

Commentary

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“Civilization” in History and Ideology Since 1800

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Abstract: The term “civilization,” articulated in eighteenth century Europe, has been widely used in many languages from the nineteenth century to the present. It refers both to widespread societies governed by powerful states in modern times and to prestigious urban and monumental civilizations of ancient times. This essay explores the history of the concept of civilization through science, ideology, and schooling. Scientific exploration of civilization was an implementation of emerging studies in social science. Ideological statement of social priorities appropriated civilization, especially in the era of expanding capitalism, empire, and white supremacy. In the school systems set up around the world, the term “civilization” was included in the curriculum both to explain ancient heritage and the comparison of modern great powers, religious faiths, and cultural practices. Weaknesses in the concept of civilization are becoming apparent as knowledge expands. New factors to consider include the significance of the end of empire; increased attention to network dynamics as well as hierarchies; comparisons of biological equality and social inequality; the roles of commoners and local scales; the rise of global social and institutional structures; shifting balances of societies and regions; and more attention to the historical role of schooling and science.

Keywords: civilization, science, empire, schooling, capitalism, Bruce Mazlish

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1 Articulating “Civilization,” from 1756

The term “civilization” came into wide use once it was formulated by Victor Riqueti, marquis de Mirabeau, in his widely read book, *The Friend of Man, or Treatise on Population* (Comte de Mirabeau 2010).¹ The publication date of 1756 was significant in that it appeared just as France was entering the Seven Years’ War, in which it would lose much of its colonial empire to Britain. Mirabeau, in France, composed his book while carrying on a correspondence with his brother, who became governor of Guadeloupe in 1753. Mirabeau wrote of his interest in agriculture and colonies, speaking of “the art of colonies” – of colonization as an art form.

Mirabeau gave explicit reference to “civilization” only two times in his book yet referred to it indirectly several times. He spoke of religion as a spring underlying civilization, helping it to limit the negative influences of cupidity and commerce. He also spoke of historical development from barbarism to decadence by way of civilization and wealth (Gordon 2017, 114; Mazlish 2004). In other passages, Mirabeau condemned plantation slavery, favoring free over slave labor, yet identifying Africans as “of a different race” (Røge 2019, 72). The overall effect was to create the concept of civilization as conveying a well-ordered regime, encouraging sociability and limiting cupidity. This concept of civilization, implicitly, promised a solution to the problems of the day. Further, Mirabeau’s *Friend of Man* shows that he created the concept of civilization not simply to explain France or Europe but to address fundamentally the colonial encounter and its transformation of social orders and populations (Røge 2019, 67–71).

After publication of *The Friend of Man*, Mirabeau joined with economist François Quesnay and other intellectuals to form a group that became known as the “Economistes” or “Physiocrats,” emphasizing agriculture, rather than commerce or industry, as the basis of progress and liberty. The writings of this group remained popular for 20 years. They proposed economic and social policies both for the homeland and the colonies of France (Røge 2019, 101). They were critical of slavery and hoped to create a situation in which colonization could expand productively in Africa.

As others joined in the new discussion of civilization, the varying outlooks showed that, “various permutations of universalism and relativism were possible” (Mazlish 2004, 20). The initial applications of the term focused on the current moment – that is, on European and colonial society, on the Enlightenment philosophy of the mid-eighteenth century, and as a device for making comparisons

¹ Mirabeau, *L’Ami des hommes, ou traité de la population* (Avignon, 1756).

with the many other parts of the world with which Europeans were entering steadily closer contact (Voltaire 1756). That is, the notion of civilization began with a focus on philosophy and ideology in contemporary times; only later did it become a device for the interpretation of history.²

2 Framework for the World History of a Concept

Of the many books on civilization, I found one that traces skillfully the changing concept of civilization in world history. It is *Civilization and its Contents*, the 2004 book by the late Bruce Mazlish (Mazlish 2004), a social-science historian with a strong interest in global history and the founder of this journal.³ Mazlish shows that the term “civilization” was indeed created in Mirabeau’s 1756 book, reaffirming the work of other scholars.⁴ He also shows that the new term had a new meaning. The old terms “civilized” and “barbarian,” created two thousand years earlier in Greece, were *adjectives*, attributes that distinguished city people from rural people in their struggles. The new term “civilization” was a *noun*, referring more comprehensively to a society, its religion, culture, political and social structure and content. Mazlish labels civilization as a “reified” term, meaning that it transforms an abstract and perhaps scattered notion into a concrete and coherent form so that, in the minds of readers, Mirabeau made civilization into something real – perhaps a process, perhaps an entity (Mazlish 2004, 19). Mazlish next traces the spread of the new concept among French intellectuals and to English-speakers.

Why did the concept of civilization emerge in the mid-eighteenth century? Mazlish poses this question and identifies several reasons why a need arose for a term such as “civilization.” Overall, it facilitated a discussion of society as a whole. Europeans, who had carried on a centuries-long discourse on manners and mores, were now voyaging and observing throughout the world; they also observed the pressure of growing population at home. The Ottoman pressure on Europe caused each contender to study the other. European philosophy began to allow for self-reflection and the study of one’s own activity; and the rise of natural history and

2 Voltaire’s universal history, published in 1756, on “the manners and spirit of nations,” emphasized parallels among the influential societies of the past but not the progress of civilization (Voltaire 1756).

