BG Pulse Journal USA
ISSN:1947-2536 http://www.bgpulseusa.com/index.php/bg
BG PULSE JOURNAL

УДК 316.3/4 ББК 60.54

EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF "CIVILIZATION": FROM THE IDEA OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT TO THE MODERN UNDERSTANDING

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Doi: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21218268

Abstract: This article examines the historical evolution of the concept of **civilization** from its origins in the Enlightenment to its modern interpretation. It explores how the meaning of the term has shifted from a moral ideal associated with progress and refinement to a comprehensive socio-cultural concept encompassing diverse historical and cultural systems. Using historical-philological, comparative, and evolutionary methods, the study analyzes the views of major European thinkers and demonstrates that contemporary scholarship recognizes civilizations as dynamic, interconnected, and culturally diverse forms of social development.

Key words: civilization, society, culture, nation, history, social structure.

Introduction

The concept of **civilization** is one of the fundamental categories in the humanities, integrating historical-philosophical, socio-cultural, and cultural analyses of society. The term originates from the Latin word *civilis*, meaning *civil*, *public*, or *urban*. Initially, it represented the ideal of an orderly social life, civic responsibility, and refined behavior. Beginning in the eighteenth century, during the Enlightenment, however, the meaning of the term underwent profound transformation. The evolution of this concept reflects changes in the European worldview—from the belief in a single universal path of development to the recognition of the diversity of cultures and civilizations. This study aims to reconstruct the semantic evolution of the term and identify the patterns of its philosophical reinterpretation.

Purpose and Concept of the Article

The article is based on the premise that the evolution of the concept of **civilization** in European intellectual history reflects changing perceptions of society and humanity. This transformation represents a shift from a normative and moral interpretation characteristic of the Enlightenment to a systemic, cultural, and pluralistic understanding in modern scholarship.

The primary objective of the article is to demonstrate that the concept of civilization has not only expanded in meaning but has also evolved from a linear model of historical development toward the recognition of multiple forms of historical and cultural evolution.

Research Methods

The study employs several complementary research methods:

- **Historical-philological analysis** to investigate the origin of the Latin word *civilis* and the earliest uses of the terms *to civilize* (*civiliser*) and *civilization*.

- **Comparative analysis** to compare the interpretations of eighteenth-century French and British thinkers, including Mirabeau, Ferguson, and Hume, with those of nineteenth-century scholars such as Jouffroy and Febvre.

- **Evolutionary analysis** to trace the gradual development of the semantic and philosophical content of the concept within changing scientific and cultural paradigms.

Main Findings

The study demonstrates that in the mid-eighteenth century, particularly in the works of **Mirabeau (1757)**, the term *civilization* referred to the moral and intellectual improvement of society through education, reason, and humanitarian values. French Enlightenment thinkers used the concept to describe social progress in contrast to savagery and barbarism.

During the nineteenth century, especially in the writings of **Jouffroy**, the term began to appear in the plural form—**civilizations**—reflecting a transition from a universal model of development to the recognition of cultural diversity.

In the twentieth century, thanks to historians and cultural theorists such as **Lucien Febvre** and **Arnold Toynbee**, the concept acquired a systemic character and came to denote complex socio-cultural organisms characterized by internal dynamics, social stratification, and interactions among various subcultures.

Literature Review

Lucien Febvre demonstrated how the concept of civilization evolved from a moral ideal into a major category of social science. **Émile Benveniste** examined the semantic foundations of the Latin word *civilis* and traced the expansion of its cultural meanings. **Mirabeau (1757)** was the first scholar to employ the term *civilization* in its Enlightenment sense. **Antoine Furetière (1690)** documented the earliest meanings of the words *to civilize* and *civility* in his dictionary. **Théodore Jouffroy** became one of the first theorists to develop the idea of multiple civilizations, emphasizing their diversity rather than a single universal model.

The concept of **civilization** is regarded as one of the most complex and multidimensional categories in historical and philosophical thought. It has long been the subject of scholarly debate and continues to attract the attention of researchers from various academic disciplines. Although the term itself entered scientific discourse in the mid-eighteenth century, ideas concerning civilization and its defining characteristics have a much longer intellectual history.

