more? The answer to this question has not been found, either for world history or for world civilization.

No one in the nineteenth century really doubted that civilization and progress were not the same thing. And progress was for the Victorian gentleman not half as economic, despite the economic advances made in his own time, as it was for the twentieth-century man. The most philosophical of the English historians, Henry Thomas Buckle, whose *History of Civilization in England* (1857) sought to probe whatever depth of meaning there was in the idea of progress, concluded that progress had certainly not been moral. There was, in fact, nothing that had undergone so little change "as those great dogmas of which moral systems are composed." These beatitudes, "to do good to others; to sacrifice for their benefit your own wishes; to love your neighbor as yourself; to forgive your enemies; to restrain your passions; to honor your parents; to respect those who are set over you . . .", had been known for thousands of years and had also remained essentially unchanged for about the same length of time. With Voltaire, he agreed that intellectual truth alone made for progress. Europe's superiority over the Ancients lay only in its contributions in all fields of knowledge. Civilization was the product of both moral and intellectual action. The combined product of both caused change, and so progress. The material environment had little effect on it.

Buckle did not live to finish his studies, but many of his ideas appear to have influenced Toynbee, who also accepts moral and intellectual definitions of civilization, and who, in fact, takes some of Buckle's examples of challenge and response. Toynbee was also unconcerned about material determinism in history.



Toynbee, however, wrote his ten-volume *Study of History* during the 1930s when it once more seemed as if the light of civilization would vanish in Europe, and not during the hey-day of Victorian England. It seems, though, as if the crisis of the 1930s only re-awakened in him the memories of pessimism of that generation of late-Victorian youth which emerged from the trauma of World War I. Perhaps a better example of those who wished to return to the eighteenth-century ideal of progress—that barbarism could be overcome by enlightenment and by fighting superstition, and by practising a well-thought-out moral code—was Albert Schweitzer. Unlike others of the generation of 1914, he had begun to doubt the faith in progress as early as 1899 when he conceived the idea for his two-volume work, *The Philosophy of Civilization*. It was eventually written in Africa, but only during 1914-1918. Certainly Nietzsche had raised a voice of doom and had declared God to be dead, but his pessimism had been isolated and unique. Even his own philosophy could not be understood clearly, since it was published from garbled notes edited by a fanatic, proto-fascist sister. Schweitzer, however, was intelligible to the post-war generation of the 1920s and even to more recent generations.

Schweitzer's pessimism posed a dialectical opposite to the late-eighteenth-century optimism of Condorcet and other apostles of progress who believed in the perfectibility of man. For Schweitzer, the world's intense and ever-present suffering weighed heavily on the private man's conscience. He himself was more than keenly aware, as he said, that he lived "in a period of the spiritual decline of mankind." Neither technological progress nor science, neither economic prosperity nor success in power politics, was important in determining the rise and development of culture or civilization. Culture was the product of a "will-to-culture", of inner forces of conviction and perception, not of the material environment. Once the will to culture declined, decay set in. Schweitzer believed that he lived in an age which disdained ideas and great thinking, and so he was convinced that it was doomed. His age mocked the inalienable rights of man and considered the Enlightenment obsolete. His generation put its trust in *real-politik* and denied rationalism merely because the rationalism of the past had been compelled to give way to other political realism. There would come a time when political realism would reduce them "to ever-increasing depths of spiritual and material misery." Then men would have no alternative "but to entrust [themselves] to . . . a new rationalism of a deeper and more efficient nature than the old."

What Schweitzer was opposing was the kind of fatalism so popular in the 1920s when Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* became a best-

seller. This German school-teacher argued that all civilization followed life-cycles of birth and decay. As Europe was declining, its culture would inevitably soon be dead. Spengler's work was also admired by many people who later became ardent admirers of the dictators who menaced European culture more than any seemingly inevitable laws had ever done. Perhaps this is why the appeal of Nazism and similar schools of philosophy proved so strong, not only in Germany but throughout continental Europe. Against the inevitability of decay, the fascist ideology posed the inevitability of racial and national superiority.

However, Europe did not decline. During the 1950s a new boom era began, and greater advances in art, education, and perhaps even in science, took place than could have been imagined before 1945.

At the end of the war there emerged a whole new philosophy about, if not of, civilization. Its chief advocates have usually been existentialist philosophers and theologians. It might best be called the existential philosophy of civilization. Its intellectual presuppositions followed broad lines of thought established by theologians who had succeeded in preserving their moral and ethical purity during the Hitler era. It was the product of men who had in their own minds rejected the mockery of those who ridiculed the idea of the inalienability of *human*, as opposed to race, rights. And some, like the theologian Tillich, attempted to create the new rationalism which Schweitzer had predicted would emerge. For Tillich more than almost any other modern thinker made it clear that the greatest meaning of life depended on the profundity of reason: "die Tiefe der Vernunft."