3 See Mazlish (2004). The title makes reference to another short book, Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (first U.S. edition 1930).

4 Mazlish relies especially on the earlier work of Jean Starobinski. In later years, Pernille Røge added further confirmation by showing that Mirabeau had used the word “civilization” with the same meaning in a 1754 letter to his brother, then governor of Guadeloupe (Mazlish 2004, 5; Røge 2019, 100).

scientific classification suggested that human society could also undergo scientific analysis. Mazlish emphasizes that, once these ideas had arisen, the term “civilization” crystallized a way of discussing them. Civilization, as a conceptual vision of society, promised solutions to the problems of the day: Mazlish notes that Mirabeau saw civilization as “a measuring rod” applied to the old regime of France (Mazlish 2004, 139). As time would show, the logic of civilization could also be applied to local and global scales, to the past and the future.⁵

Once the concept of civilization was released, it took on a life of its own. Mazlish explores two main axes of discourse on civilization. *Scientific discourse* (that is, “social-scientific discourse”) meant the effort to expand knowledge at the intellectual level; *ideological discourse* involved using the concept of civilization to support the social priorities selected by a group of people.

Mazlish focused first on civilization as a scientific or intellectual investigation. Having set forth his framework for analyzing the concept of civilization in world history, he moved next to show how Mirabeau’s concept of civilization could be applied to the collection of scientific knowledge about countries beyond one’s own. Mazlish quotes historian Gordon Wood, who argues that thinkers of the late eighteenth century were inspired by advances in natural science – as gravity was found to pull physical masses together – and sought a social parallel such as civilization to pull humans together in society (Mazlish 2004, 12).⁶ Mazlish emphasized the scientific thinking of two English leaders of expeditions. He described the voyages of Captain James Cook throughout the Pacific (1768–1779), collecting natural-science data but also analyzing the varying social orders of Pacific peoples (Mazlish 2004, 33–38). Similarly, Mazlish showed that Lord George Macartney, leader of Britain’s 1793 delegation to visit the Qianlong Emperor of China, joined the emperor in careful and mutual study of each other’s society, as each became aware of the other’s relative strengths (Mazlish 2004, 43).

In contrast, Mazlish opened his discussion of civilization’s ideological or political discourse with a definition: “... a colonial ideology – that is, the use of the concept of civilization to justify domination and superiority over others.” As he continued, “such hegemony is a puzzled one, marked from the beginning by doubts and often a guilty conscience” (Mazlish 2004, 12). Thus, the scientific discourse posed questions on civilization for research, while the ideological discourse proposed answers about civilization to be implemented as social priorities.

⁵ “The word referred first to the process that made individuals, nations, and all mankind *civilized* (a preexisting term) and later to the cumulative result of that process” (Mazlish 2004, 13).

⁶ The term “social science” seems first to have been expressed in the 1789 opening of the French Revolution, by Abbé Sieyès.

These are the basic elements of Mazlish’s framework for study of civilization. In the remainder of this essay, I seek to implement Mazlish’s framework for world-historical analysis of the concept of civilization – how its ideas have grown and changed in the days since Mirabeau. I summarize Mazlish’s views and my own interpretation in five historical periods: 1) France and the French empire, 1770–1815; 2) Britain and her allies up to 1850; 3) the world of capitalism and empire, 1850–1950; 4) Decolonization, 1950–2000; and 5) Civilization today and tomorrow. In each period, I give attention to *scientific* discourse and *ideological* discourse on civilization. In addition to Mazlish’s two axes of civilizational discourse, I have added a third: the discourse of *schooling*, for the post-1850 era of expanded schooling. Formal schooling of young people, from elementary to university levels, drew on available knowledge but also supported the social program of the state or community. Civilization in schooling was therefore a mix of science and ideology.

3 France: Civilization as Science and Ideology, 1770–1815

France remained wealthy and powerful throughout the eighteenth century, under firm control of its autocratic monarchy, yet with intellectual and social turmoil among those who sought liberation from monarchical restrictions. The Marquis de Mirabeau was a critic of French colonial policy who joined with others to form the Physiocrats, a group of economic critics. In practice, they were a subgroup within the Enlightenment thinkers and reformers of France and Europe.⁷

Abbé Pierre-Joseph-André Roubaud, another of the Physiocrats, published a multi-volume history of Asia, Africa, and the Americas (1770–1775) in which he shared the opinion that slavery should be abolished and argued that civilization could be exported to Africa through colonization (Røge 2019, 99–100). Shortly after Roubaud, Abbé Raynal published the widely read *History of the Two Indies*. Though not part of the Physiocrats group, Raynal similarly criticized slavery and French colonial policy (Gordon 2017, 123; Røge 2019, 102). Later, in a practical application of Physiocrat thinking, the chevalier de Bouffleurs, governor of French lands in Senegal in the mid-1780s, actually had success in producing and exporting crops (Røge 2019, 200–202).

⁷ Including the Scottish Enlightenment. Adam Ferguson’s 1767 book on civil society adopted the term “civilization,” though simplifying its meaning (Ferguson 1997, 7).