As is well known, the word **civilization** originates from the Latin term *civilis*, which is associated with the concepts of a *citizen* and *urban life*. To this day, this meaning has been preserved in the English word *civil*, which refers to qualities expected of a responsible citizen, including politeness, courtesy, kindness, respect for others, and adherence to the norms of civilized social life. Over time, however, the semantic scope of the word expanded considerably. The Italian poet **Dante Alighieri** used the expression *humana civilitas* to refer to humanity as a whole and to emphasize the unity of human society. Nevertheless, the original etymology and early usage of the term differ significantly from its later interpretations. Most scholars agree that the modern understanding of the concept was largely shaped by the French and British philosophers of the Enlightenment.

According to the French historian **Lucien Febvre**, *"to reconstruct the history of the French word 'civilization' is essentially to reconstruct the stages of the profound intellectual revolution experienced by French thought from the second half of the eighteenth century to the present day."* He argued that attitudes toward this concept reflect the profound social and intellectual transformations that occurred in France during the period of absolutism, when the country regarded itself as the center of European social thought.

The verbs **civiliser** (*to civilize*) and the noun **civilité** (*civility*) became widespread within the French aristocracy as expressions of refined manners and proper social conduct. These behavioral norms were strongly influenced by court etiquette and later formed one of the foundations of **Norbert Elias's** influential work *The Civilizing Process*. The meanings of these terms were also recorded in **Antoine Furetière's** *Universal Dictionary*, published in the Netherlands in **1690**.

Referring to the ideas of **Émile Benveniste**, the Russian scholar **A. P. Tsvetkov** notes that the word **civilization** was first used by **Victor Riqueti, Marquis de Mirabeau**, in his famous work *The Friend of Men, or A Treatise on Population* (*L'Ami des hommes*, 1757). Mirabeau defined civilization as *the refinement of morals, courtesy, and knowledge that spread throughout society to establish standards of proper conduct and transform these standards into generally accepted social laws.*

However, the noun **civilization** retained the essential meaning of the verb **to civilize** (*civiliser*), namely **to soften manners, cultivate moral values, and enlighten society**. Consequently, the term came to denote both the process of civilizing and the society that had successfully adopted these moral, cultural, and intellectual standards.

Traditionally, the concept of **civilization** has been applied to developed peoples and organized states, whereas the term **culture** primarily refers to the spiritual, intellectual, and artistic achievements through which the highest accomplishments of civilization are expressed. Initially, this distinction applied mainly to societies considered **civilized**, particularly **France** and **England**.

However, the optimism of Enlightenment philosophy gradually gave way to a more critical understanding of historical development. The growing body of information accumulated during the **Age of Exploration**, together with increasing awareness of the diversity of peoples and cultures beyond Europe, fundamentally challenged the belief in a single universal model of civilization.

As a result, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the **ethnographic concept of civilizations** emerged. According to this perspective, every nation possesses its own unique civilization, shaped by its particular historical experience, cultural traditions, and social institutions. This idea was most clearly formulated by **Théodore Jouffroy**, who rejected the notion that European civilization represented the only valid model of human progress.

According to **Lucien Febvre**, the term **"civilization"** was first used in the **plural form**—*civilizations*—in **1819**. This marked a significant turning point in the intellectual history of the concept, as it signified the recognition of the diversity and uniqueness of civilizations across different historical periods and geographical regions. From that point onward, alongside the idea of civilization as a single universal phenomenon, scholars increasingly recognized the existence of distinct local civilizations, each possessing its own historical trajectory, cultural identity, and social organization.

Throughout the nineteenth century, numerous fundamental studies were published describing the civilizations of various countries and historical epochs. These works viewed civilization as a comprehensive state of society in which culture occupied a central, though not exclusive, position. Civilization was understood as a multidimensional system encompassing political institutions, economic development, social organization, religious beliefs, scientific achievements, and cultural values.

From an anthropological perspective, the concept of **civilization** is often contrasted with that of **primitive** or **traditional culture**. As a classificatory category, civilization refers to cultural formations characterized by organic heterogeneity and a correspondingly complex social structure. Civilized societies exhibit advanced systems of social stratification, institutional organization, and cultural differentiation.