Renewal of the eighteenth-century ideal of humanity was, however, the work of a philosopher and not of a theologian. According to Karl Jaspers' *Origin and Goal of History* (English ed. 1953), the end of human history was "the civilization and humanization of man." This could be achieved only by the establishment of law. And here he agreed with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers who had distinguished between the civilized community and the savage. Three more goals of history were, however, added by him. One, that liberty and the consciousness of it is one end of existence. It cannot be either defined or achieved by the rule of law, for the rule of law can achieve only political liberty. Part of the liberty intended is surely psychological in the sense of meaning freedom from whatever shackles the mind—compulsions, conformity, illness.

A second goal of history is the creation of a nobler human being, one more productive, more brilliant in creating culture. If this were not an end

of existence, there would not be any history at all. In the twentieth century this goal, which in Jaspers is re-affirmed in the style of eighteenth-century thinkers, has usually been the hope of scientists too. The example of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) comes to mind. It is a favourite of modern intellectuals because it presents the reader with one of the paradoxes of the modern era. This is, that as science advances, man seems to become less able to act humanly in his application of science. The hope of Jaspers and the apostles of progress, that in the future mankind would be able to control social problems arising from lack of intelligence, does not provide any plan for educating more people, or for getting rid of those characteristics of man that have nothing to do with intelligence—personality and warlike aggression.

There are, then, two major paradoxes that confront us in our time. We cannot establish a higher world civilization unless we can control aggression. Aggression exists instinctually and in a part of the brain separate from intelligence. Culture and education mean the civilized control of savage behaviour and, it is to be hoped, the modification of aggression. The civilized man, however, seems merely to be more cultured in his use of aggression. The aggression itself does not go away. More knowledge and greater social cunning are used to achieve the same brutal ends. What difference is there between the savage who finds a stone, rubs and shapes it until he can make a tool of it, and then also hits his neighbour on the head—and modern man, who can build great cyclotrons, discover nuclear power, and then make atomic and hydrogen weapons with which to destroy all mankind? Law and order are a way of controlling aggression so that it can be channelled into constructive activity and still be available for use in time of war, in defence of the community in which law exists. But mankind can no longer afford channelling its aggression into wars. If aggression is removed, however this may be done, then we shall also lose the drive to build and to procreate. In that case there will not be any people at all, savage or civilized.

Jaspers and other have tried to get around his dilemma by assuming, in keeping with traditional Western philosophy and theology, that the third goal of history is that *God* manifests Himself in history. This is, to be sure, mainly a Christian point of view and can not be acceptable to Buddhists and other large segments of the world's people who have a different insight into the nature of divinity. We have in fact got to confront the same paradox that confronted St. Augustine. If we assume that what men call God created mankind, leaving aside the way in which it was done, and if evil or aggression is built into the brain, and inherited, then what free choice to select good

(or humanity, or the "realization of higher civilization") does the individual human being have?

The idea of St. Augustine and of Western theologians is that man was also given an endowment to make possible "choice", despite the co-existence of determinism. If this was called free will by Augustine, it was a characteristic of humans which is not included in modern scientific conceptions of intelligence or personality. What is the will and where is it? Is it, too, instinctual?

Schweitzer believed in a "will-to-culture", and some of the most barbaric philosophies of modern times have extolled a "will-to-power". Yet if culture can decline, as Schweitzer said it has, then obviously it is not merely the product of an instinctual component. Animals do not have culture, although they may be intelligent, even show signs of having personalities, and of course, they are endowed with aggression. Whatever it is that modifies and civilizes human behaviour has to do with a consciousness of the past. It is the one way we have of distinguishing the preferred group and its behaviour from an out-group.

Naturally, this ability of man, like so many others, like science and technology, can also be used to fill aggressive aims, as in the case of war and war propaganda, or the preaching of hatred for other peoples because of some historical event of contact between them. It does not follow that if all the people of the world become conscious of the same history we shall then have a world civilization. For then, of course, all peoples would be able to distinguish themselves from the same non-civilized group, existing not in unexplored regions but in the remoteness of the past. I assume that by then new paradoxes will have emerged. We shall be traversing the universe and meeting new peoples in outer space. At the same time we shall be using the world's history, as its science and technology, for greater aggressive effort as well as for greater sophistication, culture, and civilization. I would not conclude from this that life is meaningless because a more noble human being cannot be produced by man himself. I should not give up on that goal yet. If I did, I would lapse into a cultural vacuum and find myself in a situation where those who can easily revert to more savage behaviour would seize control of the world while I sit by staring out of the emptiness of my existential neurosis. History has taught us this, if nothing more: that we must not cease to be aggressive while becoming at the same time more cultured. But we must be conscious of the paradox in our behaviour: that consciousness and the unexplored depths of will and reason could just bring out of us the potential for establishing a more civilized balance of the powers within us.