

Civilization

The OED is a **civilizational project**, dedicated to improving general use of the English language. Its genealogies of English usage model a key feature of **civilizational thinking**: the creation of legacies that not only set standards but also define a cultural space, in this case, English. Awareness of this frame alerts us to its erasure of the globally collaborative histories through which even words at the center of world power are shaped. The OED offers a **civilizational history** of the term "civilization."

According to the OED, "civilization" has been used since the 18th century to refer to "the action or process of civilizing or of being civilized." "Civilization is the humanization of man in society," said Arnold in 1879. The OED also points to the use of the term from the 18th century to denote "a developed or advanced state of human society." Examples stress the intersection between pre-modern empires and the colonial encounter. Buckle's 1857 *Civilization* characterizes Egyptian civilization as one which "forms a striking contrast to the barbarism of the other nations of Africa," while differentiating "the civilization of Europe" for its "capacity of development unknown to those civilizations which were originated by soil."

Raymond Williams's *Keywords* opens scholarly and political potentials within this project, offering a rich history of words that allows users to savor and question their meanings. But this is also a civilizational project, teaching the reader to select an English legacy from all our possible pasts. In *Keywords*, Williams traces the association of civilization with "the general spirit of the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on secular and progressive human self-development," as well as its "associated sense of modernity" (R. Williams, 1976: 58). Civilization comes to stand for a "whole modern social process," including (in the thinking of John Stuart Mill, for instance) an increase in knowledge and physical comfort, the decline of superstition, the rise of forward-moving nations, the growth of freedom, but also "loss of independence, the creation of artificial wants, monotony, narrow mechanical understanding, inequality and hopeless poverty" (R. Williams, 1983: 58). Williams notes "a critical moment when civilization was used in the plural" (1983: 59), beginning in French usage in the 19th century. From the 19th century until the 21st, the slippage of the term "civilization" between its singular and plural uses has offered a logic of universal historical destiny to particular racial, religious, and cultural authorities.

Civilization became essential to discussions in anthropology and history in the 19th century. In anthropology, the concept was associated with evolutionary distinctions contrasting civilization with savagery and barbarism. In history, the concept laid out world regions associated with imperial state-building and religious conversion. By the 20th century, English discussion – influenced by criticisms of evolutionism – turned to the ahistorical and relativizing term "culture." Williams's interest in civilization derived from his project to democratize the idea of culture. Yet other Western legacies kept civilization alive. In 1939, Norbert Elias (2000) traced the history of French and German commitments to the

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concept of civilization. French reformers used the term “civilization” in the mC18, he argues, to stress the importance of improving elite culture and politics – from within the elite world of manners. In contrast, German thinkers saw *zivilisation* as an affectation that could not substitute for the more genuine morality of *kultur*. Elias uses his Germanic perspective to offer a critical history of the **civilizing process**, in which increasing self-restraint in everyday human behavior creates an uncomfortable but regularized modernity. Meanwhile, C20 French thinkers continued to find civilization a productive tool for reform.

Neither Elias nor Williams takes us to the edges of empire, where much world- and world-making has occurred. Civilization had an explicit influence in world-making in the period when Europeans established world hegemony, from the mC19 through the mC20. European expansion was justified as a project of civilization. It did civilize, in the sense of bringing non-European elites into European ideas of civilization. Non-European elites made civilization their own, reshaping the concept to forge anti-colonial and nationalist struggles. Who would inherit the mantle of civilization? Claimants vied for the term and the world-making heritage it implied. These contests show civilization coming into its meanings through a globe-traversing, culture-crossing process of translation and contention. Following the “traveling theory” of civilization requires moving in and out of particular linguistic environments and modes of cultural politics.

Japan in the IC19 and eC20 was an important site for translations of the civilizational thinking of European expansionism. During the Meiji period (1868–1912), Western civilization became an explicit goal of the reconfigured, emperor-centered state, supporting the drive for Japanese national strength and fueling Japanese imperialist expansion. In the 1870s and 1880s, translators relied on Chinese characters to translate foreign words, either adding new meaning to the characters (as with “civilization”) or using existing characters to coin new words (such as “freedom” or “right”). The English word “civilization” was rendered into Japanese by the neologism *bunmeikaika*, which was written with Chinese characters but departed from earlier Japanese identifications with Chinese civilization. Civilization became an official state project: priests appointed by the national government preached throughout Japan on topics including “civilization and enlightenment.” The rural populace did not easily accept this program. Many associated civilization and enlightenment with foreigners and with the fearful figure of the blood-sucking stranger. Civilization was sometimes understood temporally, as a state entered into by different societies at different moments, but it was more frequently rendered spatially, and ambitious nation-builders set out to transform Japan into Westernized space. In 1883, prominent critic and educator Fukuzawa Yukichi argued that an elaborate Tokyo palace for the emperor was necessary as a sign of civilization and progress, so that Japan could confer with other nations on an equal footing. He described civilization as a universal development whose initial location in Europe was incidental; Japan, too, could attain it. Well into the eC20 in Japan, civilization

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meant world civilization. Japan was qualified to participate because of its growing modernity (Figal, 1999; Fujitani, 1996; Howland, 1996, 2002).