From 1789, the Revolution in France brought challenge to and (within four years) overthrow of the monarchy. The ideas of civilization now expanded in theory as the “vector of civilization” pointed toward liberty, equality, and progress, then gradually turned toward practical implementation.⁸ In a well-known 1790 speech to the Jacobin Club in Paris, the Comte de Mirabeau, the son of the Marquis de Mirabeau, presented a forceful response to the pro-slavery voices that had become influential, drawing on the economic arguments of the Physiocrats to argue for immediate abolition of slave trade and gradual emancipation of slaves (Røge 2019, 209–215). The French National Assembly emancipated Jews from their restrictions in 1791; it formally freed slaves in 1794 (though Napoleon revoked this emancipation in 1802).

The debates on civilization underwent transformation during the years of Revolution and empire, 1789–1815. While the early years of the French Revolution highlighted efforts at rational understanding and administration of society, during the later 1790s and especially from Napoleon’s 1799 seizure of power, the notion of “civilization” began to be used in ideological and autocratic terms. Meanwhile, throughout this complex period, France experienced industrial change as well as social turmoil, but did not participate in the growing networks and discourse of capitalism until after 1814: unlike Britain, France had remained centered on autocratic control of state and economy (Scott 2019; Brandon 2015).

Napoleon’s coup of 1799, replacing the Directory with the Consulate, reaffirmed the leadership of an interventionist state (Woolf 1989, 107). Yet the overlap of scientific and ideological discourses would go on. Napoleon’s 1798 invasion of Egypt included a scientific staff of over 150: once the conquest was complete, they investigated and copied great amounts of ancient Egyptian relics. At the same time, they pillaged much of Egyptian heritage, including the obelisk that still stands in the center of Paris. Indeed, French pillaging of European art to contribute to the Louvre and the glory of France had begun as early as 1796 (Mazlish 2004; Woolf 1989).

In the era of Napoleonic rule, efforts to expand the universal French empire encountered the complexity posed by ethnicity regarding the imposition of rationality and universality. When France annexed the historic Italian region of Tuscany into the empire, along with lands from Croatia to Albania, the decision was to administer them as departments integrated into metropolitan France rather than as distinctive colonies. French officials saw the Tuscans as lazy, the Albanians as savage, and Jews as relatively advanced in civilization but reluctant to give up their ethnic practices to participate in universality (Woolf 1989). In each case, the state imposed specific restrictions on ethnicities, to achieve their

⁸ “[A]bove all through the Revolutionary experiences, the state had acquired a leading role as the instrument of national unification and integration” (Woolf 1989, 107).

compliance. Through these difficult experiences, state-led activity to build civilization focused increasingly on an ideology of ethnic hierarchy rather than universality.

Discourse on civilization unfolded through the dramatic challenges to French absolutism, nationhood, and empire: it was self-reflective and self-critical in scientific mode, but not necessarily in ideological mode. The Napoleonic regime fell, but its institutions and its personnel remained influential in France and throughout its former European empire.

4 Britain and Allies: Capitalism and Empire, to 1850

Beyond France and its empire, big changes were unfolding in other Atlantic nations, especially through the creation of a capitalist socio-economic system. The linkage of merchants and state among the Netherlands, Britain, and the United States brought innovations at several levels. Capitalism consisted not only of *economy* (meaning industry at home and free trade abroad) – but also of *politics* (the alliance of state and merchants at home, the expansion of empire abroad) and *society* (meaning hierarchy of labor and social order at home and abroad).⁹ The new global system needed to allow collaboration among capitalist business firms even as capitalist nations competed and warred with each other. It required legal codes linking capitalist nations; it needed to impose law on the states and peoples being incorporated into the expanding network. Construction of the global system of capitalism required not only socio-economic strength but also an ideology to reinforce it: a theory of capitalism and of civilization. The concept of civilization explained how capitalist leaders needed to be seen as the legitimate leaders of economy and society in every part of the world.

Here I describe these processes in the early nineteenth century through the experiences of the United States, Britain, and the Netherlands.¹⁰ As these and other examples show, an ideological notion of civilization was adopted enthusiastically within the expanding capitalist system, ranking peoples by race and ethnicity at home and abroad. Increasingly, civilization was considered in ideological rather

⁹ For an important and pathbreaking interpretation of the links among the Netherlands, Britain, and the United States, see Scott (2017); for an interpretation of the rise of capitalism that is largely consistent with Scott, see Manning (2020, 177–191).

¹⁰ As of 1830, France and Belgium joined in following capitalist policies. The replacement of absolutist government with pro-capitalist states was debated throughout Europe, but only after 1850 did several more nations adopt pro-capitalist policies.

than scientific terms. As the ideology of civilization focused increasingly on notions of race, the practical summary of race and therefore of civilization became reduced to white supremacy.

