The Problem With Civilisation

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If not immediately insulted by the question, most would be quick to respond that they are civilised. Some today even claim to live in the greatest civilisation on Earth, and so decry the many so-called threats to said civilisation.

But such a question gives me pause.

What does it mean to be civilised?

What is the meaning of civilisation?

If you were anything like me growing up, your head was probably buried in a big book of knowledge, encyclopaedic volume, or atlas of world history. At times I was fascinated by dinosaurs or space, but the history of ancient civilisations never failed to hold my attention.

I was enthralled by the ways that people just like us lived long ago. I wanted to know everything about what they did, what they wore, what they ate, where they lived, and what they thought.

Egypt, Greece, and Rome usually dominated the full-page illustrations and thus my imagination, but I eventually became invested in the histories of the Maya, the Mali, and the Mauryans as well. All were great civilisations, I was told, which accomplished glorious feats of engineering, agriculture, and the arts.

But as I matured, I became discomforted by the notion of "civilisation," particularly by who was subject to it and who was disparaged outside of it. I shifted from Usborne and DK to Haymarket and AK, and with that newfound historical knowledge of class struggle, I became more curious about the people's histories than the histories according to so-called great men. I came to see those great civilisations in a new light.

As tools for propaganda.

As vindications of division.

As manifestations of hierarchy.

There is an idea of a civilisation. Some kind of abstraction. But there is no real thing. Only a concept. Something illusory.

And though it can hide its bloody legacy so you can embrace its extolled virtues, and maybe you can even feel a sense of pride in its achievements, it simply is not there.

As I see it, civilisation is definitionally broad, historically charged, potentially domesticating, and sociopolitically limiting.

We'll take a look at a few perspectives on its definition and its virtues and vices.

By the end, hopefully we'll have a map of the maze of its ideas and perhaps a way beyond it.

What is Civilisation?

I know some people think it's not that deep, and if that's the case for you, or you're sensitive to the exploration of challenging points of view,

this video (and channel) may not be your cup of tea. I know the basic definition of civilisation is "the stage of human social and cultural development and organisation that is considered most advanced," meaning that to be civilised is to be "at an advanced stage of social and cultural development," but I'd like to challenge that way of thinking.

The word civilisation comes from the Latin civitas or 'city,' and indeed the development of cities is seen as a critical component in the development of civilisation.

Civilisation is further associated with symbolic systems of communication, social stratification, the development of the state, and the idea of "complex society." Societies are traditionally considered complex when they possess a division of labour and specialisation, large-scale architectural and agricultural projects, and a hierarchical political structure.

This understanding of complexity has the unfortunate effect of conditioning people to equate complexity with hierarchy, although egalitarian cultures have their own form of complexity, often illegible to hierarchical authorities.

Even urban development is not exclusive to civilisation understood as hierarchy, as archaeological study has found seemingly egalitarian urban traditions that date centuries or millennia prior to anything we discern as "civilisations" today.

But get used to it, this exclusion and depreciation of alternatives is an unfortunately constant theme.

There are other ways to interpret civilisation. Samuel P. Huntington, author of Clash of Civilisations (1996), defined civilisation as a cultural entity.

In his own words:

> A civilization is [...] the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species. It is defined both by common objective elements, such as language, history, religion, customs, institutions, and by the subjective self-identification of people.

For one example, a resident of Rome may define himself with varying degrees of intensity as a Roman, an Italian, a Catholic, a Christian, a European, and a Westerner.

That broadest category one identifies oneself with is said to be the civilisation one is part of.

Huntington's list includes Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American, and African.

He saw his categorisation of civilisations as "real" and "meaningful entities."

But does it really make sense to divide the world so neatly?

Can such sweeping labels accurately describe how people live and think across entire continents?

Let's just say that I don't share Huntington's perspective and nor do several academics, who have empirically, historically, logically, and ideologically challenged his claims.

One of them is British archaeologist David Wengrow, who contrasts Huntington's rather reductive view in What Makes Civilization (2010).

