

# Civilizations : Culture, Ambition, and the Transformation of Nature

## Felipe Fernandez-Armesto

In *Civilizations*, Felipe Fernandez-Armesto once again proves himself a brilliantly original historian, capable of large-minded and comprehensive works; here he redefines the subject that has fascinated historians from Thucydides to Gibbon to Spengler to Fernand Braudel: the nature of civilization.

To Fernandez-Armesto, a civilization is "civilized in direct proportion to its distance, its difference from the unmodified natural environment" . . . **by** its taming and warping of climate, geography, and ecology. The same impersonal forces that put an ocean between Africa and India, a river delta in Mesopotamia, or a 2,000-mile-long mountain range in South America have created the mold from which humanity has fashioned its own wildly differing cultures. In a grand tradition that is certain to evoke comparisons to the great historical taxonomies, each chapter of *Civilizations* connects the world of the ecologist and geographer to a panorama of cultural history.

In *Civilizations*, the medieval **poem** *Sir* Gawain and the Green Knight is not merely **a** Christian allegory, but **a** testament to the thousand-year-long deforestation of the trees that once covered 90 percent of the European mainland. The Indian Ocean has **served** as the mld's greatest trading highway for millennia not merely because of cultural imperatives, but because the regular monsoon winds blow one way in the summer and the other in the winter.

In the words of the author, "Unlike previous

attempts to write the comparative history of civilizations, it is arranged environment by environment, rather than period by period, or society by society." Thus, seventeen distinct habitats serve as jumping-off points for a series of brilliant set-piece comparisons; thus, tundra civilizations from Ice Age Europe are linked with the Inuit of the Pacific Northwest; and the Mississippi moundbuilders and the deforesters of eleventh-century Europe are both understood as civilizations built on woodlands. Here, of course, are the familiar riverine civilizations of Mesopotamia and China, of the Indus and the Nile; but also highland civilizations from the Inca to New Guinea; island cultures from Minoan Crete to Polynesia to Renaissance Venice; maritime civilizations of the Indian Ocean and South China Sea . . . even the Bushmen of Southern Africa are seen through a lens provided by the desert civilizations of Chaco Canyon.

More, here are fascinating stories, brilliantly told of the **voyages** of Chinese admiral Chen Ho and Portuguese commodore Vasco da Gama, of the Great Khan and the Great Zimbabwe. Here are Hesiod's tract on maritime trade in the early Aegean and the most up-to-date genetics of seed crops. Erudite, wide-ranging, a work of dazzling scholarship written with extraordinary flair, *Civilizations* is a remarkable achievement . . . a tour de force by a brilliant scholar.

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*Civilisation*

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THE TRANSFORMATION

OF NATURE

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Many the wonders but nothing walks stranger than man.

The thing crosses the sea in the winter's storm,  
Making his path through the roaring waves,  
And she, the greatest of gods, the Earth-  
Ageless she is and unwearied-he wears her away  
As the ploughs go up and down from year to year  
And his mules turn up the soil.

Gay nations of birds he snares and leads,  
Wild beast tribes and the salty brood of the sea  
With the twisted mesh of his nets, this clever man.  
He controls with his craft the beasts of the open air,  
Walkers on hills. The horse with his shaggy mane  
He holds and harnesses, yoked about the neck.  
And the strong bull of the mountain.

Language, and thought like the wind  
And the feelings that make the town  
He has taught himself, and shelter against the cold,  
Refuge from rain. He can always help himself.  
He faces no future helpless.

There's only death  
That he cannot find an escape from.

- SOPHOCLEASn, *tigone* 332-369,  
translated by Elizabeth Wyckoff (Chicago, 1959)

*6 mines! je retournerai vers vous prendre vos legons!*

-C . F. VOLNEYL, *e s Ruines* (1791), in

*Oeuvres*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1989), p. 170.

*Preface*

Really, it was just a small, spare library cubicle, but, in my imagination, I was in Amalia's room. The wallpaper was heavily flocked with velvet, the windows hung with double sets of curtains. More drapes enclosed the bed. Whereas most people in mid-nineteenth-century Argentina lived in houses with earthen floors, Amalia's Italian carpet was so thick that your foot felt cushioned. The air was heavily scented. On every side, light was excluded, weather shut out, nature rejected, except in the pale-golden design raised on the surface of the wallpaper, "which represented the play of light between faint clouds."1

Because of the critical interest it excites, Amalia's must be one of the most frequented rooms in fiction, though the woman who lived in it was chaste. It is an easy room to imagine, because Jorge Mrirmol described it exactly in his great novel of 1851: the book which is usually said to have started Argentina's distinguished tradition as a land of novelists. I was reading it this morning, before I started writing for the day.

Like all the citizens of Buenos Aires in her day, Amalia had something to prove. It was a frontier capital, when Argentina was an estuary and the pampa a palatinate. Everything in the environment was daunting, every view limitless so vast as to be practically indistinguishable from the blur of blindness and numbness, along the sea-wide river, across the ocean-wide sea, into the apparently endless plain. A ride away lived the people the citizens called savages.

Here, to be convincing, civilization had to be exaggerated.

Not all people who aim to be civilized cocoon themselves so deeply, shutter their rooms so thoroughly, and separate nature so decisively from their dwelling space: civilization is, however, a product of what I now like to think of as the Amalia Effect. Civilization makes its own habitat. It is civilized in direct proportion to its distance, its difference from the unmodified natural environment.

What provokes the Amalia Effect? Not an instinct, because some individuals, some entire societies, are without it-but an impulse or irritant which is

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almost universal and which, as I argue below, no habitable environment can altogether resist.

History is a humane pursuit, rather than a "scientific" one, in the conventional

sense, because the past is not present to our senses: we can only know other people's impressions and perceptions of it. Yet people are part of the awesome continuum of nature, and you cannot encounter them except in the tangle of their environments and the mesh of the ecosystems of which they form part. This book is a story of nature, including man. Unlike previous attempts to write the comparative history of civilizations, it is arranged environment by environment, rather than period by period or society by society. This shows where my priority lies. My purpose is to change the way we think about civilization: to present it as a relationship between one species and the rest of nature, an environment refashioned to suit human uses-not a phase of social development, or a process of collective self-improvement, or the climax of a progressive story, or just a suitable name for culture on a large scale, nor a synonym for excellence endorsed by elites. I am not trying to impose a new definition on an old word. On the contrary, I am reformulating a traditional usage. Whenever the word "civilization" is properly used, it suggests a type of environment; but this meaning has got buried under the rubble of misuse and needs to be excavated.

No way of dividing up the world by environments is entirely satisfactory. Geographers like to picture them unmodified by man and sort them into natural ecosystems. Most such attempts end up by identifying between thirty and forty main classes. But man is part of nature. He has dominated most ecosystems of which he has formed part. In this book, I have tried out a scheme based on environmental features which are closely reflected in people's actual experience of life in civilizations. However comprehensive one tries to make one's scheme of classification, every environment will enclose a variety of habitats and niches. The categories crisscross and overlap. There are deserts with rainfall as high as in many forests. There are alluvial floodplains in almost every latitude. Temperature, soil, rainfall, altitude, relationship to rivers, lakes, seas, proximity to mountains, winds, currents-all these are variables which can make environments in any one class seem very different from each other and closer in resemblance, in some cases, to others in other classes. Degree of isolation or facility of communications can have a transcendent effect-overleaping mountains, squeezing seas.

Nor can the environmental approach alone disclose everything that matters. One of the lessons of this book is that environmental frontiers are critical: civilizations

thrive best when they straddle environments or occupy areas dappled with microclimates and with varied soils, reliefs, and resources. Culture, moreover, shapes independently of the environment. Migrants sometimes retain it tenaciously in surprising new worlds. A people's proximity to and relationship

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with neighboring cultures can transform or inform the life of a society. Civilization is spread by human vectors in despite or defiance of environmental barriers.

