Is Civilization Uncivilized?

Ken Fuchsman

The words civilized and civilization have different connotations. A civilized individual evokes images of someone who is civil, considerate, and cultured. Civilization encompasses all that transpires in organized human societies: the good, the bad, the ugly. Some of the diversity in the responses to Paul Elovitz' and my symposium articles can be traced to whether it is civilized behavior or civilization to which the writer is referring.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines civilized as "an advanced stage of social and cultural development, usually marked by the existence of organized communities and an adherence to established conventions of behavior; highly developed; refined and sophisticated in manner or taste; educated, cultured" (*OED*, 2000). Norbert Elias sees the civilizing process as exhibiting both individual self-regulation and the existence of a government with a monopoly on force. It is the focus on state power, which then brings out the diverging notions between an individual being civilized and civilization. For the government can do its best to insure domestic tranquility, promote peaceful commerce, prosperity, knowledge, and the arts, but may also favor the influential and indulge in abuse of power.

Then there is the fact that there are a multitude of nations. These states can coexist or come into conflict. There is no political body that can always adjudicate international disputes. While most often peace prevails, sometimes armed conflict erupts between countries. War and civility are not terms that are joined at the hip, as warfare often brings out our brutality. Historian William McNeill observes, "human propensities find fullest expression in having an enemy to hate, fear and destroy" (*The Pursuit of Power*, 1982, viii). Philosopher Max Horkheimer concludes, "barbarism cannot be abolished, for it is...an element of civilization" (Horkheimer, *Critique of Instrumental*, 2012 [1974]. 69). Being considerate and barbaric both characterize civilization. It depends on how much you emphasize the refined or the brutal as to how you will address the question of whether we are more or less

civilized.

Matthew Bowker says that being civilized derives from the word civil, which he sees as an ethic that "treats others as separate and valued beings...and to relate with others...in authentic and meaningful ways." There are two possible criteria, Howard Stein writes, for being civilized. The first is openness and inclusiveness, a decrease in ethnocentrism. The second is exalted cultural moments. Stein describes how much he was transformed as an undergraduate by attending a live performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. To him, being civilized is connected to experiencing the sublime. Though as Norman Simms points out, for a long time in the West, the civilized were contrasted with the barbaric. Howard Stein's experiences can in some ways be separated from the tendency to denigrate other cultures; still, debasing others is not infrequent. Bowker then wonders if civilization entails finding "suitable containers for hatred and self-hatred." When we contrast civil and savage, to him it is often only a cover for unleashing our uncivilized sides onto others and calling it progress. He writes: "to the extent that our civilizing practices depend on a shared (self-) hatred of the uncivilized, they make *civil being* impossible." Can then being civilized be separated from the uncivilized within us? Often the creative contains the destructive, but not always. The answer to this prior question leads to evaluating human motivation.

A few of the authors of these commentaries address human nature. Utilizing *Civilization and Its Discontents*, David Lotto says Freud concludes that affiliation in a nation state brings with it an increase in aggression directed towards an out group. Lotto quotes Freud: "It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestation of their aggressiveness." Freud also is quoted as saying that "the most important problem in the development of civilization" is "the sense of guilt." To Freud, the advances of civilization bring with them "a loss of happiness." Lotto himself says that "we cannot conclude that this upward progression of civilization is a good thing. It may look good on the surface but watch out below." Philip Pomper, also referring to Freud, says that civilization "remains a veneer for our unruly drives."

Though neither Lotto nor Pomper cite the following passag-

es, Freud does elaborate on human aggressiveness within civilization. To the founder of psychoanalysis, "men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved." They are instead tempted to use their instinctual aggressiveness on their neighbor to humiliate, torture, or kill him. Freud says the "commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself...runs so counter to the original nature of man." To prevent human brutality the state uses violence against wrongdoers, but, Freud says, the law cannot always stop "refined manifestations of human aggression." The grim aspects of human hostility lead Freud to say that "each one of us has to give up as illusions the expectations which, in his youth, he pinned upon his fellowmen" (1930, *SE,* XXI*,* 112).