The United States, independent from 1783, grew rapidly in population, economy, and empire. The U.S. thrived in worldwide trade as a neutral power during the French wars, selling industrial goods produced by wage labor in the northeast region, selling tobacco and cotton produced by slave labor in the South, and expanding an empire westward (North 1974). From 1784 the U.S. claimed lands west of the Appalachian Mountains and east of the Mississippi, then carried out military conquest and occupation of these western lands. Those wars of conquest, up to 1814, were led by generals William Henry Harrison and Andrew Jackson – both of whom later became presidents of the U.S.¹¹ Next, in an explicit and political application of “civilization,” the Congress of the United States adopted, in 1819, the “Civilization Fund Act.” This law established schools where Native American children (taken from their families) were sent to learn English language, farming, and the dress and culture of white Americans (Frank 2009). Thus, civilization became explicitly linked to racial hierarchy and discrimination.¹²

Fueled by emigration from Europe, white settlers moved to many parts of the world, in parallel to those of the eastern United States. The occupation of North America and Oceania involved warfare and massacres by white settlers of many people of Tasmania, Australia, New Zealand, and among the dense indigenous populations of California, Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia. As before, indigenous children were commonly isolated from their families in schools intended to “civilize” them.¹³ This was one sort of white supremacy; others were to develop.

The Dutch had earlier showed the path to global economy and cooperation among nations; they sought to ally both with Britain and the United States in the years up to 1790. The Dutch were battered during the French wars, but later regained their position as a leading capitalist power. The British-Dutch alliance

11 In additional steps, the U.S. purchased Louisiana in a deal with Napoleon (1803), purchased Florida from Spain (1819), annexed Texas (1845), Oregon (1846), and northwest Mexico through war with Mexico (1848) – then conquered and settled all of these territories. For a recent history of the U.S. as an empire from its beginning, see Immerwahr (2019).

12 The term “Five Civilized Tribes” came into use during the mid-nineteenth century to refer to the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole nations. Although these Indian nations had various cultural, political, and economic connections before removal in the 1820s and 1830s, the phrase was most widely used in Indian Territory and Oklahoma (see “Civilization Fund Act,” Wikipedia; Frank 2009).

13 There were parallels in white settlement of Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, and South Africa.

lapsed as the French conquered the Netherlands in 1795. Dutch revolutionaries formed a Batavian Republic, which lasted with various changes from 1795 to 1806, when a French administration controlled both Netherlands and Java, until Britain seized most Dutch colonies by 1811. Yet after 1815 the Netherlands, now as a constitutional monarchy, regained its British alliance, expanded its East Indies empire, and participated actively in global trade and finance.

Britain led its Dutch and American allies in industry, trade, and empire. As the Napoleonic wars continued, the British seized colonial territories from France, Spain, and the Dutch. The British East India Company tried but failed to seize northern India from the Maratha state in 1803. At the same time, Lord Elgin, ambassador to the Ottoman court, was able beginning 1802 to select and remove numerous marble sculptures from the Acropolis of Athens and send them to England. The “Elgin marbles” were later sold to the British Museum, where they remain today. The result made an ideological statement of Britain as the modern global hegemon, appropriating the past of ancient Greece.

After the defeat of Napoleon in Europe, the East India Company conquered the Marathas in 1818 and seized most of India by 1820. Britain built a major port at Singapore beginning in 1819. In 1824 Britain and the Netherlands signed a treaty granting Malaya to Britain and enabling the Dutch to reconquer Java and expand their empire to other Indonesian islands. Britain, meanwhile, expanded its prison colony in Australia, founded in 1788.

With the First Opium War, Britain brought civilizational hierarchy to a peak. The war (1839–1842) was fought by Britain and China in Guangzhou and nearby regions of South China; it brought severe defeat to China. In their formal position, the British refused to obey the Qing prohibition of opium import (Perdue 2011; Wakeman 1969). At the end of the war, China ceded Hong Kong to Britain and recognized British privileges in five other “treaty ports.” Britain continued to import opium to China in exchange for silver and tea. At the same time, civilizational ideology moved the Chinese realm to a lower level of civilization – this was a second sort of white supremacy. In the aftermath of the Opium War, the Qing state raised taxes to cover its wartime debts, helping to provoke the rise of the opposition Taiping movement, which seized the old capital of Nanjing and fought the Qing from 1850 to 1864, at the cost of millions of deaths. This was one of several human and natural disasters in war, rebellion, and famines, especially in South and East Asia during the late nineteenth century – in effect, a third type of white supremacy (Davis 2002).

Capitalist success in trade and empire brought responses from every region of the world. The term “civilization” served the purpose of making worldwide comparisons among contemporary social orders in an era of rapidly expanding global interactions. Additional European powers sought to redefine themselves as nations building civilization; so also did the newly independent nations of Latin America (Adelman 2006). The terms for “civilization” in all European

languages, including Russian, are direct borrowings of the French term. In Asia and Africa, leaders needed to develop their response to the expanse of imperial power and to the notion of civilization, so that terms for “civilization” were developed in their written languages. Included are Chinese wénmíng 文明; Hindi sabhyata सभ्यता; Japanese Bunmei 文明; Indonesian peradaban; Arabic al-hadara الحضارة. The discourse on civilization became worldwide, though of course with local variations.