In any case, classification of environments is not an exact science. After experimenting, I have selected the categories which seem to me to work best in practice. The reader will see at once that the environments which form the basis of organization of this book are not discrete or mutually exclusive or individually homogeneous. Many civilizations could be classified in more than one environment. Some start in one and end up largely or wholly in another as a result of migration, displacement, or expansion.

Although my categories are broadly derived from geographers' ways of dividing up the biosphere, I have invented environmental labels of my own. No geographer would recognize small islands, for instance, as a coherent type of environment.

But such a classification makes sense in terms of the history of civilization, because there are cases in which proximity to the sea outweighs every other environmental influence in shaping the modalities of society. Study of the history of Venice and Easter Island benefits from an arresting juxtaposition. Highlands form another dangerously open-ended category. Whether a land is high or not depends on relative judgment, not objective criteria; the altitude of Tibet elevates Tibetan civilization to a different sort of world from that of Iran, but there are advantages to be had, insights to be drawn, from considering them together. When I treat Scandinavia alongside Phoenicia or the Scythians alongside the Sioux, I do not claim that these surprising pairings fall into uniquely valid categories; but I do maintain that these categories are uniquely virtuous. No other way of selecting and dividing up the material would yield quite the same insights, emphasize quite the same analogies, or suggest quite the same speculations.

A type of environment is the subject of each part of the book. I start with ice and aridity, tundra and taiga, desert and dry scrub, because most people think of

them as inimical to civilization. Part Two is about the grasslands which have resisted or discouraged agriculture because of dry soil or an unyielding sod. Part Three deals with well-watered environments in swamps, tropical lowlands, and postglacial forests. Only after visiting these unpromising places do I devote chapters to the alluvial floodplains, where most conventional histories of civilization start. I then turn to the category I call "Highlands"-which has to be accepted as a relative term, without absolute value. I then deal with the types of environment formed by proximity to the sea: nurseries of maritime civilization in small islands and narrow coasts. I include anywhere where the sea seems to me to be the dominant element in the environment, as far as the history of civilization is concerned, regardless of any feature of climate except current and wind. My final category is the deep sea itself-an environment never yet home to a civilization, but one which civilizations have labored to cross. Migration, expansion, the incorporation or traversal of new environments are themes which intrude at almost every stage of the book, because every civilization originates in a specific environment, but some manage to transcend their environments of origin and occupy others by expansion or displacement.

The effect is to suggest that civilization can happen anywhere. The prejudice that some environments are uniquely conducive is hardly more justifiable than that which claims that some peoples are more productive than others or some races more prone. It is true that civilization is harder to sustain in some environments

than others, but no habitable environment has wholly resisted attempts to recraft it to suit human purposes. When looked at environment by environment, the talent to civilize appears higgledy-piggledy all over the world and may be concentrated most conspicuously in places traditionally undervalued by conventional histories of civilization. The most ambitious modifiers of preindustrial grasslands are to be found in Africa. The most creative builders in swamps arose in the Americas long before the "white man" arrived. Europeans have been particularly good at civilizing temperate forests-in effect, at cutting or burning them down- but in other types of environment, where their achievements are directly comparable with those of peoples in other parts of the world, their record is not especially impressive.

In different parts of the world, similar environments inspire different responses

and solutions. The history of civilization is therefore conditioned but not "determined" by environment, even though the influence of the environment is pervasive and tends to favor some outcomes rather than others. Indeed, I am not aware of any evidence that any of the human experience we lump together under the heading of "history" is determined by anything. A near-lifetime of studying it has left me convinced that it happens at random, within limits allowed by a mixture of willpower and material exigency. Or else it happens chaotically, by way of untraceable causes and untrackable effects. Very broadly, it is probably fair and useful to say that the differences which arise from place to place in similar environments are matters of culture. It would be absolutely wrong, however-not just unwarranted by the evidence but actually contradicted by it-to say that some parts of the world or some special patterns of genetic inheritance nourish cultures with a special vocation for civilization. I have tried to write without prior exclusions: without excluding readers, without excluding range. This is an experimental work and should not be mistaken for a purported achievement. I think of it as an essay because, though long, it is short by comparison with other attempts to encompass the history of civilizations (or, as some writers prefer to say, civilization). And it is a tentative work, meant to be risky, rough-hewn, and selectively unprecedented, written to stir provocation, not invite assent. I have written it in something like a frenzy, anxious to get down what I wanted to say before I forgot it. No mature delibera

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tion has formed it (though I have been thinking about the subject for many years). No research assistants have helped compile the material, few specialist readers have restrained or righted the judgments. This means that I shall rely on readers to tell me where I have gone wrong; but it confers one advantage: the unity of a single conception, executed by a single-minded effort.

This is helpful because the subject is so big and hard to contain. I intended a comparative study, but I have also tried to say something distinct and discrete about a large number of different civilizations: it would be tedious to go through them all, trying to do justice to each; it would be hopeless to attempt to select in each case facts for recitation which would command universal approval. The critical facts are, in any case, usually well known and, in consequence, not

worth repeating. Civilization by civilization, I have therefore normally preferred to attempt evocations or descriptions from odd angles, rather than an ample conspectus. But where I bring in civilizations generally ignored or littleknown such as those of the Aleut or the Battamaliba-or relatively scanted or underappreciated, such as those of Fukien or the Fulani, I have included more elementary facts; readers who already know these are asked for indulgence. No one will expect me to be equally well versed about all the places visited and peoples met in these pages. I have cited more evidence, specific sources, and supporting literature than is usual in a work on this scale, not to make a show of erudition but so that readers can see for themselves where my preparatory work or existing knowledge is thin: as usual, I alternate between "thick description" and broad, risky generalization, roaming a landscape of snowdrifts and thin ice. This seems better than just staying in my igloo.

In a departure from the way civilization is usually understood, I try not to judge societies against a checklist of supposedly civilized characteristics. Nor shall I rank civilizations as "higher" or "lower" according to my judgment of their works of art or ways of thought. Instead, because civilization is seen here as a kind of relationship between human society and the natural world, the degree to which a particular society is civilized is measurable on a scale of its own making. My own attitude to civilization tacks between love and hate. I am like Amalia. Despite a lifetime spent in England, I have never learned to prefer nature to culture, as English people are supposed to do, with their taste for country life, rural sports, veterinary surgery, all-weather walks, and gardens which imitate natural landscape. I like dressed stone and tarmac to keep my feet from earth. The countryside to me is something to admire, if at all, at a distance, through a study window or in a frame on a wall. To the annoyance or amusement of my family and friends, I hide from nature in clothes rigid with starch and in angular rooms, mathematically proportioned for preference. I am moved by ruins because I see them as wounds civilization has sustained in a losing war against nature. On the other hand, I am full of respect, and even reverence, for the wisdom of the wild, and I am equally moved by the wounds inflicted on nature by man.

Despite the self-isolation in which this book has been written, I have incurred debts which must be acknowledged (without deflecting any blame for

my mistakes). I owe a lot to friendly scrutineers of my English, but in one small respect I have resisted their advice: I write prose which hobbles along on the crutches of old allusions, and they have urged me to explain more of these to help readers who do not recognize them. But I think literature in which everything is explicit is no fun to read: part of the pleasure of engaging with a writer is unraveling some allusions and admitting defeat by others. The purpose of allusive writing is to arouse associations deep in the reader's mind and feelings, not necessarily to communicate plainly. So some of what I serve up in this book comes straight off the range; some has to be picked out of the sauce. Besides, allusion-expanding is a kind of imperialism and a *ieu sans frontihres*.

