

Preface

Civilization is an intriguing subject, and for a long time I had been collecting material on it in a desultory way. Then, a few years ago, I received an invitation to participate in a conference to be held the following May in Tehran, Iran. My eye fixed on the word “Tehran,” for I had long wanted to visit that city and its country. Without reading further, I mentally accepted. As my eye followed along the invitation, I saw that the conference was on comparative civilizations, sponsored by an Institute for Discourse on Civilization, founded under the auspices of the president of Iran, Hojjatoleslam Seyyed Muhammad Khatami. My acceptance grew even warmer.

In preparing my paper, I did extensive research on the origin of the word “civilization.” I discovered that it was of Western and fairly recent birth. I shall detail that story later. Then a funny thing happened on the way to Tehran. The conference became embroiled in the political struggles of Iran. A few months previously, the Institute for Discourse on Civilization had participated in a meeting in Berlin that had been marred by a few dissidents rushing the stage, making disparaging remarks, and by a young woman allegedly disrobing in public. This tainted the effort by

hard-liners back in Tehran seized upon the incident, claimed that that is what happens when you deviate from the fundamentalist position and enter into discourse with the enemy—and arrested two of the institute participants in the Berlin meeting four days before my scheduled conference!

I say “my” conference. In fact, I was one of six American-based scholars who were to participate, and whose papers were to be published in the journal *International Sociology*, edited by Professors Said Arjomand and Edward Tiryakian. They were handling the arrangements from the Western side. Those arrangements were delicate and complicated. The visas, in fact, had not been granted as the conference date approached. Our hosts were too polite to say that given the arrests, the conference was now too dangerous to attend. Only a week or so *after* the scheduled conference had passed did the visas arrive. Very diplomatic! Obviously, we never did get to the conference.

Civilization is clearly a contentious issue. It is not merely a historical subject, awaiting impartial and passionless research and thinking. It is a burning topic, which was made globally so by the UN Declaration of the Year 2001 as the year of the “Discourse on Civilization.” It continues to arouse ambivalent feelings in many observers. For some people, it represents the epitome of human achievement, the end result of modern progress. For others, it is a dehumanizing, external threat, bringing with it a mechanization of life and a challenge to “traditional” beliefs. This has been the case from the inception of the word “civilization.”

Tehran was the inspiration for going back to the numerous notes that I had already compiled before the invitation. It led me not only to write a paper for *International Sociology*,¹ but to undertake the present book. It coalesced with another stimulus. My

book *Civilization and Its Discontents*, which I have used in my teaching for a number of years. Inspired by Freud's book, as by Tehran, I have undertaken to look more closely at the "contents" of the word "civilization"; only after this task is finished do I seek to make tangential evaluations in regard to human happiness and discontents. Also, as is clear, I am concerned with the political as well as the psychological and philosophical implications of the discourse. Furthermore, whereas Freud was a psychoanalyst, I am a historian (although of an interdisciplinary and comparative kind), and approach the topic mainly in that mode of inquiry.

In the light of these inspirations and allegiances, I seek in the book that follows to trace the origins and intentions of the word "civilization"; to pursue its evolution into a form of Western ideology, employed in the service and shadow of colonialism; to treat it as part of what has come to be called the "civilizing process" (following on the work of Norbert Elias); and then to study its spread beyond the West, as it becomes a traveling concept. Then, although briefly, as part of the latter study, I want to raise the question of whether globalization, in the context of a discourse on civilizations, can be regarded as a new form of civilization, with all the problems attendant on both terms, "globalization" and "civilization." At that point, I shall undertake an evaluation and address the question as to the future of the concept of civilization.

A few preliminary remarks are in order. The position I take, claiming only a bit of originality for it, is that the notion of civilization is a social construct. Its political and ideological nature and function have already been touched upon. My historical treatment will show how it changes over time. I want to argue further that there is no "essence" nor "natural" character to be found in

nature can be ascribed to it; this can be one form of its social construction. For example, Oswald Spengler (although he called them cultures) and Arnold Toynbee both treated civilizations as more or less fixed organisms, given to birth, growth, decline, and death. So conceived, they were basically closed entities, little open to borrowings or interconnections.