As he writes in his preface:

> Civilization, if we are to retain that term, should then refer to the historical outcomes of exchanges and borrowings between societies, rather than to processes or attributes that set one society apart from another.

In other words, civilisations are not distinct entities which clash but are instead the dynamic outcome of societal interdependence.

Such a view reminds me of Wengrow's later work with David Graeber in The Dawn of Everything (2021), where they describe cultures as defining themselves through their interaction with other cultures, both in terms of their similarities and their differences.

For one more perspective on civilisation, we can turn to American author Daniel Quinn, who speaks of civilisation in Beyond Civilization (1999) as a particular way of life that requires a form of "complexity" again defined in hierarchical terms. According to this understanding:

> A confederation of farming villages isn't politically and socially complex, and it's not a civilization. When, a thousand years later, the royal family lives in a palace guarded by professional soldiers and buffered from the masses by clans of nobles and a priestly caste that manages the state religion, then you have the requisite political and social "complexity"—and you have civilization.

There are many ways that one can define civilisation, but even within those definitions, there are some thorny underlying assumptions about "advancement" that I'd like to interrogate.

To do so, we must ask why?

Why Civilisation?

Why did we come up with this concept of "civilisation," where do we get this idea of "advancement," and what lies outside of this matrix?

At its core, the idea of "advancement" suggests that there is an objective scale upon which societies can be measured from less to more "developed," AKA "civilised."

But this linear model of progression is a subjective value system imposed by those who sit atop the dominant global order. The markers we use to measure this progress—whether technological innovation, urbanisation, or centralised governance—don't necessarily lead to more equitable, meaningful, or sustainable lives, so why treat them as the barometer of a society's value? This fixation on "advancement" implies that societies that are following other paths, or may be content with a simpler life, are somehow lesser or "doing it wrong."

But contrary to the driving ideology of our current civilisation, there is no single, right way to live.

The masses of early civilisations seem to have understood this. In Against the Grain (2017), James C. Scott explores the fragility of early states and their tendency to collapse. Of course, such a collapse was more of a disassembly, as environmental pressures, zoonotic and lifestyle diseases brought on by civilised life, and internal strife would compel people to disperse from the state and return to so-called uncivilised forms of living where they might enjoy more freedom.

Civilisation has historically defined its "righteous" existence to contrast with the "uncivilised"—outsiders, tribes, barbarians, savages, nomads, foragers, and in some cases, even its own subject populations.

The civilised see themselves as the "adults" of humanity, viewing the violent expansion of civilisation as just the discipline needed to tame the unruly "children" on the fringes.

This paternalistic ideology has been used to justify colonialism and imperialism throughout history and up to today, as the popular imagination views the "uncivilised" as primitive at best, brutish at worst, and in any case in desperate need of assimilation into civilised modernity, the "right way to live."

By the 16th century, civilisation had developed into a measurable quality of the "advancement" of one's humanity. Jesuit missionary José de Acosta exemplified this view in his observations of the Americas.

As Wengrow writes:

> On the basis of technological traits—such as the possession of writing, planned and permanent settlements, monumental masonry, and sophisticated equipment for eating, clothing, and waste disposal—certain pagans were deemed further along the road to full humanity, and hence more prepared for evangelization, than others.

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, race—classified by superficial phenotypic features like skin colour—was seen as the chief indicator of a population or individual's position on the spectrum of civilised and uncivilised.

The same civilised and uncivilised spectrum is often applied to separate the ruling classes from the ruled masses. In both cases, the uncivilised are, naturally, ripe for conquest, colonisation, and exploitation.

The same mindset extended to the so-called untouched wilderness. The natural world; pretty, but not "productive."

Civilisation defines itself above and apart from nature itself, which exists to be exploited. Its "mastery" of the environment and "sophisticated" use of resources has brought us precisely the climatic circumstances we find ourselves in today.