The question of whether over time humanity is becoming more civilized to Freud cannot be answered without delving into depth psychology's emphasis on aggression and guilt. I think Freud and the commentators here who cite him are onto something essential. Is there an underlying psychology of humanity that provides a foundation for what transpires in social life? In recognizing these unruly drives between an in-group and out-group, Freud, Lotto, and Pomper have hit on something universal. Psychologists Elizabeth Spelke and Katherine Kinzler write, "every human community" includes "cooperation, reciprocity, and group cohesion," plus a "predisposition to categorize oneself and other humans into groups." This includes showing a "preference for the in-group, or *us,* over the out-group, or *them.*" This us/them tendency can be seen in infants as early as three months (Spelke and Kinzler, *Developmental Science,* Vol. 10, Issue 1, 2007, 91-92). Psychologist Michael Tomasello also reports that an in-group/out-group frame of mind is present in infants at a young age. He then notes that "the best way to motivate people to collaborate...is to identify an enemy and charge that 'they' threaten us" (*Why We Cooperate*, 2009, 94, 100). Similarly, Keith Oakley and colleagues write, "The emotional preference for 'us' and hostility to 'them' is indeed a candidate for a biologically inherited human universal" (*Understanding Emotions*, Second edition, 2006, 250).

These psychological foundations of us vs. them also need to be balanced with other aspects of our psychology. Freud's assertion that humans are not gentle individuals seeking love omits the

side of humanity that has some affinity for the commandment to love one's neighbor. "Researchers from diverse fields," anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy reports, are finding that although "humans can be very selfish, in terms of empathic responses to others and our eagerness to help and share with them, humans are also quite unusual, notably different from other apes" (*Mothers and Others*, 2009, 7).

As civilization is a double-edged sword, humans are double-sided creatures. Our caring establishes deep bonds, and our rage is projected onto others and too often results in widespread destruction. We have developed ideals of human rights and not always followed them. As Jay Gonen writes, "The origins of the double-edged sword of civilization are rooted in a contradiction." He goes on to write, "the Achilles heel of civilization rests on the presumption that lofty standards of conduct such as care for others, scientific developments and cultural creations rely for their implementation on a power base that does not always tend to safeguard civilized humanistic ideals." The paradox of advanced civilization is that opportunity, affluence, and safety are provided for many while others are exploited. The will to power is used to injure those who are in out-groups. Both empathy and barbarity are perennials of civilization. What is not a perennial is how humanity has developed science, technology, commerce, complex societies, and ideals of human rights that have transformed human existence. As Gonen writes, "Many middle class citizens in the developed countries enjoy material and cultural amenities that the kings of old could only dream of. This calls for optimism." On the other hand, the "tracing of causal links leading from modernity to the Holocaust evokes pessimism."

Many of the commentators to this symposium recognize the over- and underside of civilized life. Judith Logue sees Western culture aimed at vanquishing ignorance and promoting democratic learning, yet atomic bombs and napalm are also products of the West. She wonders if this advanced technology producing deaths in war "makes us less civilized." Don Carveth writes that I view civilization as a mixed blessing. He himself sees how it has both "brought us a great deal," while in recent times has increased inequality and led to a kind of oligarchy for the elites. To Christina

Stern, the ideals developed in the Enlightenment remain noble and inspiring. She perceives herself as a beneficiary of these "vital" sentiments. Like Carveth, she sees a "tiny corporate elite" undermining democracy and denying basics of survival to too many. To her, it is frightening that some of us are not much concerned with "seeking the 'better angels' of our nature." Lawrence Tritle says, "Civilization, like mankind is Janus-faced, savage man, peaceful man." In this, Tritle is in accord with how I characterize organized societies. Don Carveth and Jay Gonen also mention the double-sidedness of civilization. Humanity remains a kind and killing species.

There are some contributors who focus more on the underside of civilization and some who stress our achievements. Irene Javors in her analysis of the apocalyptic fantasies in the zombie TV show, *The Walking Dead*, focuses on a catastrophic vision. She remarks that since 9/11 one side of our culture is preoccupied with fear and anxiety resulting from our fighting endless wars, enduring financial crises, terrorism, and fear of infectious diseases. The media then reflects the war in contemporary life between life and death, including these fantasies of the living dead.