There is no such thing as common knowledge any more, and each of us is surprised by everybody else's ignorance. In the homily I heard in church this morning (as I write), the priest spoke of those "great dreamers of freedom, MARTIN LUTHER KING and STEVE BIRO of South Africa." "It's a slip of the pen," I whispered to the young friend next to me. I now wonder whether she even knows who Martin Luther King was. *Ou sont les ndgres dhntan?*

Invitations to lecture gave me a chance to try out ideas from the last two parts of the book. For them, I thank (in the order in which the lectures were given) the Institute of Policy Studies (Institut Kajian Dasar) of Kuala Lumpur; the Departments of History and of Spanish, Portuguese, and Latin American Studies of Princeton University; La Trobe University; the Vasco da Gama Quincentenary Conference of La Trobe and Curtin Universities; the History Department of Harvard University; the Humanities Research Center and the Program in British Studies of the University of Texas at Austin; the Crayenborgh College of the University of Leiden; the National Maritime Museum, London; the Associates of the John Carter Brown Library; and the Associates of the James Ford Bell Library of the University of Minnesota. The substance of the introduction was given as a workshop paper at the Center for Early Modern History, University of Minnesota, and as an NIAS lecture at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (where I found some time to finish off revisions to the manuscript, thanks to the delights of the place, the indefatigability of the staff, the generosity of my colleagues, and the institute's culture of reverence for productive leisure). In all these places, I got too much help from too many hosts and participants in discussion to mention them all by

name. Most of the book was written where I could look out over the wrinkled bricks and old lawns of Brown University; I owe a lot to that companionable place, the lively atmosphere of the History Department, and the courtesy and interest which come naturally to people in and around the campus. My wife, Les

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ley, read the manuscript. Professors Leonard Blusse, Willem Boot, Joyce Chaplin, and Johan Goudsblom, and Sebastian Fernandez-Armesto and Federico Fernandez-Armesto read parts of it and were enormously patient and helpful. Vital improvements were made on the advice of my excellent editors, Bill Rosen and Tanya Stobbs. My deepest debt is to the Director, Dr. Norman Fiering, and the Board, Associates, Fellows, and incomparable staff of the John Carter Brown Library: it is as near an ideal place of study as I know. In particular, it is a wonderful place for comparative colonial history- the project I came here for, from which this book is a thick, dangling, sesquipedal thread. All history, I have come to believe, is the history of colonization, because all of us got to where we are from somewhere else.

Providence, Rhode Island

May 37 1998

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June-November 1999

*Intro2uctwn*

THE ITCH TO CIVILIZE

HUBERTC: 7estu n cas bien particulier qui m7amkne.

MORCOLJe: ne connais que des cas particuliers, Monsieur.

-R. QUENEAULe, Vol d'lcare (1968), p. 4

"Phew!" muttered Bob under his breath, and I wrinkled my nose, too. The smell that assailed us defied description. But then the thought occurred to me that some of our own civilized odors are not too delicate either. What about the smells that hover over some of our industrial cities-the smogs, factory stench, unburned gas exhausts from a million noisy autos, garbage smells drifting out of back alleys? I smiled. Probably an Aleut would wrinkle up his nose at them. I guess it all depends on what you're used to.

-TED BANKS, Birthplace of the Winds

(New York, 1956), p. 73

"Has it ever struck you," he said, "that civilization? damned dangerous?"

-AGATHA CHRISTIE, The Shadow on the Glass,"

The Mysterious Mr. Quin

The Civilizing Ingredient

In a dim, grim square in downtown Providence, a few blocks from where I was writing these lines, workmen were installing an ice rink between embarrassingly empty office blocks. The city fathers hoped, I suppose, to freeze-frame a splash of life, color, poise, and charm. When they finished it, the ice rink inspired fun but stayed cold. Meanwhile, other optimists were laying down vivid lawns in Lapland.

Neither effort, some readers may think, says or does much for civilization.

## 12 INTRODUCTION

For even the world's best ice-dancing is tawdry: glitz and lutz to Muzak. Lawns are platforms for the mentally numb rites of suburban England in summer: small talk and silly games. What wilderness wants to be coated with this bourgeois shellac?

Yet we should applaud the heroism of the ice rink in the concrete jungle, and the lawn in the ice. They represent the terrible paradox of construction and destruction at the start of the civilized tradition: the urge to warp unyielding environments

in improbable ways; the itch and risk to improve on nature. The results of civilization are equivocal: sometimes the environment is gloriously transformed; sometimes it is mocked or wrecked. Usually, the effect is between these extremes, along the range of achievements reviewed by Sophocles in a passage which appears at the head of this book: wearing the earth, cleaving the waves, controlling beasts, creating towns with "feelings," and building refuge from weather.

Like most terms calculated to evoke approval, such as "democracy," "equality," "freedom," and "peace," the word "civilization" has been much abused. Of course it denotes a type of society. The difficulties begin to arise when we ask, "What type?" or demand a description or characterization, or inquire into awkward distinctions- between, say, "civilization" and "culture," or "civilized" and

"uncivilized." In the course of many unsatisfactory traditional attempts to capture a term for it, the civilizing ingredient-the magic which transmutes a mere society into a civilization- has been seen as a process, a system, a state of being, a psychic or genetic disposition, or a mechanism of social change. "Civilization" has meant so many different things to different people that it will be hard to retrieve it from abuse and restore useful meaning to it.<sup>2</sup> It may be helpful to set out the ways in which the term is usually understood and the way in which I propose to use it.

Loosely used, "a civilization" means an area, group, or period distinguished, in the mind of the person using the term, by striking continuities in ways of life and thought and feeling. So we can speak of "Western civilization" or the civilizations of China or Islam, or of "Jewish civilization" or "classical civilization" or "the civilization of the Renaissance," and readers or listeners will know roughly what we mean. This usage is justified by convenience and legitimated by wide acceptance; but it is imprecise and insubstantial, riven with subjective judgments. The words "society" and "culture" would serve the same purpose equally well. The perceived continuities will vary from observer to observer; some observers will deny them altogether, or perceive others which cut across the proposed categories.

One way of getting round this problem is to insist that there are particular continuities which distinguish civilizations, such as a common religion or ideology or sense of belonging to a "world order"; or a common writing system or mutually intelligible languages; or shared peculiarities of technology, agronomy, or food; or consistency of taste in art; or some combination of such features.

All such criteria, however, are arbitrary-as I hope we shall see-and there seems no good reason why some societies should qualify as civilizations because of them, whereas other features of culture, such as dance or prophetic techniques or sleeping habits or sexual practices, are not necessarily admitted as civilizing.

At a further level, the word "civilization" denotes a process of collective self-differentiation from a world characterized, implicitly or explicitly, as "barbaric" or "savage" or "primitive." By extension, societies judged to have achieved such self-differentiation are called "civilized." This usage is obviously unsatisfactory because

barbarism, savagery, and primitivism are also nebulous terms, partisan and value-charged-but it is easy to understand how it arose: it began in eighteenth-century Europe, where politesse and manners, sensibility and taste, rationality and refinement were values espoused by an elite anxious to repudiate the "baser," "coarser," "grosser" nature of men. Progress was identified with the renunciation of nature. Reversion to the wild was derogation. Men might be the sucklings of wolves, but their destiny was to build Rome. Savages might be "noble" and set examples of heroic valor and moral superiority; but once rescued from the wild, they were expected to renounce it. The so-called Wild Child of Aveyron was a boy abandoned in infancy in the high forests of the Tarn, who survived by his own wits for years until he was captured in 1798 and subjected to an experiment in civilization, which his custodians were never able to complete to their satisfaction. Perhaps the most poignant moments in his pathetic life, described by his tutor, were of reminiscence of his solitude:

At the end of his dinner, even when he is no longer thirsty, he is always seen with the air of an epicure who holds his glass for some exquisite liquor, to fill his glass with pure water, take it by sips and swallow it drop by drop. But what adds much interest to this scene is the place where it occurs. It is near the window, with his eyes turned towards the country, that our drinker stands, as if in this moment of happiness this child of nature tries to unite the only two good things which have survived the loss of his liberty—a drink of limpid water and the sight of sun and country.

When the experiment failed, he was abandoned again: this time into the care of a kindly old woman in a modest neighborhood of Paris, where the scientific world recalled him with the bitterness of disappointment.