5 Imperial Boom and Bust, 1850–1950

Empires and the alliances of capitalist nations proliferated from 1850. France experienced revolution in 1848 but became a capitalist empire by 1852. Pro-capitalist constitutional monarchies formed in Denmark and Prussia by 1850, in Italy from 1860, and Japan from 1868. Russia extended its conquests throughout the century and Germany built an overseas empire from the 1880s. In all these territories, civilizational hierarchy and white supremacy were the rule.¹⁴ Thus, race became the primary criterion for civilization as the boom continued in imperial expansion, capitalist economic transformation, and triumphal European civilization, until the outbreak of World War I.

Mazlish entitled his chapter on this period as, “Civilization as European Ideology.” He showed the tight connection of scientific and ideological thinking in this era, highlighting the widely-read 1828 work of the French scholar and diplomat, François Guizot. In *The History of Civilization in Europe* (Guizot 1997). Guizot formally expanded the logic of civilization beyond nations to all of Europe (though he saw France as the leader of Europe). In his view, the accumulated heritage of Rome, Christianity, and feudalism had brought Europe to high achievement, which could be advanced through representative government. Other analyses of civilization had less influence. In England, John Stuart Mill’s 1836 essay on civilization identified two main aspects of civilization – the improvement of humanity in general and the specific distinctions between civilized peoples and “savages and barbarians.” The essay laid groundwork for his later essays on liberty and representative government (Mazlish 2004, 74–77). Mazlish also observes that Charles Darwin, following his great 1859 scientific advance in identifying natural selection as the basic process of biological change, expressed certain racist sentiments in his 1871 *Descent of Man* (Darwin 1871). Mazlish concluded that Darwin prioritized his concept of natural

¹⁴ The Japanese and Qing empires faced complex choices. On one side they opposed racial classification; on the other side they sought to be classified as high as possible in the hierarchy of races and civilizations.

selection but that he also adopted some contemporary racial categorization among human beings.

The scientific conceptualization of civilization spread in time as well as in space. The Classical world of Greece and Rome, preceded by the ancient societies of Egypt and Mesopotamia, now became incorporated into the narrative of civilization, facilitated by archaeological work such as that of Heinrich Schliemann at the ancient battlefield of Troy in the 1870s. Still, it appears that the European field of Classics, documenting and comparing ancient societies, has not commonly relied on the term “civilization”: instead it relies on more specific institutional terminology. The term “civilization,” as used to discuss ancient societies, was thus implemented by those writing broad summaries for the interest of a general audience.

In a more fully ideological statement on civilization, the French lawyer and diplomat Arthur de Gobineau published an 1855 work, *The Inequality of Human Races* (Comte de Gobineau 1915). It ranged widely over time and space but justified the current expansion of empire. Gobineau’s logic may have appeared to many in Europe as confirmed by the events of the Second Opium War in China (1856–1860). In it, Britain, France, and the United States carried out a four-year war, launched by British objections to Chinese arrest of Chinese citizens on board the British vessel *Arrow*, docked in Guangzhou. The victors gained Chinese cession of treaty ports to as many as 20 nations. The collaborative economic exploitation of China by so many foreign powers showed the expanded operation of the capitalist system (Nield 2015).

Japan became the leading case of a nation without European heritage that gained a position of strength in the international order, beginning with provocation from the United States. The U.S., which had conquered California in 1848, sent an 1853 fleet to Japan to demand an opening of trade on the model of the treaty ports of China. After deep debate, the Japanese government agreed. Mazlish emphasized that a Japanese word for civilization, *bunmei*, appeared at this time.

Repudiating their past as ‘barbaric,’ they also sought to locate their own place in a larger pattern of history: the history of civilization. In doing so, they emphasized educational reforms, the abolition of feudal society and its myriad ranks, and the need to involve all strata of society in the leap to “civilization” (Mazlish 2004, 102).

At the end of his discussion of Japan and civilization, Mazlish emphasizes how strongly the conception of civilization has become linked to the idea of modernity. The young scholar and translator, Fukuzaki Yukichi, argued effectively that Japan could maintain its independence by promoting civilization through study of Western institutions in science, social services, and war (Mazlish 2004, 103–105).

The concept of civilization continued to emphasize liberty and progress: for instance, it was invoked to support the emancipation of Black slaves, of Jews, and

of Eastern European serfs during the nineteenth century. Yet the aftermath of emancipation brought the ideological and legal constraints of segregation, hierarchy, land deprivation, and anti-Semitism, to restrict the same populations, also to achieve progress in civilization. When Australia gained recognition as a self-governing dominion in 1901, the new government formalized the “white Australia” policy limiting immigration, especially from Asia. Chinese migration to the Americas after 1850 met commonly with riots, expulsion, and killings. In the U.S., a new immigration system had been developed by the 1890s, replacing violent expulsion with elaborate questionnaires intended to select only the most “civilized” of migrants for admission – in effect, a fourth type of white supremacy (McKeown 2009).

Schooling advanced rapidly, at all levels, in leading nations after 1850. The University of Berlin, founded in 1810, had become Europe’s leading research institution by 1850. It was widely imitated, for instance, at the University of Tokyo, founded in 1877 (Manning 2020b, 87–89). In the same era, elementary schools were created worldwide to provide literacy and civilizational ideology for the general population – for instance in Japan and Egypt (Adal 2019).

