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What is Civilization?

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Introduction

The Oxford English Dictionary's defines "civilization" as an "advanced stage of human social development and organization". This begs a lot of questions.

The OED elaborates by referring to civilization as providing the "comforts and conveniences only available in towns and cities". This takes us to the root of the word "civilization", which comes from the Latin "cives", meaning "citizen" – someone who lives in a city. In its precise formulation, then, the word "civilization" refers to a society that can only really be found in a city (leaving aside for the moment the fact that a Roman's idea of a city was rather different from ours').

Interestingly, this idea closely echoes that of the Chinese, who also identified civilization with cities. The Chinese character for civilization embodies the symbol for a walled town.

Ingredients of civilizations

Cities

Cities are a hallmark of every society to which historians have given the label “civilization”. They are settlements larger than villages, and having specific features which mark them out as being of particular importance, such as large public buildings or defensive walls.

A food surplus

Cities can only exist where a large number of people can be freed from agricultural work. An essential precondition for any civilization, therefore, is an agricultural “surplus” – that is, farmers grow more food than they and their own families will consume. Having such a surplus available allows such people as craftsmen, artists, merchants, priests, officials and kings to be free from the need to work in the fields.

There also has to be a social mechanism for gathering surpluses from the farmers and distributing them to the non-farmers. In the background of all civilizations lurks that ubiquitous political phenomenon which we call the “state”.

Art and literacy

A result of the above two propositions is that a feature of most, if not all, civilizations, is refined art produced by skilled, professional artists and craftsmen. These, not being farmers, can only devote themselves to such professions in conditions where there is a surplus of food which has been produced by others (the farmers) and extracted from them by the state.

One final element which most civilizations have had is literacy. In most cases the earliest writing systems were called into existence by officials of the state, to address the need for organizing and storing administrative information. Starting out as a tool for administrators and accountants, writing then almost always taken wing to be used for all sorts of purposes which those early scribes, struggling to find better ways to record transactions and document receipts, probably did not foresee: hymns, poetry, sagas, plays, works of scholarship, novels, newspapers, Facebook entries and so on.

Are not all societies civilized in one way or another?

It has sometimes been claimed that all societies, whether or not they have cities, states or literacy, are equally civilized. Civilization isn’t about material or political culture, it should include things such as oral traditions and how people live with one another.

One major problem with this idea is that it makes studying world history much harder than it already is. If all societies are equal in terms of civilization (and therefore, presumably, significance), teachers and students would be swamped by having to look at a vast array of small-scale, simple societies. One has to make choices, and determine criteria.

Another point to make is that, labelling a society “civilized” does not imply moral superiority for that society – although it is a fact that civilized societies are, on the whole, far more orderly than less civilized ones. Anthropologists have described murder rates in simple societies up to 200 times greater than those in the most deprived areas of modern inner cities.

This factor is at the heart of why civilization has proved so beneficial to mankind. People in many, perhaps most, simple or “primitive” societies experience a level of personal insecurity and violence which most Westerners would find utterly intolerable. Without the over-arching control provided by an organized state, one of whose primary functions is to provide law and order to its inhabitants, small-scale societies often live in a condition of constant low-level but lethal warfare.

This is not to say that simple societies do not have rich oral cultures, or are incapable of creating beautiful artefacts. Individuals living in societies which lack urban settlements and literacy are in no way inferior to members of societies which do. On the contrary, it has been argued that the constant alertness and shrewdness required to thrive in hunter-gatherer bands or small-scale farming societies culls the weaker, less savvy individuals, whereas more advanced communities allow its weaker members to survive.

Indeed, this is the point: an ordered, civilized society allows a weakling like Ludwig van Beethoven to survive childhood, and then to work as a professional musician. We can probably assume that he contributed more to humanity in this role than as a members of a hunter-gatherer war band.

Summary

The concept of civilization therefore includes the following elements:

- The existence of food surpluses, to free a section of society from the need to feed itself
- Cities, to act as centres of authority, exchange and culture
- States, to provide law and order
- Fine art, including monumental architecture, produced by professionals
- In most cases, literacy, initially to help administer a large and concentrated population, and then to act as a vehicle for myths, stories, hymns, prayers, history, drama, philosophy and so on.

By this definition, civilization first appeared in Mesopotamia and Egypt by c. 3000 BCE, India by c. 2800 BCE, China by about c. 1500 BCE; and Central and South America sometime in the first millennium BCE. From these core centres it then spread outwards, taking in most of the world by 1900 CE.