Finally, "civilization" is commonly used to denote a supposed stage or phase which the histories of societies commonly go through or which they achieve at their climax. I find this usage repugnant a fortiori, because it implies

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a pattern of development, whereas I disbelieve in patterns and am skeptical about development. Societies change all the time but in different ways. They do not develop, evolve, or progress, though in some measurable respects they may

get better or worse, according to different criteria, at different times. They conform to no model, work towards no telos. History does not repeat itself and societies do not replicate each other, though they may evince similarities which make it useful to classify them together. The pages which follow are full of examples of how theories of social development tend to be written *d parti pris*, in order to legitimate some solutions while outlawing others. Whenever "civilization" appears as a phase in the context of such a theory, it comes loaded with value: it may be a culmination or a crisis; it may be gleaming or gloomy; it may denote progress or decadence. But it is always an item in an agenda, distorted by a program of praise or blame.

A young man, down on his luck as he hovered between the center and edge of the French empire around the turn of the eighteenth century, seems to me to have had a revealing inspiration. His background was noble and tragic; his habits were simultaneously evasive and assertive. His family had sold their birthright for cash, but he went on calling himself "Baron de Lahontan." In 1702, he was in Paris: the place where - and not long before the time when - the word "civilization" was first coined in its modern form.<sup>5</sup>

The penniless ex-aristocrat was dreaming of his beloved Canada, where he had been fortune-hunting in adolescence and had come to admire the natural nobility of the people his countrymen called "savages" (see page 134). How, he wondered, would a Huron, transported from that wilderness, react to all the grandeur of this great city? From a world uncluttered by civilization, with a mind unprejudiced by its values, Lahontan's Huron admired the stones of Paris. But it did not occur to him that they could have been laid by people. He assumed they were natural rock formations, fitted by chance to be human dwellings. His delusion seems to have been a literary topos. When a "savage" from St. Kilda saw Glasgow in the early eighteenth century, "he remarked that the pillars and arches of the church were the most beautiful caves he had ever seen."<sup>6</sup> The surprise of the "savage" measures the difference between an environment modeled by people and one molded by nature. It leaps the gap between the civilized condition, in which the adaptations are forced on nature, and a different type of society, in which they evolve in man.

These stories go to the heart of the problem of what a civilization is. I propose to define it as a type of relationship: a relationship to the natural environment,

7 recrafted, by the civilizing impulse, to meet human demands. By "a civilization" I mean a society in such a relationship. I do not necessarily mean that all civilizations are in any sense good, though I happen to like some of them, or bad, though I am aware of their dangers. One lesson of this book is that civilizations commonly overexploit their environments, often to the point of selfdestruction.

For some purposes - including, in some environments, survival itself civilization is a risky and even irrational strategy.

#### The Glutinous Environm

Some societies make do with the environment nature provides. They live off the products and inhabit the spaces nature gives them-or sometimes they build dwellings in close imitation of those spaces, with materials which nature supplies. In many cases they live by moving with the seasons. In others they set up home by making small modifications: hollowing out, for instance, or superficially decorating caves; penning or herding the animals they need; or grouping for their own convenience the plants they want to cultivate. Others risk interventions in the environment which are intended only to conserve it or provide for their own survival, without any program for changing it permanently. All of them take at least one big step towards modifying it: controlling fire to cook food, keep cold at bay, and destroy or regenerate plants.<sup>8</sup> I call these cultures "civilized" only according to the degree to which they attempt to refashion their natural environment.

For the standard of civilization is set by other societies, bent on the defiance of nature: hazard-courting societies; human communities who transform the world for their own ends. They recarve its landscapes or smother them with new environments which they have built themselves; they struggle to impose their own kind of order on the world around them. Sometimes, they try to secede from nature altogether-to pretend that people are not part of the ecosystem and that the human realm does not overlap with the animal kingdom. They try to "denature" humanity: to fillet the savage out of themselves, to domesticate the wild man within by elaborate clothes and manners.

You can see the scars of their struggles in the deep, sharp lines on which civilizations have erected their buildings, laid out their settlements, formalized their gardens, and arranged their fields. A passion for regular geometry-overlaid

on nature's bristles and bumps-runs through their history. At its most uncompromising, civilization wants to perfect nature in line with the prophet's vision of the end of time, when every valley shall be exalted, the hills made low, and the rough places plain: a world regulated with the spirit level and the measuring rod, where the shapes conform to a pattern in a geometer's mind.

I assume for purposes of this book that there is no such thing as exclusively human history. History is a "humane" discipline: it is too far steeped in tears and blood and affectivity and hatred ever to be anything else. If it were a "science" - in the old-fashioned sense of the word, a field of study governed by laws, in which effects were predictable-I should find it uninviting. The study of mankind is man and, to historians, nothing human is foreign. But to understand man properly, you have to see him in the context of the rest of nature. We cannot get out of the ecosystem in which we are linked, the "chain of being" which binds us to all the other biota. Our species belongs in the great animal continuum. The environments we fashion for ourselves are gouged or cobbled out of what nature has given us.

All history is, therefore, in a sense, historical ecology. This does not mean that it has to be materialist, because many of our interactions with the environment start in our minds. Like the geometry of civilizations, they are imagined or excogitated before they happen outwardly. All the traditional ingredients in the checklist of civilization are underlaid by ideas: cities by ideals of order, for instance, agriculture by visions of abundance, laws by hopes of utopia, writing by a symbolic imagination.

Yet the glutinous natural environment with which societies are surrounded does mean that the history of civilization cannot be written wholly in terms of ideas or of works of the imagination. It is not and cannot be a subject only of art history or of intellectual history. It belongs in the soil, seeds, and stomachs. It has to encompass episodes in the history of technology, because, at his most effective, man meets nature at the edges of his tools. It has to be about food, because, at their most dependent and their most destructive, people encounter the environment when they eat and drink it. (I have been criticized by fellow historians for writing economic history largely in terms of food-but to most people, for most of the time, nothing matters more.) It has to cover the terrain of both German words for it: *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*. Study of civilization has to be informed

by readings in lots of different disciplines, especially archaeology, anthropology, geography, and art history. It has to travel beyond the places in which historians usually confine it. In the pages which follow, readers kind enough to persevere will find material on the buildings of the Battamaliba rather than the Bauhaus; there is more on the Aztecs than Athens, more on the Khmer than the Quattrocento. Civilization-history has to be total history: winnowed and threshed and swept out of remote corners of the past, not just picked out of the archives and libraries like the living worm. This makes it perhaps impossible to write, but surely irresistible to attempt.

### The Mask and Apollo: Recent Definitions and Approaches

The great art historian Kenneth Clark, who devoted the most influential work of his life to the study of civilization, ended up by saying that he still did not know what it was but he thought he could recognize it when he saw it. He drew what has become a famous - to some critics, infamous - comparison between an African mask and the Belvedere Apollo, an ancient marble of uncertain date and provenance which generations of art critics praised as an expression of ideal beauty.<sup>1</sup> "I don't think there is any doubt," Clark said, "that the Apollo embodies a higher state of civilisation than the mask." He went on to explain that the Apollo represents an essential ingredient of civilization - confidence to build for the future; whereas the mask, by implication, comes from a world terrified and inhibited by nature's power over man. His preference was a matter of taste-of personal judgment. Clark recognized a civilized society as one which values and creates lasting works of art and which builds on a large scale for the future." Today, people who think of themselves as civilized might also want to belong to a society which has enough wealth to buy creative leisure for its people; which provides ways for people in large numbers to live and work together for each other's good; which has techniques of recording and transmitting its inherited wisdom; which tries to adapt nature to people's needs without destroying the natural environment. We might use these criteria "to recognize civilization when we see it." But they are not much help in an attempt to define it. They accurately reflect ideals widely shared today: our image of what we should like to be. They are not prescriptions which would necessarily command assent or determine priorities in other cultures and other epochs. All definitions of civilization seem vitiated by this sort of prejudice. They all belong to a conjugation

which goes, "I am civilized, you belong to a culture, he is a barbarian." To strip the value out of our notion of civilization may be too much to hope for; but it may be possible at least to escape from some of the cruder perversions of prejudice, the warped perspective of what Kenneth Clark admitted was "a personal view."