Although capitalist powers had expected to conciliate with each other in their exploitation of the world, cooperation broke down and war broke out in 1914. Was it because of the politico-economic structure of capitalism? Was it because of flaws in the underlying conception of civilization? World War I brought, in its aftermath, a critical reflection on civilization at the social-scientific level.

Schooling after World War I continued and in some cases expanded the triumphalism of civilizational ideology. In European nations and their colonies, history was taught as a national and imperial past. In the U.S., schools presented a trans-European version of civilization, focusing first on politics and later on intellectual history. A revised course on Contemporary Civilization, required of students at Columbia University from 1919, became a model for other institutions. The curriculum included readings in ancient, medieval, and modern history, focusing on intellectual history and political philosophy, with a sprinkling of social and economic change – and linking U.S. history to a European past (Allardyce 1982). The imperial and civilizational courses of the interwar years were introduced at the secondary level, in simplified versions, in the years after World War II.

European writers of history for the general public, led by Oswald Spengler, H. G. Wells, and Arnold J. Toynbee (Toynbee 1933), followed World War I by reviewing world history at length: they considered the weaknesses as well as the strengths in empires and the notion of civilization. Mazlish was critical of psychiatrist Sigmund Freud’s short popular work, *Civilization and its Discontents* (Freud 1930): its main advantage, Mazlish thought, was to make readers aware of the dark side of

civilization; its disadvantage was treating civilization as “an abstract, timeless concept,” rather than as “a process, constantly at work.” Mazlish was far more impressed with the work of German sociologist Norbert Elias (Elias 1969), whose analysis of *The Civilizing Process* focused on civilization at the level of individual and group manners rather than imperial rule, emphasizing its advances (Mazlish 2004, 83–88). For Elias in Europe as for world historian Lei Haizong in China, the crisis of world war and struggles for survival set their interpretations aside, only to be explored again after war’s end (Fan 2021, 110).

By the 1930s, the capitalist powers again found themselves unable to cooperate – a situation made more complex by the rise of the Soviet Union and its socialist challenge. The result was a world war even more devastating than the first: World War II massacred civilians as well as soldiers, and was fought with steadily increasing focus on the issues of Race and Civilization, with the massacres of Jews in Europe and the racial antagonism of the Pacific and China theaters of the war. German and Japanese empires collapsed in 1945, the rest of the empires collapsed within in the 30 years after the bombs exploded at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.¹⁵

6 Decolonization: Critique of Civilization, 1950–2000

Several Asian nations gained independence within five years of the end of World War II – including India, Pakistan, Ceylon, Indonesia, Philippines, Burma, and three Arab nations, plus the formation of the People’s Republic of China. This change, while momentous, did not at first make clear that nearly all colonial territories would soon be independent nations – and empires would simply disappear, at least in their old form.

Despite the great changes in the world order, the science of civilization changed little. V. Gordon Childe’s *What Happened in History* (Childe 1946) conveyed to general audiences the concepts of the Agricultural Revolution (especially in the Fertile Crescent, 10,000 years ago) and the Urban Revolution (in Mesopotamia, roughly 5000 years ago). While Childe’s archaeological analysis was sophisticated and subtle, his interpretation was widely taken as a modest extension of Guizot’s view, in which civilization spread from a few well-chosen

¹⁵ In contrast to my critical and largely negative view of empires, Krishnan Kumar’s recent overview argues for the strength, continuity, and benefits of empires. He also argues that empires will play a role in the future (Kumar 2021).

centers. For a slightly later period, Karl Jaspers identified the Axial Age as a time period from the eighth to the third century BCE, when great religious and moral leaders arose to call for greater attention to liberty and morality (Jaspers 1953). The Axial Age thesis added detail to the religious emphasis in Guizot's interpretation. To this point, the new contributions brought restatement of old ideas rather than new ideas.

But the postwar era brought scientific innovations as well as continuities. An important academic innovation was the creation of Area-Studies scholarship, in which European and North American universities formed multi-disciplinary centers for the study of Asian, African, Latin American, Middle East, and Slavic societies. In one sense, these studies expanded Western notions of civilization in greater detail to each of these regions, previously neglected in European studies. At the same time, Area Studies gave most attention to colonial rule and imperial perspectives in those regions. Still further, Area Studies programs also gave attention to the recent formation of independent nations and to the new problems of nationhood.

The postwar era revealed multiple voices on civilization, arising beyond the Euro-American university system. In an excellent study of such voices in China, Xin Fan's survey of world history as studied in China traces four generations of lively debate (Fan 2021). He begins with the multivolume *Outline of Western History* published by Zhou Weihai, a member of the Qing gentry, in the 1880s. Fan then turns to professional world historians from China's new universities, who expressed various critiques of Eurocentrism in their global analyses. For the era of the People's Republic, Fan describes the strengths and weaknesses of Marxism for historical interpretation, tracing the careers of scholars who sought to support the new regime yet maintain the autonomy of professional scholars. Fan focuses especially on ancient world history, a subfield often neglected within world history that was important because it posed the question of whether reigning world history narratives accepted the possibility of global interactions before 1500. That is, ancient world history asked whether early Chinese history could be seen as relevant to world history. As these scholars fought the usual battle of world historians against narrow nationalism, they relied on analysis of civilization, modes of production, and critique of Eurocentrism to challenge the rigidity of nationalistic thinking (Fan 2021, 314–337). Fan's study conveys but one example of historical reflections on civilization based at once on independent thinking and contestation of Eurocentric ideas. Similarly, for Africa, for other regions of Asia, and the Americas, one may learn of other regional interpretation of historical change, phrased as responses to the thesis of civilization (for instance, Manning and Miller 2019). These traditions, as they are combined, can provide a basis for a rich scientific dialogue on civilization.