Such societies are distinguished by a high degree of functional specialization and the coexistence of multiple interconnected subcultures. These include elite and popular cultures, urban and rural traditions, official and everyday cultural practices, all of which interact within a single civilizational framework. Rather than existing independently, these subcultures form an integrated cultural system that contributes to the overall stability and development of civilization.

From an evolutionary perspective, the emergence of civilization represents a distinct stage in the historical development of both society and culture. Civilization stands in contrast to **savagery** and **barbarism**, which are regarded as pre-civilizational stages in the evolution of humankind. In this sense, civilization reflects a higher level of social organization, technological advancement, institutional complexity, and cultural achievement.

The development of civilization should therefore be understood not merely as material progress but also as the continuous refinement of social institutions, moral values, intellectual life, and cultural creativity. It encompasses the gradual transformation of human communities into increasingly organized, interconnected, and culturally sophisticated societies.

Consequently, civilization is not a static condition but a dynamic and evolving social system. Its development is influenced by political, economic, technological, cultural, and spiritual factors, all of which interact to shape the historical destiny of individual societies. Modern scholarship therefore interprets civilizations as living historical entities that continuously adapt to internal changes and external influences while preserving their unique cultural identities.

The reinterpretation of the concept of **civilization** is closely associated with changes in the self-awareness of European societies. During the **Age of Enlightenment**, civilization was perceived as a universal standard of human progress, embodied primarily in European culture. This understanding reflected a distinctly **Eurocentric worldview**, according to which European civilization represented the highest stage of social and cultural development.

During the nineteenth century, however, the rapid development of ethnography, anthropology, archaeology, and historical studies fundamentally transformed this perspective. Scholars increasingly recognized that different peoples had developed their own unique civilizations, each governed by its own historical logic, cultural traditions, and patterns of social evolution. Consequently, the concept of civilization shifted from a singular and universal model toward a pluralistic understanding that acknowledged the diversity of human cultures.

Contemporary scholarship integrates these historical perspectives by interpreting civilization as a **dynamic, multidimensional socio-cultural system**. Modern civilization encompasses the interaction of cultures, economic and technological development, political institutions, social organization, and spiritual diversity. Rather than viewing civilizations as isolated entities, contemporary researchers emphasize their continuous interaction, mutual influence, and contribution to the development of world history.

Thus, the evolution of the concept of **civilization** illustrates a transition from a **moral and normative interpretation** to a **structural, systemic, and pluralistic understanding** of society and culture. This transformation reflects broader changes in philosophical thought, historical methodology, and the social sciences.

Conclusions

The concept of **civilization** has evolved from denoting good manners and refined customs to becoming a comprehensive scientific category describing the overall development of human society.

Modern scholarship regards civilizations as **unique yet interconnected cultural worlds** that coexist and interact within a shared global historical space. Their development is determined not only by economic and political factors but also by cultural traditions, religious beliefs, technological innovations, intellectual achievements, and systems of social organization.

The historical evolution of the concept demonstrates more than a linguistic or terminological change. It reflects a profound transformation in humanity's understanding of history—from the Enlightenment belief in a single universal path of progress to the recognition that multiple civilizations may develop through different yet equally valuable historical trajectories.

Consequently, civilization should be understood as a complex, dynamic, and evolving social phenomenon that incorporates cultural diversity, institutional development, technological advancement, and moral progress while maintaining its distinctive historical identity.

Final Conclusion

This article examines and analyzes the principal definitions of the concept of **civilization** and provides a concise historical overview of the origins and evolution of the term. It demonstrates that the meaning of civilization has continually expanded in response to changing philosophical ideas, historical knowledge, and scientific approaches. Today, civilization is understood as one of the central analytical categories in the humanities and social sciences, enabling scholars to investigate the complexity of human societies and their historical development.

Summary

This article explores the principal approaches to defining the concept of **civilization** and traces its historical evolution from its earliest usage to its contemporary interpretation. It demonstrates that the concept has developed from a moral ideal associated with civility and refinement into a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding the diversity, complexity, and historical development of human societies.

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