From a vastly different angle, Aaron Denham speaks of structural violence. This is a term he takes from the work of Paul Farmer, a physician and anthropologist. Structural violence occurs when political and economic arrangements cause harm. Denham quotes Farmer as saying "they are violent because they cause injury to people." Examples of structural violence are the close to 10 million children across the globe under five who die each year from preventable causes: the lack of safe drinking water, the failure to have a solid health infrastructure in the countries where Ebola is present, and the legacy of discrimination for African-Americans. These are all serious issues that deserve much attention and hopefully many of them can be remedied. Yet to call them violence is a significant stretch. Violence is usually defined as the intentional use of physical force to harm or kill another being. As most of the examples Denham gives do not involve physical force, the term violence does not fit. Another term might be more appropriate. While the impact of the problems Denham mentions can be as deadly as violence, still the term violence should be confined to us-

ing physical force to injure, maim, or slay someone. The experience of physical violation arouses specific neurological and psychological reactions that can induce post-traumatic stress. These bodily responses to physical attacks then are of a different category than the horrors of infectious disease, lack of water, or the legacy of racial discrimination. It is important to preserve appropriate distinctions. Too often we categorize things incorrectly, usually in an over-inflated way. For example, the word "trauma" has been defined as involving life threatening incidents, but is frequently used to describe awful events that do not threaten life or limb. Similarly, let's keep violence to mean the intentional use of physical force.

Another commentary that looks at the underside is John Snow and Frederick Stecker's article on social Darwinism. They connect this phenomenon to Herbert Spencer's doctrine of the survival of the fittest. Spencer said that government should not interfere in the struggle for existence. These notions were used in the United States to justify the state not regulating business. In his classic book on social Darwinism, historian Richard Hofstadter discusses a side of social Darwinism that Snow and Stecker ignore. To promote survival and fitness, humans should use their ingenuity to enhance civilization, and this includes using human intelligence to regulate the economy and deal with social inequities. In other words, there was a conservative and a liberal American social Darwinism in the late 19th century. When Snow and Stecker consider the more recent doctrine of winning as the only thing, they view this and other similar sentiments as still being social Darwinism. They find these points of view to be a reduction of reality. They write, "Winning is *not* the most important thing. It is nothing. It is pure illusion." I am not so sure that the more recent manifestations of the ideology of victory is Darwinist. As the advocates of success do not join winning to the doctrines of Charles Darwin, they are not evolutionary. This American emphasis on triumph owes more to the civil religion of free enterprise, which preceded Herbert Spencer and flourished when Spencer went out of fashion.

For an article in this issue but not included in the symposium, historian Peter Petschauer writes of "civilizational progress." He recognizes serious setbacks and ebbs and flows, yet maintains that "human attainments have gradually moved in the direction of

civilized behavior—behavior that allows increasing numbers of us to enjoy its benefits." He details significant advances in the progress of humanity, including the invention of writing and reading, better health care in industrialized societies, the decline of deaths during childbirth, the abolition of slavery, the notion that all Homo sapiens are human and should be treated equally. Petschauer is cognizant of that not all enjoy the benefits of these improvements, yet history reveals how much we have done to improve our condition and enhance our lives. His analysis then is in accord with what Paul Elovitz has written in his symposium article. On the other hand, Dzmitry Samakhvalau views Elovitz as exemplifying a progressive Western view of modernity that underplays the contributions of the rest of the planet. Where Elovitz sees violence declining, Samakhvalau is not convinced. The latter sees the "belief in linear progressive development" as "a psychological defense," and a way of hiding "under a blanket so as not to see real challenges." One view emphasizes progress, the other denial.

Both perspectives have merit, for humanity is gentle and ferocious, collaborative and contentious, innovative and resistant. In viewing Homo sapiens in civilization it pays, as Joni Mitchell sings, to look at both sides now. We should also seek the negative capability John Keats advocates, which includes the capability of being in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts (*Selected Letters,* 2002 [1817], 41). There is much both perplexing and illuminating within civilization. Keeping opposites before us is a better way to get a comprehensive view of civilization than adhering to a more one-sided perspective. ❑

British Civility: Reality or Reaction-Formation?

Joyce M. Rosenberg—Private Practice

For those who passionately read Jane Austen, watch *Downton Abbey*, or follow news of the royal family, Britain appears to be a refined society. Good manners, beautiful clothes, and speaking the King's English are seen as evidence of how civilized the British are. Contrast that with slums and poor working class towns, Brit-