Equally disruptive to inherited views of civilization were the biological discoveries of the late twentieth century. Most outstanding was the 1987 study based on mitochondrial DNA, showing that all humans share ancestors from Africa some 200,000–300,000 years ago. Subsequent studies of the human genome have traced migration outward from northeast Africa some 70,000 years ago. Together, this knowledge has confirmed the commonality and equality of all human individuals, thus renouncing racial differences as no more than superficial.¹⁶

The ideology of civilization met challenges on many fronts after 1950, although the believers in Western supremacy continued to hold to their outlook. Decolonization, which meant the rise of people of color to leadership in many new nations, challenged white supremacy, as did social movements against discrimination. Within the United Nations General Assembly, the Group of 77 formed in 1964 to lobby for greater influence and social welfare for their nations. The cultural recognition of new nations advanced, but their economic position remained relatively weak. In the Cold War, as the number of pro-socialist governments rose to 1980, the U.S.-led capitalist bloc emphasized a civilizational defense of its dominance, an approach that contributed to the fall of the USSR in 1991.

Civilization then became a topic of brief global debate with the publication of *The Clash of Civilizations* (Huntington 1996), a 1996 interpretation of the world situation in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse. Author Samuel Huntington concluded that the world could be divided, according to religion and race, into nine civilizations, and that these civilizations would carry out a fight for global dominance.¹⁷ In critical response to this work, a United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations was convened in 2001 on the initiative of Muhammad Khatami, president of Iran (1997–2005). Bruce Mazlish was one of six American-based scholars involved in this discussion – his participation led Mazlish to compose his book, *Civilization and its Contents* (Mazlish 2004, ix–x, 120–125). This was one of many more episodes in postwar ideological debate on civilization.

In schooling and in a systematic rethinking of earlier civilizational thinking, William H. McNeill published, *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (McNeill 1963). This book, a key work in the scholarly discipline of world history, not only recounted the history of individual civilizations but traced their interactions and the eventual formation of a worldwide set of human societies under Euro-American leadership. The work advanced the scope and methodology of world history yet remained close to the inherited civilizational interpretation. In

¹⁶ Further complications have since been discovered: biological mixtures of *Homo sapiens* with Neanderthal and Denisovan strains of humanity.

¹⁷ Huntington’s framework exhibits remarkable parallels to that of Gobineau, many years earlier, in articulating simplified prejudices.

that sense, this work played a scientific role parallel to that of Guizot's European history just over a century earlier.

Seen from the perspective of the present, teaching about civilization has shown remarkably little change in the half-century since empires had crumbled. In a study of eight Asian countries and their secondary school curricula, it became clear that virtually all of those countries had established curricula in world history soon after World War II, but that those curricula were heavily Eurocentric, focusing on European history and European empires, with modest attention to national or regional history. Periodic revisions in the curricula gave growing attention to national history, but only gradually with attention to global perspectives (Minamizuka 2019).

In the United States, where the teaching of world history had become most prominent, interpretations had similarly not yet caught up to changes in the global order. The concept of civilization was the basis of survey courses in world history, but "civilization" referred overwhelmingly to ancient societies of Eurasia, with a focus on their technology and material culture rather than wider social issues (Brown 2004). From 1500 forward, the world continued to be interpreted through great powers and their empires, or through continental variations in global civilization. For the period since 1950, these surveys describe decolonization, but focus attention on great powers and Cold War conflict, with little attention to relations among ex-colonial nations, the United Nations, international organizations, or global corporations.

7 Civilization Today and Tomorrow?

Bruce Mazlish, in his concluding chapter, asks, "Has the concept 'civilization' outlived its usefulness? Is it more harmful than beneficial in the effort to understand humanity and its vicissitudes? ... I am suggesting that the very concept itself should be viewed as in crisis and needs now to be put on trial" (Mazlish 2004, 138). He argues instead for a new analysis in social science, claiming that the concept of civilization is showing serious inconsistencies with what is known of world history. In subsequent works (Mazlish 2006, 2009), Mazlish was to articulate his alternative, the concept of Humanity).¹⁸

¹⁸ In *The New Global History* (2006) and *The Idea of Humanity in a Global Era* (2009), Mazlish advanced his vision. He set the discourse of civilization into the background, focusing instead on Global Humanity – a standpoint both analytical and moral that highlights the historical rupture launched by postwar globalization, envisioning an emerging Global Humanity. As he argued, "one of the consequences of globalization is that we are actually becoming something called Humanity

