

FACTS AND MEASURES OF CIVILIZATION

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THE question has recently been raised whether it is at all possible to measure civilization, and to determine whether one nation is more civilized than another, or whether the same nation is more civilized today than it was a century, or several centuries, ago.

Of course, this question has only academic or scientific interest. No one seriously doubts that in a rough and general way it is possible to form a correct opinion as to the comparative cultural states of nations and communities. Germany, we know, is more civilized than, say, Serbia, and France than Jugo-Slavia. Western Europe is more civilized than eastern, North America than Central America. And if it be impossible to say offhand with any confidence whether France is more civilized than England, or England than Holland, why, the comment of most intelligent persons on such difficulties is that "it really doesn't matter" what the fact is from any pragmatic point of view.

Yet, despite this common sense remark, it is perfectly natural for cultivated persons to seek tests and measures of civilization. If we had such instruments, we could advise some communities to emulate others in these or those special directions in order to improve their civilization; and such a consummation is devoutly to be wished.

Now *are* there tests of civilization, or are there not?

In attempting to answer this query, we must begin by defining the term "civilization." Dictionary definitions are scarcely satisfactory, and will not help us. We must evolve one on our own account.

We may say, perhaps, that by civilization is meant a state of things in a society or community which permits the individual member thereof to develop his faculties, to pursue happiness without undue restraint, to live in peace and security, to enjoy comfort and

a fair degree of prosperity, to reflect on the deeper spiritual problems of life, and to co-operate in a hundred ways with other individuals as free, secure and comfortable as himself.

If a community is poor, illiterate, oppressed by some tyrant, unprogressive, superstitious, addicted to cruelty, incapable of maintaining order and insuring the individual against violence and aggression, that community is not civilized. Where there is much personal liberty, equal or approximately equal opportunity for individual development, diversified industry, diffusion of material wellbeing, encouragement and appreciation of science and art, a spirit of reasonableness in settling disputes, their civilization has attained a high level.

The foregoing elements of a proper definition of civilization are all implicit in the generalization of the Italian sociologist, Prof. Alfred Niceforo, that civilization includes three distinct groups of facts, material, intellectual and moral.

Thus whatever makes for prosperity, for popular education, for leisure, for a rich and harmonious social life, for beauty, for order based on cheerful respect for sound and wise legislation, makes for civilization.

Substitute arbitration for strikes, or for obstinate litigation in the courts of law, and you promote civilization. Simplify legal processes, expedite justice, reduce the cost of meritorious lawsuits, and you promote civilization. Multiply schools, colleges, lodges, clubs, civic bodies devoted to genuine reform, and you promote civilization. Humanize the criminal code, eliminate vengeance from punishment, and try to redeem offenders while restraining them, and you promote civilization. Encourage universities, art institutes, good musical schools and organizations, and you promote civilization. Improve the daily and weekly press, rid it of sensationalism, vulgarity and bigotry, and you promote civilization.

To civilize, then, is to refine, soften, socialize, elevate and purify the individual as well as the community.

It may be asked, How far is this process of civilizing to be carried, and what is the goal to be reached by the conscious civilizers? The answer to these questions cannot be precise in the nature of things, but an answer there is, and an adequate one. *The goal is human solidarity, human happiness, human brotherhood, with a noble and joyous life for every member of society.* This goal has been contemplated and pointed out to mankind by its seers, leaders and benefactors. There is no religious or moral system of any importance that does not inculcate justice, sympathy, pity, helpfulness,

service, unity. If those principles and ideals are worthy and realizable, then there can be no sort of doubt as to the aim and objective of civilization.

There are those who affirm that civilization is a disease, and that the more civilized a state or society is the nearer it is to dissolution and death. Civilization is supposed by these thinkers to carry within itself the fatal seed of decay and destruction. But it is difficult to make out just what such pessimists mean by civilization. History, it is true, is a record of failures and wrecks of civilizations; but can it be seriously argued that any state has ever died because of *too much civilization*—that is, of too much wellbeing, too much education, too much justice and internal harmony? To put the question is to answer it.

War has destroyed nations; tyranny, slavery, corruption, greed, arrogance have destroyed states or crippled and dismembered them. But in each case something was "rotten"; the civilization was defective, one-sided, incomplete, superficial.

Take the classical instance of Rome. What caused its decline and fall? Historians are still wrestling with this question and giving it conflicting answers. Christianity undermined Rome, say some; malaria and enervating luxury, say others. Corruption, indolence, neglect of agriculture, foreign influence in the army, lack of patriotism, etc., say still others. Whatever one may think of these divergent explanations, one thing is plain—it was *not* superabundant civilization that destroyed Rome!

Or take the situation in Europe today. It is constantly asserted that European civilization is gravely imperiled. A Japanese statesman said that western civilization was committing suicide. Perhaps it is; but how is it committing suicide? What is it that is threatening and endangering European civilization? Too much wealth, too much pity and sympathy, too much knowledge, too much good will and co-operation? The very suggestion that Europe is dying of civilization is ludicrous. Hate, misunderstanding, suspicion, malice, prejudice—these are the sources of Europe's misfortunes and diseases. What Europe needs is a stiff dose of genuine civilization—a dose of reason, justice, solidarity, faith in itself and in progress. In modern times civilization implies a considerable amount of sane and healthy internationalism. No state can live in isolation; no state can prosper long at the expense of other states; no state can refuse to aid other states in emergencies without incurring ill will and retarding organized international co-operation. The

promotion and perfecting of civilization is a duty, or privilege, which all advanced nations must discharge together.