Such a view is no longer fashionable (except perhaps by the eccentric Samuel Huntington). Most of those who still work with the notion of civilization, such as William McNeill, have liberated it from its fixed boundaries, and are interested in cross-border and trans-civilizational encounters. In fact, some scholars now prefer to think of such interactions as constituent of civilizations, not peripheral and accidental to them. This, it seems to me, is a congenial way of thinking about our topic.

Yet I think that today we must push beyond even this view and perhaps conceive of civilization as an imaginary figure that may itself vanish. The imagination, of course, is not to be dismissed entirely. Rather, it must be recognized for what it is, and then reimagined. As we shall see, the first emergence of cities as the locus of a social community was marked by the construction of walls. These demarcated the division of those who were “civilized” from those without, who were designated “barbarians.” If this be acknowledged, then the tearing down of walls around urban centers, a physical manifestation of the advent of “modernity,” may be seen as marking a profound shift in the way civilization had to be imagined.

Increasingly, it became hard to imagine a “center” of civilization. Obviously, the concept had become more intangible. And, as the poet Yeats famously remarked, the center cannot hold. Certainly by the eighteenth century, even though that was when

only with a center, but as separate and enduring entities. Before that century, it was still possible. Nomads, for example, were yet a potent force; here, then, were the necessary barbarians. Similarly, before the successes of the ages of modern exploration, the physical contiguity of civilizations could be minimized: Japan could seek to shield itself from outside influences.

All this changed by the eighteenth century, and, as I shall try to show, the way was prepared for the coming of the neologism “civilization” in place of the old, simple dichotomy between civilized and barbarian. Once in existence, this reification took on a life of its own, whose ramifications I shall also try to follow. This construction, it must be remembered, took place at the same time as the nation-state was established as the leading form of social bonding. There is, therefore, a dialectic between the two. It embodied a changing relation over time, one in which the nation-state progressively established international institutions and even world-systems.

In this context, we must note that civilizations do not figure as members of international institutions, nor do they “act” and “interact” with one another, except possibly as ideologies. Nor do they mobilize armies, nor raise taxes, nor have representation at the United Nations. Nor do they launch satellites or operate computer banks. Which is not to say that they, or the concept of them, does not have power, indeed, sometimes immense power.

In the chapters that follow, I attempt to explore the origins and nature of that power. For the moment, two aspects are to be singled out. One is that the concept of civilization, developed at the time of the Enlightenment as part of the European imaginary, claimed to offer a universal measuring rod: a civilization had certain material characteristics and it behaved and thought in

tion could be another's barbarism.) Certainly this was the case in the past. Was there anything more substantial, however, to the European version of civilization, carrying with it a claim to universality? Or was it a simple expression of domination, to be overthrown in the name of relativism or multiculturalism?

The other aspect to which we must give attention is that civilization is a social-science concept. It is both an attempt to understand and to construct new social bonds. The relevance of this piece of social science to today's problems is not entirely clear. At a time when the process of globalization is apparently accelerating—a matter of some debate—the concept of civilization may simply be outmoded. Such a conclusion can only come from an immersion in the materials, many of them primary, related to our topic.

Even if one chooses not to embrace such a sweeping conclusion, there is a corollary outcome one might want to embrace. It is to recognize that, in a respectful manner, one can take on the task of seeing how different approaches to civility and the civilizing process, in the past and at present, can be compared and perhaps even be reconciled. There is also the possibility that such a comparison might lead to changes in each and every party to the exchange.

By raising a few flags over our line of march, I seek to engage the reader in the historical, sociological, and philosophical inquiry that follows. With these brief comments I hope to entice the reader into joining in the dialogue of ideas that comprise what I am calling the contents of civilization.