The historical development of civilisation as an ideal is charged with the biases of the dominant global order, which considers itself the bastion of prosperity and enlightenment while upholding oppression and ecological destruction.

Have We Been Domesticated?

The civilised of today, for their part, are largely unaware of or deeply misinformed about life before and beyond civilisation, and even if they are aware of civilisation's many flaws, they may still consider it our best possible outcome.

But what if it's not?

Sadly, many people just haven't considered that there's any other way that we could be doing things. Millennia under the yoke of civilisation has created an almost "domesticated" humanity.

Now, I know that sounds derogatory, but let's take a moment to play with the idea.

The argument that we have been "domesticated" by civilisation is pretty compellingly laid out in Civilized to Death (2019) by American author Christopher Ryan.

In it, he argues that much like domesticated animals are corralled and controlled to serve human purposes, humans in civilisation are trapped in rigid, hierarchical structures where our autonomy is limited in service of systems beyond our control.

We are conditioned for compliance from an early age to foster our dependence on these systems and limit our ability to live independently or challenge the status quo. Rather than enjoying diverse natural diets, a close relationship with the land, meaningful labour, and a variety of physical activity, like animals in captivity, we live in confined, constructed environments designed to facilitate productivity rather than well-being, suffering from diseases and mental illnesses consequent of a sedentary, stress-filled lifestyle and heavily processed food diet.

So we get to be overworked and underfulfilled in our schools and workplaces, our creativity, health, and freedom atrophy, but at least the few at the top enjoy the lion's share of our labour.

Isn't that what life's all about?

Now, I can already hear the comments.

"Go live in the forest if you hate civilisation then!"

"Are you a primitivist?"

"Return to monke much?"

"Uhm ackshually civilization is spelled with a z"

Believe it or not, I value many of the technological achievements that are associated with civilisation. I enjoy going to the dentist, using public transportation, and having access the Internet. I appreciate the medical and technological advancements that occurred under civilisation that enable a higher quality of life for disabled persons.

But this isn't to say that civilisation holds a monopoly on technological improvement; as French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss observed,

> It was in Neolithic times that man's mastery of [what are now considered] the great arts of civilisation—of pottery, weaving, agriculture and the domestication of animals—became firmly established. Each of these techniques assumes centuries of active and methodical observation.

Our pre-civilised ancestors were not sitting around scratching in caves, they were quite admirable innovators, and there's no reason to believe that humans wouldn't innovate in a world beyond civilisation.

Still, I recognise that it is neither possible nor desirable to "return" to a time before civilisation, especially not with a population of eight billion people, mostly crammed into ever-growing cities.

We can't exactly scatter into the wilderness.

There is no real-life CTRL+Z and such is not the thesis of this video.

What I've attempted to outline so far are my reasons for considering civilisation definitionally broad, historically charged, and potentially domesticating.

I'm not here to deny the positive associations people have with civilisation, nor glorify the past, nor demonise the present.

My aim is simply to acknowledge that civilisation is not a singular good, it has many rarely acknowledged faults, and its benefits are not universally distributed.

Civilisation might mean progress for some, but it also means exploitation for others.

SKIT

"Vroom vroom"

"What are you doing?"

"Driving home, obviously."

"You're not going to get home if you're driving in this thing, it's a cardboard box!"

"If not in this, then in what? This is the only form of transportation. The peak of human travel. Nothing will ever surpass this."

Beyond Civilisation?

The question is, are we willing to think and go beyond civilisation? Or will we continue to limit ourselves to its framework, forever convinced that it is the pinnacle of what we are capable of, that it is truly the endgame, "the most advanced stage of human social and cultural development?"

I think we can do better.

Just as our bodies carry genes, our cultures carry memes, a term originally coined by British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in The Selfish Gene (1966).

Internet memes are only a small part of the picture of what memes are.

Each cell contains a set of genes; each individual carries a set of memes.

Genes replicate themselves in the gene pool; memes replicate themselves in the "meme pool" or culture.