Someone once said that most books are books about books, and I do not want to write another of the same kind. But readers of this book, if they are to get any further with it, may want to know how it fits or misfits into the existing tradition on the subject. Readers who find theories unnecessary or uninteresting can skip the next thirteen pages or so. By uttering that exemption, I make it obvious that I find them generally unnecessary and largely uninteresting myself.

But because the project on which I am engaged is so different from previous contributions in the field, readers already well read in the literature will demand reassurance on the theoretical front before proceeding. On the one hand, an urge inherited from empiricism makes us want to cut out the *pourparlers* and get on with the job. On the other, we inhabit or are entering an intellectual world in which nothing is pinned down and definitions always seem deceptive: a "processual" world in which no process is ever complete, in which meaning is never quite trapped, and in which distinctions elide, each into the next. I get impatient with wrigglers into word games: I want every inquiry to aim, at least, at saying something definite. Most traditional definitions of civilization, however, have been overdefined: excessively rigid, contrived, and artificial - imposed on the evidence instead of arising from it. It is useful to go back over them in order to see what to avoid. The rest of this section reviews what might be called "civilization studies" since the First World War; the following three consider traditional definitions and classifications of civilization and the problems they pose.

It seems impertinent to say that the history of civilizations is a neglected subject, since, in a sense, almost everything ever written belongs to it. Nevertheless, it is true that the attempt to understand it and present it to readers and students has been relatively neglected in recent years. Between the wars, the subject was a playground of giants, in which Oswald Spengler, A. J. Toynbee, V. Gordon Childe, Lewis Mumford, and Ellsworth Huntington waded and traded blows. Civilization-ology could be said almost to have constituted an academic discipline in itself. The Great War had been represented as a war "to save civilization";

it therefore became pertinent - albeit after the event - to establish what civilization was and how and why it should be defended.<sup>12</sup>

All the projects of that era failed. Spengler was a wayward genius, who tortured his readers with grisly predictions and a contortionist's prose. He had a brilliant gift for conjuring a sense of what particular civilizations were like by assigning symbolic sensations to each: Western civilization, for instance, was expressed by the sound of a Bach fugue in a Gothic cathedral.<sup>13</sup> The metaphor which controlled his understanding was, however, childish and unconvincing: civilizations were like living organisms, doomed to the decay of senescence. When he defined civilization as the "destiny" of a culture, its climactic phase, "the organic-logical sequel, fulfilment and finale," Spengler was not, therefore, being complimentary. A culture did not become a civilization until it was already in decline. It "suddenly hardens," he said, "it mortifies, its blood congeals, its force breaks down, and it becomes Civilization."<sup>14</sup> He claimed to know remedies to reverse decline, but, as one of his many devastating critics said, "an element of blank despair is unmistakable in the activism that is left to those who foresee the future and feel instrumental in its arrival."<sup>15</sup> He denied that he was a pessimist- but that is a form of self-indulgence for Jeremiahs who are afraid that their predictions are insufficiently bleak.

None of the other contending giants was able to do much better. Childe disliked the word "civilization" and tried to avoid it, but ended up by making it mean little more or less than settled life: a state of society which ensued from two "revolutions,<sup>770</sup> of which the first was agricultural (man's "control over his own food supply") and the second was "urban."<sup>16</sup> Farming and city life were already conventional ingredients of checklists of civilization, to which Childe later added, equally conventionally, writing.<sup>17</sup> In the work of Mumford and Huntington, "civilization" was a shamelessly value-laden term, applied respectively to what they hated and approved. This does not mean their work was valueless: far from it. Huntington's genius gleams on almost every page of his enormous output, but it was warped into error by two vices: first, his affection for pet theories, especially his conviction that long-term weather trends changed by a mechanism he called "pulsation," which enabled him to affix every development he acknowledged as civilized in a place and period of favorable climate;<sup>18</sup> second, the preference for his own kind, which he fought against but to which

he routinely succumbed. He recognized that every people had its own standards of civilization, but he could not help preferring above all the others those of protestant Northwestern Europe and New England, whose environment combined the "optimal" conditions (see page 33 below). In other directions, the farther from Yale, the worse. This may have been a symptom of *mal de siècle*: Arnold Toynbee doubted whether civilization was possible much north of Boston. Toynbee was a tireless advocate of the comparative study of civilizations and wrote a monster of a book about it: twelve volumes, each at least as big as this book. But this leviathan ended up beached. Near the beginning of his work, Toynbee assured readers that there is "a real specific difference" between civilizations and so-called primitive societies and spoke of one "mutating" into the other.<sup>19</sup> One searches the next eleven and two-thirds volumes helplessly to find what the difference is. The nearest the author comes to specifying it is this:

. . . in primitive societies, as we know them, mimesis is directed towards the older generation of the living members and towards the dead ancestors who stand . . . at the back of the living elders, reinforcing their power and enhancing their prestige. . . . Custom rules and the society remains static. On the other hand, in societies in process of civilization, mimesis is directed towards creative personalities which command a following because they are pioneers on the road towards the common goal of human endeavors. In a society where mimesis is thus directed towards the future, "the cake of custom" is broken and the Society is in dynamic motion along a course of change and growth.<sup>20</sup>

Strictly speaking, "primitives" do not exist: all of us are the products of equally long evolution. The confusion of civilization with change and of change with "growth" seems wildly unjustifiable: all societies change yet all crave stability; and the illusion of changelessness has been cultivated in societies which it would be mad to exclude from the civilized category. In retrospect, Toynbee's enthusiasm for "pioneer" leaders, steering civilization towards collective goals, seems chilling in a work published just after Hitler came to power. The "cake of custom" is a phrase Toynbee got from Walter Bagehot; the English law and British constitution are examples of institutions baked into it. The notion that only the uncivilized defer to "the older generation" and to ancestral wisdom

would, if valid, disqualify from civilization just about every society worthy of the name. For, if there is such a thing as progress, tradition is the foundation of it.

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No society has ever prospered by forgetting the accumulated learning of the past.

The notion that civilizations are bent on the future does, however, have a lot of suggestive power and has generated a lot of unacknowledged influence. It underlay a historically minded anthropologist's poetic characterization of civilization as "the cultivation of our ultimate purposes," the self-conscious remaking of society oriented towards the future instead of the past.<sup>21</sup> It inspired, I suspect, Clark's definition of a civilization as a society with confidence to build for the future; and it responded to the pessimism of Spengler and the doomfraught atmosphere of modern times. What Paul Valkry called "the crisis of the spirit" was spread by the conviction that civilizations- because they resembled living organisms-were "mortal."<sup>22</sup> "A civilization which knows that it is mortal," as a representative commentator said, "cannot be a civilization in the full sense of the word."<sup>23</sup> The sense of doom-the need to contend with pessimismgot more pronounced as the twentieth century multiplied horrors and disasters; but the interwar period was already deeply shadowed with it. The future then seemed to lie with new barbarians who abjured civilization altogether-communists and Nazis who repudiated humane values in the rush to exterminate whole races and classes. Mikhail Tukhachevsky, best of the generals of the first Red Army, threatened "to make the world drunk . . . to enter chaos and not to return until we have reduced civilization to ruin." He wanted Moscow to become "the center of the world of the barbarians." His program for progress included burning all books, "so that we can bathe in the fresh spring of ignorance."<sup>24</sup> The repudiation of civilization at the corresponding extreme on the right was less explicit, but the latent savagery was at least as horrible and quite as silly. Just as Tukhachevsky dreamed of "returning to our Slav gods," so the Nazis fantasized about ancient folk-paganism and turned Heimschutz- the preservation of the purity of the German heritage- into a mystic quest through stone circles and along ley lines.<sup>25</sup> Futurism was the art and literature both political extremes had in common: war, chaos, and destruction were glorified and tradition was vilified in favor of the aesthetics of machines, the morals of might,