Writers have said that if our civilization is doomed to perish, it is so doomed because it has failed to elevate and humanize modern states and therefore is not worth saving. But what reason is there to think that another and better civilization would arise on the ruins of the present one? After all, the human materials and factors of any new civilization would be exactly the same as those available to-day. Would the mere destruction of the present civilization—that is, of existing states and societies—change the minds and emotional natures of men?

No, no; it is idle to talk about a catastrophic or a miraculous substitution of a sound civilization for a defective one. Civilization is a growth, not a manufactured product. Our woes and troubles are the result of survivals from savagery and barbarism, and we can get rid of these survivals only by education and purposeful work in correcting mistakes and remedying evils.

It is evident, for example, that war is destructive of civilization. It not only destroys life and wealth, but it also demoralizes the nations engaged in warfare and breeds hatred, malice and cruelty. Peace, indeed, may be regarded today as the supreme test and measure of civilization. The more civilized nations seek peace and would substitute judicial settlements for brute force in international disputes. We may differ as to the proper organization of international courts of law and justice; but all agree that courts and arbitral tribunals are more civilized institutions than armies and navies. Well, then, instead of talking about letting civilization die of egotism and folly, why not talk about effective agitation in behalf of international courts? We know the mischief and we know what the cure is; why despair of applying the remedy today or tomorrow; why resign ourselves to the death of the present civilization?

Again, every thoughtful and sincere person favors some form of international co-operation to combat evils that are beyond the reach of judicial tribunals. Why not drop differences concerning accidental details and endeavor to evolve a satisfactory constitution for a genuine association of nations—an association that shall devote itself to constructive and beneficial enterprises exclusively? There is much natural opposition to governmental leagues, to dubious alliances, to supreme councils of cabinet ministers and diplomats, the argument being that the very men who bring about war by meddling and muddling, by arousing passions and prejudices among the masses, and by putting personal vanity and pride above national and

human welfare, dominate and direct such organizations. There is force in this argument, but, clearly, what it suggests is not the abandonment of all plans for international co-operation but the revision and betterment of such plans with a view to removing valid objections. He who desires the end, desires the means to the end. Groans, sighs, lamentations, recriminations will not put an end to war or to the perfidious and dishonest diplomacy which begets war. Every lover of peace and justice is bound to consider ways and means of insuring peace and furthering justice. If proposed ways and means be insufficient, or fraught with danger to the very cause they are designed to serve, let criticism of them be frank and unsparing, but let it be accompanied by sincere and constructive suggestions.

Now, just as peace is a measure of progress in international relation so is concord a measure of progress in national life. Strife, mob law, violent strikes, ruthless policies among employers, low wages, discontent are all symptoms of social disease and obstacles to progress. We may not accept this or that solution of the industrial problem as "the" progressive one; men of vision and sympathy may honestly differ in opinion concerning the value or effectiveness of remedies prescribed for social ill; but progressive men will never refuse to face problems and to seek solutions of them. Progressive men will not pretend that all is well in modern society, but, on the contrary, will recognize that much in it requires mending and reconstruction.

Without further illustrating the method of determining broadly the level of civilization or progress attained by a community, let us now inquire why it is so difficult to apply the tests indicated with real precision to the more civilized nations, and to discover accurately which of two neighboring states approximately equal in many respects is really the more civilized of the two. The answer seems to be found in what even Herbert Spencer, who was addicted to generalizing and classifying, to forecasting and divining, was finally compelled to describe as "the infinite complexity" of human life and human history. Things which seem to be equal may, if human, be unequal in a number of subtle ways. History, tradition, survivals, climate, accidents may shape and color a nation's existence and make it superior or inferior to another nation as old, as stable, as comfortable, as intelligent.

For example, one is greatly tempted to say, dogmatically, that a nation in which lynchings are common is less civilized than one in which such lawless and abominable outbreaks never occur. Could

any generalization seem more reasonable? Yet no American will admit that his country is less civilized than, say, England, which has no lynchings. The thoughtful American will not claim that lynchings are a civilized practice, but he will point out that America's peculiar troubles and difficulties under slavery and since preclude fair contrasts as regards lynching between it and countries that had no terrible domestic slavery problem and no millions of illiterate, degraded and black ex-slaves to assimilate and govern. If Englishmen were transplanted to America and Americans took their places in England, what would happen in respect of lynchings? Americans, prestimably would speedily lose the lynching habit, and Englishmen would acquire it in their new environment.

Or take capital punishment as a test of civilization. In the abstract, one might say that the more civilized a state was the more disinclined it would be to take life. But what are the facts? The states that have abolished capital punishment are certainly not more civilized than those that have as yet failed to do so. There is a chapter of accidents in the moral story of man. Leadership, initiative, like genius, may "happen" anywhere and at any time and produce remarkable results—results that do not necessarily indicate a higher level of civilization than is enjoyed in neighboring states.

Happily, as was intimated at the beginning of this paper, the shades and nuisances of civilization are of little practical importance. The tests and measures of civilization that are undoubtedly available serve every vital need. Moreover, if civilization be in danger, it is not in danger for any lack of delicate tests and measures. It is in danger because the forces of evil and darkness, of anti-civilization, are still very strong and numerous and quite capable of destroying the frail and unfinished fabric we call human civilization. Any relevant test, any measure, will tell us how far we have fallen short of our own ideal. Even the foundations of civilization are crumbling. Why trouble ourselves with nice issues? Let us go to work to save the foundations and pillars of civilization, for, alas, this seems to be the task of the present generation.