Genes spread through reproduction; memes spread through communication, from parents, siblings, friends, neighbours, teachers, preachers, bosses, coworkers, and all the media we consume.

A very small percentage of genes make the difference between a human and a chimpanzee; a very small percentage of memes, accumulated over time, made the difference between the Renaissance and the Middle Ages.

Both genes and memes outlive individuals.

Some genes and memes are lethal.

As Quinn notes in Beyond Civilization (1999)

> Lethal genes don't start out as
>
> benign and then later become lethal. Rather, they start out as having no effect
>
> or another effect, which only later becomes lethal. The same is true of lethal
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> memes.

It seems as if our society has been implanted with the unquestioned and now lethal meme that: "civilisation MUST continue at ANY cost and MUST NOT be abandoned under ANY circumstance."

The word civilisation in that meme could easily be replaced by capitalism. So things might get worse and worse, we might live in daily misery and drive life on this planet to near extinction, but we'll still cling to the meme that "civilisation and capitalism must continue at ANY cost and must not be abandoned under ANY circumstance," accompanied by an additional complex of memes that keep us conforming. Memes like: "ours is the one RIGHT way for people to live and EVERYONE should live like us," "everyone, rich and poor, gets what they deserve," "the meek will inherit the Earth," or "new rulers will fix everything."

So everyone from Finland to Fiji to the Falklands continues to "Enjoy Coca-Cola" while the world burns. Because there's nothing better, after all.

Or is there?

Maybe if we realised we didn't have to fall to our deaths, that we could "try something different" and pull the string on the parachute, we'd let go of this life-threatening meme.

If we are to try to imagine a world beyond civilisation, we should probably have a better understanding of the world before civilisation.

Just as there are troops of baboons and flocks of birds, we've had tribes of humans.

Quinn notes that, contrary to popular belief, "a tribe isn't a particular occupation [like hunting and gathering]; it's a social organisation that facilitates making a living."

By this definition, we're not limited to ethnic lines or hereditary boundaries. That "making a living" might be hunting and gathering, as was historically typical, or it might be a circus, or a theatrical troupe, or anything else.

That "social organisation" might be a cooperative, a found family, an affinity group, or a medley of individuals from all walks of life.

My experience and observation have been that you're not supposed to say anything positive about tribal life or else you're idealising it, so let me be clear: people who live in tribes are not any more noble than anyone else.

As Quinn writes,

> The tribal life doesn't turn people into saints; it enables ordinary people to make a living together with a minimum of stress year after year, generation after generation.

So perhaps we can draw a lesson or two from our history of tribal life in our efforts to create something beyond civilisation.

In a rather anarchic manner, Quinn emphasises his definition of tribal systems as being fundamentally egalitarian, rather than hierarchical. Everyone in a tribe has a part to play in their survival and well-being, and no one member's role is more important than another because everyone's contributions are equally valued.

Tribal life is also very flexible, making it easy for them to adapt to the challenges they face and walk away from structures and situations that are no longer working for them.

Taking these lessons in mind, a world beyond civilisation might be a decentralised, mutually supportive, and egalitarian patchwork of groups flexibly organised around various purposes with the overall aim of sustainably maintaining collective well-being.

Imagine libraries of things, community kitchens, and shared gardens.

Instead of competing to "own" more, people focus on mutual care, so that no one is left behind.

We're not going backwards, but recognising that our hierarchical, consumption-obsessed civilisation has reached its limits and that we can move towards a future where cooperation, adaptability, and shared success define progress, rather than the endless pursuit of more.

Civilisation does not have to be the endgame.

There are other worlds, just around the corner.

Creating Change?

So how do we make this change?

I've broken down the basics of social revolution before: to pursue anarchy, a world without rule nor dogmas of rule where free association, self-determination, and mutuality form the basis of our society, we need to both oppose the system and propose new ways of thinking and doing things, so acts of confrontation, noncooperation, and prefiguration are necessary to create lasting change.