and the syntax of babble. 26 In roughly the same period-at least, after Margaret Mead published her work on sexual maturation in Samoa-civilization seemed menaced by a further threat: from romantic primitivism. Mead's picture, based more on fantasy than fieldwork, was of a sexually liberated society uninhibited by the "discontents" which psychology had detected in civilization. In her Samoa, unclad adolescents could rollick, free of hang-ups and repressions.<sup>27</sup> The Second World War did not dispel these threats; but it did seem to make civilization less worthy of study. Since the horrors of the Holocaust and Hiroshima, taste for the systematic study of civilization has never recovered its former confidence. Occasional critics have popped up to denounce the errors or assumptions of the prewar giants; I read the abridged version of Toynbee's first **THE ITCH TO CIVILIZE 21**

six volumes in late childhood, then resolved never to return to them after encountering Pieter Gey's merciless denunciation when I was still at school.<sup>28</sup> (I maintained that resolve until the present book was nearly finished, when I found that Toynbee's work is half full of wisdom.) Philip Bagby, who was better at unpicking other people's definitions than sewing up his own, ended, disappointingly, by equating civilization with cities, which merely shifts the problem of definition to another, equally problematical term.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, admirers of Toynbee, and followers who thought they could improve on his legacy, arranged congresses and founded something like a movement, with modest results.<sup>30</sup> During the same period, sociologists, who often fancy civilization as a potentially useful category into which to class societies, have occasionally urged historians to resume the task of identifying its characteristics, generally without being heeded, or have proposed elaborate schemes of "stages," "phases," and "cycles"; these owe more to the sociologist's vocation than to the realities of civilizations, which are intricate and elusive and have to be deciphered and described before they can be sorted.<sup>31</sup> Numerous American textbooks on "Western civilization" appeared during the Cold War: I have only glanced at a few of them, but I think it is fair to say that their authors were under an obligation to say nothing new. The most engaging insights of these decades were offered by Kenneth Clark and Norbert Elias.

Clark, who was writing for television, found the concept of civilization irresistible,

perhaps because it defied definition. E. H. Carr brilliantly dodged the usual obligation to treat civilization as a subject of universal history. He pointed out-with the genius that consists in pointing out the obvious that no one has noticed before- that it was a self-referential Western concept, which "expresses the self-consciousness of the West, . . . everything in which Western society of the last two or three centuries believes itself superior to earlier societies or 'more primitive' contemporary ones."<sup>33</sup> He told its story in terms of what used to be called "civility" or *politesse*-the transformation of standards of behavior in Western society in line with the bourgeois and aristocratic values of modern, or fairly modern, times: a "change in drive-control and conduct,"<sup>34</sup> or what the eighteenth century called the "planing and veneering" of man." This was a valid project, which produced deeply instructive results; but it was not really an essay in the history of civilization-or of more than a small part of it. Though "civilization" is a Western word, in the sense proposed in the present work the concept is commensurable with, or translatable into, universal terms.

During the Cold War, two further groups remained faithful to the idea that civilization was a concept worth studying: ancient-historians or archaeologists (who, however, tended without officious theorizing to use the name for societies they studied);<sup>i6</sup> and the few surviving believers in progress. In the latter category, Fernand Braudel was the most influential and widely admired. He scattered the term "civilization" throughout his work as part of a program of encouraging stu<sup>22</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

dents and scholars to think in terms of broad categories. He formulated his most useful definitions in a work designed for secondary-school use in 1963. Sometimes he used "civilization" as a synonym for culture, sometimes as a name for a society made coherent, in his mind, by continuities of identity or ideology.<sup>i7</sup> He also equated a "true civilization" with an "original culture," by which he meant an innovative or distinctive one.<sup>38</sup> He realized that some civilizations, at least, can be classified according to their environments, and proposed one such category, which he called "thalassocratic civilizations, daughters of the sea." The examples he identified-Phoenicia, Greece, Rome, and "that assemblage of vigorous civilizations of Nordic Europe, centered on the Baltic and the North Sea, without forgetting the Atlantic Ocean itself and the civilizations on its shores" are considered in Part Seven below.<sup>39</sup> The term "thalassocratic" seems unhelpful,

since most of these societies were ruled by soldiers and landowners, but they all qualify for classification under a single heading because of the mastering presence of the sea.

Meanwhile, that indefatigable educator and progressivist Sir Jack Plumb, the last English Whig, edited an enormous collection of volumes intended to constitute *The History of Human Societies*. Plumb's conviction that the underlying story was progressive made a certain sense of "civilization" the implicit subject, and the word kept cropping up in titles of books in the series. A few years earlier, without theorizing or even offering a word of justification, a brilliant work launched a similar series under the title "History of Civilisation." John Parry, the series editor and author of the inaugural volume, held a chair of "Oceanic History" and concentrated on the seaborne communication of European cultural influence.<sup>40</sup> All the books in both series were good, and some have deservedly become classics, but civilization was re-examined in none of them. They were histories; they were human histories; but it is impossible to identify anything, in any of them, added by virtue of the inclusion of the term "civilization" in some of the titles.

Another scholar, who, like Plumb, was a curious mixture of progressive passions and conservative habits, kept alive a Toynbee-like tradition of the comparative study of civilizations in one of the great works of our times, *Science and Civilisation in China*.<sup>41</sup> Like all geniuses, Joseph Needham could be misled by an excess of cleverness. He espoused an odd, faintly mystical mixture of High Church Anglicanism and naïve Maoism. He had daft convictions, such as that undocumented Chinese explorers had founded Mesoamerican civilization.~~ Yet his masterpiece is unmatched in our times for most of what I admire in history: scholarship, ambition, sensibility, fidelity to evidence, boldness in argument, impassioned curiosity, unlimited range -and sheer mastery, sure pilotage amid vast oceans of material. He died leaving the work unfinished, but the first few volumes changed the way I looked at the world. When those creatures of my imagination, the Galactic Museum-Keeper, look back on our past, with the objectivity of a vantage point near the edge of the universe, ten thousand years in the future, they will center their display on China and cram Western civilization into a corner of some small vitrine.

Now the study of civilization is back on the academic agenda, thanks in

part to the end of the Cold War, which has made the study of "blocs" redundant and liberated manpower for the study of something else; further thanks are due to Samuel Huntington. He has warned that differences between civilizations have succeeded those between ideologies as the likely causes of future conflicts; and he has summoned us to a "multi-civilizational" world. The call has been heard in a world which was just getting used to a definition in a Marxist tradition, which more or less equated a civilization with an ideology, as a zone dominated by a prevalent "cosmology" or model of how the world works. This model, of course, would always be devised and imposed in the interests of a power elite. Huntington—who echoed this tradition, surely against his own will, by making religion the adhesive of civilizations—could not fully satisfy the demand for a definition or classification of civilizations to match the importance he gave them. Sweden, in his map of the world, belongs to the same civilization as Spain, but Greece does not. He assigns a big area to "Buddhist civilization," while doubting whether such a thing exists.<sup>46</sup> But he set other scholars the task of improving on his definitions and groups.

It is tempting to rest content with the feeling that civilization does not need to be the subject of theories: it can just be used pragmatically as a name for the very large units into which we group human societies when we try to write world history—"the largest fractions of humanity."<sup>47</sup> Every theory makes nonsense of the groupings to which it gives rise: is this a reason for abandoning the term or for abandoning the attempt at a theory? Some historians have managed to write about civilizations comparatively without worrying too much over whether their categories were coherent or consistent—just taking it for granted that one can talk usefully about "Islam" or "the West" or "China"<sup>48</sup> or relying on the sort of value-free and minimalist definition I formulated on a previous occasion, that a civilization is "a group of groups who think of themselves as such."<sup>49</sup>

The effect of this approach is to make civilizations no different in kind from other types of society; and if one forgets that their frontiers and configurations are bound to change all the time, or if one tries to make them comprehend the whole world, tangles will ensue, like Samuel Huntington's "Orthodox Civilization," which combined Russia with Georgia, or his "Sinic," which included Korea (but not Japan) and Vietnam (but not Laos), or Toynbee's "Syriac Civilization," which, with less justification, crushed Armenians and Arabs in the same embrace.