Continuing his critique of civilizational analysis, Mazlish noted that it remained little changed, though with some innovations, despite the great changes in the world order. Civilization provides elitist theory in an egalitarian age. It focuses on centers of power, leaving aside the many individuals and smaller-scale societies, each of value on their own. It focuses attention on the leaders of hierarchies and on large-scale analysis – surely of importance overall but not to the exclusion of local-scale dynamics in society. It has quietly acquiesced in the new knowledge of human biological equality but has not asked many questions about human social equality. The experience of the Covid-19 pandemic has given many instructive examples of the importance of local-scale work by skilled individuals in saving lives, as contrasted with thoughtless decisions by top managers of hospitals or nursing homes.¹⁹

In ideology and politics, Mazlish argues that the notion of civilization has become too firmly anchored in public consciousness to be displaced. He therefore gives little attention to the ideological critique of civilization. But critical voices within the old imperial powers and, especially, worldwide critique, have been able to challenge the hierarchical view of civilization with an ideology favoring social equality – in terms of race but also nationality and economic inequality. Another neglected factor in civilizational thinking is the changing global balance of economic and political power. U.S. proportion of the total value of world output was as high as 40% in 1960 but has now declined to just over 20%. The United States, which remains a great national power, must now prepare to become a former hegemon, and consider how best to play the role of a prominent but not dominant member of the global community of nations. The situation has been faced earlier by Britain, France, the Netherlands, and China in earlier times, as well as by other great powers.

and not merely aspiring toward that state” (Mazlish 2006: 101). From this perspective he explored the past and present.

19 I proposed a somewhat different alternative to civilization studies in my *History of Humanity* (Manning 2020). I too adopted the term “humanity” but tried to stretch its application over a longer time frame. This analytical perspective, similar in many of its particulars to that of New Global History, appears to differ in that I hope to construct a transhistorical perspective, encompassing the habits and outlooks of humans across the millennia rather than prioritize the current era as a basis for analysis. I seek to study the full system of human interactions, with its many scales of human activity among commoners and not just civilizational leaders: I focus on the agency of individuals and collaborative groups, their construction of communities and institutions, and their debates over such social priorities as race, gender, and inequality. I give attention to language, culture, migration, economy, and knowledge at elite and general levels. The approach is intended, for instance, to set the concept of civilization into the context of empires, nations, and communities.

In contrast, the rapidity of recent economic growth has now made China the most powerful nation in many sectors of the economy. Within 10 years China will certainly be the largest economy in the world.²⁰ Yet for China too, growth may ultimately reach its limits – because of limits on China’s domestic resources as well as the limits in the global environment. Chinese civilization today draws on a complex past. Chinese today can think back to the earlier power of the Middle Kingdom – or to the national humiliation of unequal treaties or the individual discrimination of anti-Chinese racism. The sentiments of racism and nationalism that have arisen in China today may not be greatly different from the racial hierarchy of the Western world, but they are of great concern in today’s dangerous world (Cheng 2019).

Further, the civilizational analysis of the future, in science and ideology, must focus beyond the great powers to consider the majority of humanity – the citizens of nearly 200 nations, large and small. To identify national examples, Colombia and Kenya each have 50 million talented and well-educated citizens who seek to play significant roles in their nation and world. They will not be dominant but have hopes of participating significantly in global affairs.

In schooling, there was a postwar change in scale if not in quality, as educational institutions expanded as never before. The schooling, while expanding the coverage of areas outside Europe and North America, largely maintained the earlier hierarchical view of civilization. Could there be a reconceptualization of civilization that draws on the strength of Mirabeau’s earlier concept? That would return attention to cultural and economic aspects of society, with attention to the liberty of individuals – yet leave room for the new understanding of the moral and social equality of all human beings. Such an approach would give less attention to the creation of hegemonic states and institutions but more attention to building the networks of interactions among local and regional groups as they work on the many tasks that remain to be completed to preserve humanity from terminal social inequality and from ecological destruction. Schooling is to inform and develop the initiative and agency of students everywhere, at elementary and advanced levels. The most important level of measurement is that of individual students and their skills, though so far they are measured by nation. And since there exist standards – as there are in mathematics education – why is it that students from more than half of the world’s nations and more than half of the world’s population are unable to be evaluated in their math skills?

Studies on world history in recent years show that all nations and communities of the world have participated in the process of world history. The concept of

20 By PPP measures, China now leads in output; by GDP measures, the U.S. may lead for another decade.

civilization is not quite as simple. That concept, created in the 1750s, was a contribution to science because it conceptualized society at a large scale – at the level of nations and perhaps beyond. But the scale wasn’t large enough – world history and a global perspective had not yet become part of science. The builders of empire became attracted to an idea of civilization only for themselves. They created an ideology arguing that Europeans must rule the world; they conquered widely. Their schools expanded with capitalism and empire – they taught empire and white supremacy as if it were science. Yet after two great wars, the empires collapsed and left only nations. Today, the concept of “civilization” – or Global Humanity – should also be consistent with what world history research has revealed. The scientific, ideological, and schooling discourse of “civilization” should further reduce the elements of elitism and Western centrism, and replace civilizational hierarchy and white supremacy with egalitarianism and multiculturalism.

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