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CIVILIZATION

Civilization is now generally used to describe an achieved state or condition of organized social life. Like CULTURE (q.v.) with which it has had a long and still difficult interaction, it referred originally to a process, and in some contexts this sense still survives.

Civilization was preceded in English by civilize, which appeared in eC 17, from C 16 civiliser, F, fw civilizare, mL — to make a criminal matter into a civil matter, and thence, by extension, to bring within a form of social organization. The rw is civil from civilis, L — of or belonging to citizens, from civis, L — citizen. Civil was thus used in English from C14, and by C16 had acquired the extended senses of orderly and educated. Hooker in 1594 wrote of ‘Civil Society’ — a phrase that was to become central in C17 and especially CiS — but the main development towards description of an ordered society was civility, fw civilitas, mL — community. Civility was often used in C 17 and C 18 where we would now expect civilization, and as late as 1772 Boswell, visiting Johnson, ‘found him busy, preparing a fourth edition of his folio Dictionary ... He would not admit civilization, but only civility. With great deference to him, I thought civilization, from to civilize, better in the sense opposed to barbarity, than civility.’ Boswell had correctly identified the main use that was coming through, which emphasized not so much a process as a state of social order and refinement, especially in conscious historical or cultural contrast with barbarism. Civilization appeared in Ash’s dictionary of 1775, to indicate both the state and the process. By lC18 and then very markedly in C19 it became common. In one way the new sense of civilization, from IC 18, is a specific combination of the ideas of a process and an achieved condition. It has behind it the general spirit of the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on secular and progressive human self-development. Civilization expressed this sense of historical process, but also celebrated the associated sense of modernity: an achieved condition of refinement and order. In the Romantic reaction against these claims for civilization, alternative words were developed to express other kinds of human development and other criteria for human well-being, notably CULTURE (q.v.). In 1C18 the association of

civilization with refinement of manners was normal in both English and

French. Burke wrote in *Reflections on the French Revolution*:

‘our manners, our civilization, and all the good things which are connected with manners, and with civilization’. Here the terms seem almost synonymous, though we must note that manners has a wider reference than in ordinary modern usage. From c19 the development of civilization towards its modern meaning, in which as much emphasis is put on social order and on ordered knowledge (later, SCIENCE (q.v.)) as on refinement of manners and behaviour, is on the whole earlier in French than in English. But there was a decisive moment in English in the 1830s, when Mill, in his essay on Coleridge, wrote:

Take for instance the question how far mankind has gained by civilization. One observer is forcibly struck by the multiplication of physical comforts; the advancement and diffusion of knowledge; the decay of superstition; the facilities of mutual intercourse; the softening of manners; the decline of war and personal conflict; the progressive limitation of the tyranny of the strong over the weak; the great works accomplished throughout the globe by the co-operation of multitudes...

This is Mill’s range of positive examples of civilization, and it is a fully modern range. He went on to describe negative effects: loss of independence, the creation of artificial wants, monotony, narrow mechanical understanding, inequality and hopeless poverty. The contrast made by Coleridge and others was between civilization and culture or cultivation:

The permanent distinction and the occasional contrast between cultivation and civilization . . . The permanency of the nation... and its progressiveness and personal freedom. . . depend on a continuing and progressive civilization. But civilization is itself but a mixed good, if not far more a corrupting influence, the hectic of disease, not the bloom of health, and a nation so distinguished more fitly to be called a varnished than a polished people, where this civilization is not grounded in cultivation, in the harmonious development of those qualities and faculties that characterize our humanity. (*On the Constitution of Church and State*, V)

Coleridge was evidently aware in this passage of the association of civilization with the polishing of manners; that is the point of the remark about varnish, and the distinction recalls the curious overlap, in C18 English

and French, between polished and polite, which have the same root. But the description of civilization as a 'mixed good', like Mill's more elaborated description of its positive and negative effects, marks the point at which the word has come to stand for a whole modern social process. From this time on this sense was dominant, whether the effects were reckoned as good, bad or mixed.

Yet it was still primarily seen as a general and indeed universal process. '[here was a critical moment when civilization was used in the plural. '[his is later with civilizations than with cultures; its first clear use is in French (Ballanche) in 1819. It is preceded in English by implicit uses to refer to an earlier civilization, but it is not common anywhere until the 1860s. In modern English civilization still refers to a general condition or state, and is still contrasted with savagery or barbarism. But the relativism inherent in comparative studies, and reflected in the use of civilizations, has affected this main sense, and the word now regularly attracts some defining adjective: Western civilization, modern civilization, industrial civilization, scientific and technological civilization. As such it has come to be a relatively neutral form for any achieved social order or way of life, and in this sense has a complicated and much disputed relation with the modern social sense of culture. Yet its sense of an achieved state is still variously specified, originally as learning or scholarship, later as cultivation and taste, later still as SENSIBILITY (q.v.). At various stages, forms of this confidence have broken down, and especially in C20 attempts have been made to replace it by objective (cf. suBJEcTivE) methodologies, providing another kind of basis for judgment. What has not been questioned is the assumption of 'authoritative judgment'. In its claims to authority it has of course been repeatedly challenged, and critic in the most common form of this specialized sense — as a reviewer of plays, films, books and so on — has acquired an understandably ambiguous sense. But this cannot be resolved by distinctions of status between critic and reviewer. What is at issue is not only the association between criticism and fault-finding but the more basic association between criticism and 'authoritative' judgment as apparently general and natural processes. As a term for the social or professional generalization of the processes of reception of any but especially the more formal kinds of COMMUNICATION (q.v.), criticism becomes ideological not only when it assumes the position of the consumer but also when it masks this position by a succession of abstractions of its real terms of response (as judgment, taste, cultivation, discrimination, sensibility; disinterested, qualified, rigorous and so on). The continuing

sense of criticism as fault-finding is the most useful linguistic influence against the confidence of this habit, but there are also signs, in the occasional rejection of criticism as a definition of conscious response, of a more significant rejection of the habit itself. The point would then be, not to find some other term to replace it, while continuing the same kind of activity, but to get rid of the habit, which depends, fundamentally, on the abstraction of response from its real situation and circumstances: the elevation to 'judgment', and to an apparently general process, when what always needs to be understood is the specificity of the response, which is not an abstract 'judgment' but even where including, as often necessarily, positive or negative responses, a definite practice, in active and complex relations with its whole situation and context.

See AESTHETIC, CONSUMER, SENSIBILITY, TASTE