Through such acts, we develop our powers to enact the changes we seek, which in turn emboldens our drives to create even greater changes and shapes our consciousness of how the world works and what it takes to shape it.

Here's a new piece of the puzzle: changing the world must start with memes.

We were taught to believe certain memes about how the world should be, including the lethal meme that "civilisation must continue at ANY cost and must not be abandoned under ANY circumstance."

The easiest way to kill a meme is to introduce another meme, like "something BETTER than civilisation is waiting for us."

Solarpunk, that shining vision of a positive future, might be such a meme, interpreted as the "something better" to work towards. Or more accurately, somethings better, as I don't really see solarpunk as a monolithic way of life.

Solarpunk says that a sustainable future doesn't have to be "a sort of miserable half-life of voluntary poverty, donning sackcloth and ashes to do penance for our environmental sins," to borrow Quinn's words. Letting go of civilisation should be freeing, not burdensome. It's not about "giving up" certain things, it's about embracing better things.

Some see solarpunk as the next step in civilisation's future, others see it as the subversive successor to civilised life.

However you take it, my work, and that of others, seeks to spread a revolutionary solarpunk meme into the popular consciousness.

Anarchic social revolution might appear vast and unachievable, but we don't need to start with global change for it to occur.

The revolution has already begun, wherever people have stood up for themselves under the system or sought to build something new.

But whichever path we take, we must understand that confrontation with the powers that be is an unfortunate inevitability.

In the novel Walkaway (2017) by Cory Doctorow, minor spoiler, but the people could only abandon their dystopia for so long before their oppressors brought the fight to their door.

It would be best not to take them on prematurely, to try to skirt their radar for as long as possible, but if this solarpunk meme (or anarchy meme) is going to flourish, to spread and adapt to new circumstances, it will eventually have to confront the capitalist and statist establishment.

Understand, however, that our victory will not be achieved by the barrel of a gun. It will be achieved by the pandemic of the ideas. Remember that only a few memes differentiated the Middle Ages from the Renaissance, but such memes made it impossible to go back to the Middle Ages once the transformation had occurred.

Once the "civilisation idea" or "capitalism idea" or "hierarchy idea" can no longer maintain their privileged position, once alternatives have made themselves readily apparent and evermore viable through their networking with each other outside the dominant order, the old ways will no longer be able to hold people in the chains of "the only way to live."

The contrary would be obvious.

More and more will be convinced to defect not by the noble words of social change, but by the example of their fruits. From then on, the systemic inertia of hierarchy might be superseded by the systemic inertia of anarchy, as a society where a particular form of organisation is predominant tends to reproduce individuals with the values associated with that form of organisation.

The predominance of anarchy would mean the predominance of anarchic values, including the conscious opposition to hierarchy, making new hierarchies very difficult to impose.

Before you know it, the balance has tilted fully in favour of the world beyond civilisation, with its actualised promises of security, meaningful work, greater leisure, and social equality.

But that's just one potential outcome, and I'm certainly no Kwisatz Haderach.

New worlds, and especially worlds beyond civilisation, are never the brainchild of single men.

For some, civilisation encompasses every positive development of our species as a whole, for others, humanity exists on a spectrum from the savage to the civilised.

Some see civilisation as an indefensibly anthropocidal phenomenon that we should progress beyond. Others see civilisation as the outcome of our combined cross-collaboration.

Some extoll the virtues of our progress in civilisation, others denounce all that we've lost in service to it.

Depending on your perspective, I might be a pioneer of a new and improved civilisation based on anarchic principles and building on what came before,

or I might be a subversive seeking to disrupt the machinations of the civilisational project and sow seeds for the unimpeded cooperation of anarchy to flourish on its ashes.

Either way, I don't care about civilisation as a concept.

I refuse to see it as the end of the story.

I feel no attachment to it and no desire to stake my efforts on its legacy or its future.

In a sense, you could say that I'm beyond civilisation.

All power to all the people.

Peace

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