Moving through heterogeneous channels, Japanese versions of civilization shaped a variety of social improvement movements – including anti-colonial movements – across Asia. Between 1894 and 1905, Japan gained “civilized” status in international law; others hoped to follow. Japan’s complex identification of civilization with the West disrupted earlier patterns of civilizational thinking in China. Accompanied by a growth in Japanese political strength and military might, it helped to destabilize the loyalties of Chinese elites, many of whom went to Japan in search of thinking and technologies that would help them to reconfigure their own place in the world. In Tokyo, Chinese intellectuals joined others from throughout Asia and its diasporic populations to explore pan-Asianism, anarchism, Marxism, and the reconfiguration of gendered relations (Duara 2001; Karl, 2002). Civilizational debates were actively pursued in Chinese journals well into the 1920s. In China and Korea, Japanese-inspired “pan-Asianism,” expressed in intellectual debate as well as religious societies, inspired attention to the “spiritual” qualities of “Asian civilization” – at least until Japan’s wartime mobilization, and subsequent defeat, discredited these projects. Most young Chinese intellectuals rejected claims to a unified civilizational order in favor of the language of nation, modernity, and revolution. Yet nation and civilization were tightly linked: nation-building was taken as a sign of a higher form of civilization (Duara, 2001).

These developments traveled widely. In Dutch colonial Java, for example, Javanese students were impressed when Japanese were granted “European” status; they formed their own civilizational aspirations, particularly after Chinese nationalists in Java offered them the nation as a model for social and cultural mobilization (Pramoedya, 1991a, 1991b). Nation and civilization moved together conceptually through Europe’s colonies.

Gandhi’s reported quip about **Western civilization** (“It would be a good idea”) sums up these great debates: who would be the proper inheritors of the legacy of human improvement? European powers claimed civilization as the reason for their far-flung conquests. Were not the colonial powers enlightening the natives, who had lived until then as savages? But by the eC20, non-Europeans used this very rhetoric to object: was not colonialism a form of savagery to be resisted for the cause of freedom, justice, and equality, the very dreams of which the Europeans spoke so highly? As European critics were also noting (Adas, 1993), was not “Western civilization” limited, warlike, and materialistic? Might Europe’s Others carry civilization toward a brighter future?

Civilization has been a player in diverse and contradictory debates. Consider education. In the 1950s and 1960s, French secondary education became embroiled in a fight over “civilization” as understood through the history of Ferdinand Braudel (1994). Braudeliens wanted to move beyond a one-thing-after-another narrative of French history to teach

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global social history: civilization was the concept to open this door. Civilization lost and French political history was reinstated. Meanwhile, in the United States, a very different educational battle had begun to unfold.

The US university took up the cause of Western civilization during World War I. The first course was started at Columbia University in 1919 "as a 'war baby', born of the struggle to make the world safe for democracy" (Allardyce, 1982: 706). Similar courses, which brought US citizens inside the heritage of Europe, spread around the country. Courses in Western civilization were mainstays of US college education through the 1960s, at which point educators began to question the exclusion of non-white authors and non-European legacies of scholarship. In the 1970s and 1980s, new courses were organized to offer a more culturally inclusive education; this current became identified as **multiculturalism**. Multicultural curricula stimulated a virulent backlash particularly from conservative alumni, a key source of university funding. A small war broke out in academe in the 1980s, as multiculturalism and civilization were pitted against each other as opposing educational philosophies (Pratt, 1992).

Samuel Huntington's (1993) "The clash of civilizations?" had a powerful impact on this debate by arguing that the term "civilization" was not just relevant to teaching students about the past; civilization might be the organizing feature of post-Cold War politics. With the decline of the nation state, he argued, religion-based cultural politics would be at the base of world order and disorder. His argument, developed further in Huntington (1996), requires the patriotic consolidation of white Christian Western civilization against its competitors and potential enemies, at home and abroad. Huntington's homogeneous and tightly bounded civilizations resonate nicely with those still taught (despite a generation of historians who have refused such boundaries) in world history textbooks (Segal, 2000). Their familiarity and simplicity – as well as their apparent opening to pluralist appropriations – made them immensely charismatic. In the 1990s, conferences on civilizational clash and dialogue were convened across the world.

When US president George W. Bush championed a war of the worlds in 2001, the revised rhetoric of civilization was ready and waiting for him. Bush first turned to the Crusades as his image of war, but he was quickly criticized for alienating Muslim allies. Civilization was safer: on the one hand, it called to mind "Christian civilization" and the specific cultural mobilization against the infidel that he required for the wars; on the other hand, it evoked global civility, and who could be opposed to that? One project aimed to discipline critical scholars by demanding that universities focus on "defending civilization" (Martin and Neal, 2001).

Meanwhile, civilization has proved a useful rhetoric for distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate forms of warfare. The civilized must punish the uncivilized by any means necessary. In this use of the term "civilization," the Bush administration reached back to colonial precedent. European colonial rule required the unrestrained punishment of the uncivilized for the good of civilization (Lindqvist, 1996). Through this history of

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civilized slaughter, indeed, the Bush administration's repetition of the term "civilization" invoked a Western civilizational heritage, although not an admirable one.

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See: ***CULTURE, EDUCATION, MODERN, MULTICULTURALISM, NATION, WEST.***