Not everyone has to belong to some large "unit of intelligible study"; sometimes the only units which can really be studied intelligibly are very small. As well as being used, for practical purposes, as a name for very big combinations of societies, "civilization" has been defined in the same sense by thinkers who certainly believed they were formulating a theory. By being expressed in impressively complicated language, this way of understanding civilization can take on the semblance or sound of a theory. Durkheim and Mauss, for instance, proposed this definition: civilizations were "systems of complexity and solidarity which, without being contained within a particular political entity, can nonetheless be localised in time and space . . . and which possess a unity and way of life of their A. L. Kroeber adopted the term "culture wholes"; he tried to give it a numinous quality by adding that culture wholes were "natural systems," resembling life-forms and distinguished by "style," which encompassed everything from gastronomy and skirt lengths to monumental art and taste in literature." When we read that civilizations are "real causal-meaningful wholes, different from the state, or the nation or any other social group,"<sup>52</sup> it is evident that an attempt at theorizing has failed. We are back with a subtly modified version of the instinct Kenneth Clark trusted- to know a civilization when we see it, without being able to say what it is.<sup>53</sup>

#### Reaching Between Civilizations --and Reaching for the Unity of Civilization

The problem of defining "a civilizationn-which has defeated so many effortsis straightforward compared with that of defining "civilization." Yet it might be held that the former depends on the latter: you can only identify a particular civilization as such once you have established how to recognize "civilization" in general. The first is a phenomenon easily verifiable by empirical scrutiny. There are civilizations-lots of them -even if we have difficulty in agreeing in every case whether a given society deserves to be classed as one. In what seems a rather silly game, some scholars have tried to enumerate them: Toynbee thought there were twenty-one, all told.<sup>54</sup> Carroll Quigley counted "two dozen"<sup>55</sup>; for Samuel Huntington the world today is covered by "seven or eight" or maybe nine.<sup>56</sup> The term "civilization," without particularity, denotes a universal concept, of which the reality is open to doubt; or else it signifies what I called above "the civilizing ingredient<sup>7</sup>,- the feature all the civilizations properly

so called have in common.

All the societies I call civilizations do indeed have something in common: their program for the systematic refashioning of nature. That does not mean that there are any limits to their possible diversity. By calling this book *Civilizations*, in the plural, I repudiate the claim that civilization is indivisible.

This claim is usually put forward in two contexts: first, when "civilization" is used as a name for the totality of human societies, rather than a property or character which some or all of them have in common; and, second, when it is used to mean a state towards which all societies tend, by way of progress. There is no convincing evidence that all societies have any common tendency, except to be social. Progress towards any historical climax-whether it is the classless society or the Age of the Holy Spirit or the Thousand-Year Reich or liberal democracy or some other "end of history"-is illusory. So there seems little point in pursuing this claim, either to hound it or to bring it home. In this book, the history of civilizations is treated as a field of comparative study, riven with discontinuities. At intervals, I try to embody a sense of discontinuity in the reader's experience of the work by a startling or abrupt change of scene.

Still, readers may be nagged by the doubt that civilizations could fuse and justify believers in their ultimate unity. As well as the story of their encounters with nature, another story-that of civilizations' communications with each other-gradually builds up in the course of this book and ends by dominating it. Mutual assimilation is part - an increasing part - of that story. World history is about peoples' relationships with each other. Its most representative episodes, environment by environment, reflect great cross-cultural themes: migrations, trade, exchanges of influence, pilgrimages, missions, war, empire-building, wide-sweeping social movements, and transfers of technologies, biota, and ideas. Some of the environments considered in this book-deserts, grasslands, and oceans-figure not so much as settings for civilizations but rather partly or entirely as highways between them.

This theme demands inclusion because civilizations nourish each other. Perhaps because it takes a certain arrogance to confront nature, civilizations have usually been contemptuous of most of their neighbors. In ancient Greece and ancient China, the rest of the world was considered to be inhabited by barbarians of little worth. In ancient Egypt, inhabitants of other lands were regarded

as less than fully human. This is, I think, more than an instance of the apparently universal reluctance of people in societies to conceive outsiders in the same terms as themselves: it is usually said that most human languages have no term for "human being" except that used to denote speakers of the language concerned,<sup>57</sup> but it would be more accurate to say that the terms by which groups denote themselves are inelastic. It does not mean that outsiders cannot be denoted by respectful or even reverential names. Real contempt for the other is a civilized vice rather than a universal trait.

The self-differentiation of the civilized is of a peculiar kind, precisely because it is selective. People who belong to a civilization share a sense that their achievements set them apart from other peoples. Even when locked in mutual hostility-like ancient Rome and Persia, or medieval Christendom and Islamcivilizations tend to develop relationships which are mutually acknowledging and sometimes mutually sustaining. They are enemies visible to each other in a kind of mirror. Even when, as in these cases, civilizations have neighbors whose kinship they sense, they tend to look farther-sometimes to distant parts of the world - in the hope of finding other civilizations, rather as beings on other planets are supposed in some works of popular science fiction to be searching the universe for intelligent life-forms like their own. Though there are occasional exceptions (see pages **230-7i**), it seems to be hard for any civilizations to survive at a high level of material achievement except in contact with others, unless they are very big.

In partial consequence, the story of civilizations includes the story of how they established mutual contact. Now, all those civilizations that have survived to our own day are in close touch. Indeed, it is often said that they are all blending into a single global civilization. The question of whether a global civilization is possible is considered towards the end of the book; but if there were such a prospect, it would merely add one more civilization to the plurality, not fuse them in an all-encompassing unity.

#### Process and Progress

In the existing tradition, some of the most attractive and impactful definitions of civilization are the most idiosyncratic. For Oscar Wilde, civilization was "what the middle class hates"; for Alfred North Whitehead, "a society exhibiting the qualities of Truth, beauty, adventure, Art, Peace."<sup>58</sup> Ortega y Gasset defined

it as "postponing force to the last resort."<sup>77</sup> For R. G. Collingwood, one of the few professors of metaphysics who deserved the name in the twentieth century, it was not even a type of society, but an attitude which preceded it: a mental process towards ideal social relationships of "civility." In practice, this meant becoming progressively less violent, more scientific, and more welcoming to outsiders.

In a wartime essay, chiefly designed to demonstrate that Germany was uncivilized, he reluctantly allowed, by extension, that the word could be applied to societies according to the degree to which they had undergone the process.<sup>60</sup> Toynbee, in what may have been an unguarded moment, gave it the same sort of quality: "progress towards ~ainthood." In ~ a ~n obviously self-interested plea on behalf of a "leisure class," Clive Bell called it "reason, sweetened by a sense of values, . . . a sense of values, hardened and pointed by R e a s ~ n .C" ~rit~ic s of civilization

often represent part of the truth of it when they condemn it as a kind of tyranny which overlays natural goodness with the tortures of conformity. Oneliners of this sort may be uplifting or stimulating, and they certainly reveal the prejudices of their formulators, but they do not help isolate a subject which can be studied.

"Process," however, is a potentially useful concept. Those who think the meaning of a word arises from its etymology will say that, properly speaking, civilization has to be a process, because all words derived from French in similar forms -all "-izations" - denote processes.<sup>63</sup> Yet "progress" taints every "process" so far proposed in this context. Freud's effort was characteristically memorable and disturbing. His inclination was to see civilization as an accumulation of cultural sediment-a collective effect of individual sublimations and repressions.

