

# INTRODUCTION

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Since the first edition of *Against Civilization* [1999] the general perspective referred to by its title has begun to make sense to a growing number of people. An overall crisis—personal, social, environmental—is rapidly deepening, making such an indictment feasible, if not unavoidable.

This collection is, among other things, a reminder that critiques of civilization itself are anything but new. And the past five years have provided an opportunity to add voices to the chorus of doubters, those with enough vision to think outside civilizational confines.

The 15 additional selections include correctives to a serious deficiency of the original book: the paucity of women and indigent contributors [not exclusive categories, of course].

The current edition makes some advance in these vital areas, I believe.

Discontent with civilization has been with us all along, but is coming on now with a new freshness and insistence, as if it were a new thing. To assail civilization itself would be scandalous, but for the conclusion, occurring to more and more people, that it may be civilization that is the fundamental scandal.

I won't dwell here on the fact of the accelerating destruction of the biosphere. And perhaps equally obvious is the mutilation of "human nature," along with outer nature. Freud decided that the fullness of civilization would bring, concomitantly, the zenith of universal neurosis. In this he was evidently a bit sanguine, too mild in his prognosis.

It is impossible to scan a newspaper and miss the malignancy of daily life. See the multiple homicides, the 600-percent increase in teen suicide over the past 30 years; count the ways to be heavily drugged against reality; ponder what is behind the movement away from literacy. One could go on almost endlessly charting the boredom, depression, immiseration.

The concept of progress has been in trouble for a few decades, but the general crisis is deepening now at a quickening pace. From this palpable extremity it is clear that something is profoundly

wrong. How far back did this virus originate? How much must change for us to turn away from the cultural death march we are on?

At the same time, there are some who cling to the ideal of civilization, as to a promise yet to be fulfilled. Norbert Elias, for example, declared that “civilization is never finished and always endangered.” More persuasive is the sobering view of what civilization has already wrought, as in today’s deadening and deadly convergence of technological processes and mass society. Richard Rubenstein found that the Holocaust “bears witness to the advance of civilization,” a chilling point further developed by Zygmunt Bauman in his *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Bauman argued that history’s most gruesome moment so far was made possible by the inner logic of civilization, which is, at bottom, division of labor. This division of labor, or specialization, works to dissolve moral accountability as it contributes to technical achievement in this case—to the efficient, industrialized murder of millions.

But isn’t this too grim a picture to account for all of it? What of other aspects, like art, music, literature—are they not also the fruit of civilization? To return to Bauman and his point about Nazi genocide, Germany was after all the land of Goethe and Beethoven, arguably the most cultural or spiritual European country. Of course we try to draw strength from beautiful achievements, which often offer cultural criticism as well as aesthetic uplift. Does the presence of these pleasures and consolations make an indictment of the whole less unavoidable?

Speaking of unfulfilled ideals, however, it is valid to point out that civilization is indeed “never finished and always endangered.” And that is because civilization has always been imposed, and necessitates continual conquest and repression. Marx and Freud, among others, agreed on the incompatibility of humans and nature, which is to say, the necessity of triumph over nature, or work.

Obviously related is Kenneth Boulding’s judgment that the achievements of civilization “have been paid for at a very high cost in human degradation, suffering, inequality, and dominance.”

There hasn’t been unanimity as to civilization’s most salient characteristic. For Morgan it was writing; for Engels, state power; for Childe, the rise of cities. Renfrew nominated insulation from nature as most fundamental. But domestication stands behind all these manifestations, and not just the taming of animals and plants, but also the taming of human instincts and freedoms. Mastery, in various forms, has defined civilization and gauged human

achievement. To name, to number, to time, to represent—symbolic culture is that array of masteries upon which all subsequent hierarchies and confinements rest.

Civilization is also separation from an original wholeness and grace. The poor thing we call our “human nature” was not our first nature; it is a pathological condition. All the consolations and compensations and prosthetics of an ever more technicized and barren world do not make up for the emptiness. As Hilzheimer and others came to view domestications of animals as juvenilizations, so also are we made increasingly dependent and infantilized by the progress of civilization.

Little wonder that myths, legends, and folklore about gardens of Eden, Golden Ages, Elysian fields, lands of Cockaigne, and other primitivist paradises are a worldwide phenomenon. This universal longing for an aboriginal, unalienated state has also had its dark flip side, a remarkable continuity of apocalyptic beliefs and prophets of doom—two sides of the same coin of a deep unhappiness with civilization.

Centuries of the persistence of utopias in the literature and politics of the West have more recently been replaced by a strong dystopian current, as hope seems to be giving way to nightmare apprehensions. This shift began in earnest in the nineteenth century, when virtually every major figure—e.g., Goethe, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Melville, Thoreau, Nietzsche, Flaubert, Dostoevski—expressed doubt about the vitality and future of culture. At the time that technology was becoming a worldwide unifying force, social scientists such as Durkheim and Masaryk noted that melancholy and suicide increased precisely with the forward movement of civilization.

In terms of the current intellectual domestication, postmodernism, despite a certain rhetoric of rebellion, is merely the latest extension of the modern civilizing process. For its moral cowardice as well as its zero degree of content, a horrific present is thus captured all too well. Meanwhile, *Forbes* magazine’s 75th-anniversary cover story explored “Why We Feel So Bad When We Have It So Good,” and the simple graffito “I can’t breathe!” captures our contemporary reality with precision.

From every camp, voices counsel that there can be no turning back from the path of progress, the unfolding of still more high-tech consumerist desolation. How hollow they sound, as we consider what has been lost and what may yet, one desperately hopes, be recovered.