He called it "a process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to combine single human individuals and after that families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind."<sup>64</sup> He wanted to free man from the corrosive discontent of civilization: guilt-feeling. The unhappy issue of his initiative has been the "feelgood society," the joint objective of politics and psychotherapy in the modern West. It is obviously useless as a starting point for writing the history of civilizations-but I hate it anyway. It is a recipe for moral inertia. We need to feel bad about ourselves if we are going to make ourselves better.

Even more pernicious is progress as some sociobiologists represent it: the achievement of people made superior by a peculiarly rapid evolution of the brain-the attainment of "a certain intellectual and educational level . . . an ongoing, living, evolving emanation of the brain," as one of them puts it.<sup>65</sup> This can be disguised as a plea to privilege particular forms of representation, such as writing or statehood, as defining characteristics of civilization-"human symbolism writ on a high abstractive level of meaning," in the same writer's jargon. But even the most imprecise language cannot blur what is really at stake. "Not only," says our author, "do the civilizations of history represent intelligence as power, but intelligence in its multifaceted human face pouring itself into a number of deeply-rooted and ancient human symbolic valences or forms."<sup>66</sup> Thinking so slovenly that it slops metaphors by the bucketful is unlikely to command discerning respect; but it fools some people. It amounts to a justification of tyranny when the pace of evolution is forced and societies without the requisite "symbolism"-nonliterate societies, for instance, or those not organized as states-are derogated to a subcategory of the unintelligent and underevolved. Believers in progress tend to place civilization towards the end of it. "Civilization," according to another of Toynbee's sayings, is always "ultimate." It is usually treated as a state of being which societies attain in the course of growth out of primitivism, a phase in an inevitable pattern, procured by the natural inflation of the human mind, or by technological accretion; or else social evolution is the motor force, determined in turn by economics and the means of production, or by demographics and the demands of consumption. One sequence reads: hunting, herding, agriculture, civilization. Another reads: tribes, totemic societies, "complex" societies; another leads through tribal headships and chieftaincies to states, another through superstition and magic to religion; another starts with camps and ascends through hamlets, villages, cities. None of these sequences is genuinely universal, though some of them may describe some phases of the histories of some societies. Yet the temptation to depict the past as progressive is astonishingly strong. Lewis Mumford, who had a jaundiced view of civilization, still located it inside a progressive framework, where "dispersed villages" evolved into the state and the city, immemorial custom into written law, "village rituals" into drama, and magical practices into religion "built upon cosmic myths that open up vast perspectives of time, space and

power."68

The language of evolution bears a heavy responsibility for misleading people into thinking that civilization is a superior way of organizing life, simply because it happens late in history. Societies do not evolve: they just change. If "the survival of the fittest" is a valid criterion, noncivilizations, which have endured better in some conditions than civilized rivals (see, for example, below, pages 53-55. 76), would sometimes have to be reckoned as more highly evolved.

#### The Checklist of Civilization

Once a stretch of line has been pegged out and marked as civilization's own, observers start noticing or imagining ways in which it is different from the rest. Almost every theorist has proposed checklists of criteria which a society has to meet in order to qualify as a civilization. All these lists are useless.

All the characteristics traditionally used to identify civilizations raise problems which are hard, perhaps impossible, to solve. It has often been said, for instance, that nomadic societies cannot be civilized; "civilization began when agriculture and a definite form of organized village life became established."~~ Yet the Scythians, and their heirs on the Asian steppelands, created dazzling and enduring works of art, built impressive permanent structures- at first for tombs, later for administrative and even commercial purposes-and created political and economic systems on a scale far greater, in the Mongols' case, than those of any of their neighbors whose traditions of life were more settled (see pages 110-13).

Again, cities have frequently been thought of as essential to civilized life; but no one has ever established a satisfactory way of distinguishing a city from other ways of organizing space to live in. Some of the impressive sites we shall visit in the course of this book-such as Great Zimbabwe or Uxmal- have been denied the status of cities by some commentators, although they were heavily populated and formidably built. In medieval Mexico or Java and Copper Age Southeastern Europe there were peoples who preferred to live in relatively small communities and dwellings built of modest materials; but this did not stop them from compiling fabulous wealth, creating wonderful art, keeping-in most cases-written records (or something very like them), and, in Java, building on a monumental scale (see pages 238, 320, 334).

Some strivers for a definition have insisted that civic communities have to

be defined economically-usually by preference for trade or industry over the production of food. This will not do, because, in most societies for most of history, communities recognizable as cities have been part of a wider countryside and most of their populations have been absolutely dependent on agriculture. To disqualify strictly agrarian societies from civilization is to invalidate much of the work that has been done on the subject. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it is the kind of radical revision that demands careful justification. No such justification has so far been proposed. Economics, in any case, do not make a city: only the state of mind of the citizens can do that. In Santillana del Mar there are cattle grids in the streets, but civic pride frowns from every crested stone facade. Every real-life "Gopher Prairie" in the American Midwest in the early twentieth century had claques of "boosters" to testify to the urbanity of their wretched little settlements. Every metropolis on an erstwhile frontier existed in the imaginations of its founders-and sometimes in the laughably grandiose plans they scratched on any materials to hand-before it became big or viable or economically specialized. To suppose that a city has to be "postagrarian" is worse than a mistake, it is a sin: the sin of pride in the sort of cities we have nowadays in the industrialized world, the crime of insisting that our own standards are universal.

Writing is an ingredient often demanded by definers of civilization; but many societies of glorious achievement have transmitted memories or recorded data in other ways, including knotted strings and notched sticks, reed maps, textiles, and gestures. The distinction between writing and other forms of symbolic expression is more easily uttered than justified in detail." Elements of two works which, after the Bible, have had the greatest influence on Western literature, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, were probably composed without writing and-like much ancient wisdom in all societies-transmitted by memory and word of mouth. The epics of almost every literary tradition preserve echoes from an age of oral tradition. Chinese novels, until well into the present century, were divided into chapters by the storytellers' traditional recapitulations and included end-of-chapter "teases" to induce another copper for the pot. In the pages which follow, many societies are seen to have confided what was memorable, and therefore of lasting value, to oral transmission, and to have devised writing systems in order to record rubbish: fiscal ephemera, merchants' memoranda.

Some of the other criteria-division of labor, economically structured class systems, states or statelike institutions, organs for making and enforcing laws are so obviously plucked & parti pris from the social environments of the men who have proposed them as to be unworthy of consideration. Most societies have them, and can rejoice or repine in mixed measures. But there is nothing j O INTRODUCTION

particularly civilized about any of them.<sup>71</sup> Other supposed desiderata are too vague to be useful, or occur too selectively, or depend on incomplete prior arguments about how societies in general "evolve" or "develop." They are usually presented in a ragbag represented as a systematic analysis. The editor of the 1978 Wolfson Lectures on The Origins of Civilization speculated on the possible relevance of irrigation, technology, population pressures, "evolving social structures," "property concepts," ideology, and trade.<sup>72</sup> In the end, city life, religion, and literacy were selected as the only criteria; in consequence, the lectures revealed something about the origins of city life, religion, and literacy, but those of civilization were left untouched.

In proposing to treat civilization as a relationship between man and nature, I am not merely erecting, in place of those I have discarded, another set of hurdles another list of criteria which societies have to meet before they can be admitted to the ranks of the civilized. I am, rather, extending a scale along which societies place themselves according to the degree to which they modify their natural environments. Some of the civilizations chosen as examples in the rest of the book are familiar to readers of comparative studies of civilizations. This should not be taken as an endorsement of the criteria: it is a purely practical device to enable readers to relate the more unfamiliar, recherche, or surprising examples to what they already know. It is also intended as a way of showing that many societies excluded from traditional lists of civilizations actually fulfill some of the conventional criteria or possess characteristics generally thought to define, or at least to mark, civilization.

Back to Nature: Array by Environment

There are four principal reasons for classifying civilizations according to environment.

First, it represents a . . . .