

## Gentrain Dialogue: What Is Civilization?

Gentrain Reader, Unit 1: “It has been suggested that civilization derives from the Latin *civilis* (*civil*, and its related words *citizen* and *city*). In this sense, then, civilization exists where we find cities and citizens. But does this get us very far?”

Gordon Childe said civilization arose when you had:

1. Large population and large settlements (cities)
2. Full-time specialization and advanced division of labor
3. Production of an agricultural surplus to fund government and a differentiated society
4. Monumental public architecture
5. A ruling class
6. Writing
7. Exact and predictive sciences (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, calendars)
8. Sophisticated art styles
9. Long-distance trade
10. The state

### Questions:

- 1) What about religion? Is it not essential?
- 2) What about a large and technologically well-equipped military?
  - a) Machiavelli, *The Prince* (chapter XIV): “A PRINCE ought to have no other aim or thought, nor select anything else for his study, than war and its rules and discipline; for this is the sole art that belongs to him who rules, and it is of such force that it not only upholds those who are born princes, but it often enables men to rise from a private station to that rank. And, on the contrary, it is seen that when princes have thought more of ease than of arms they have lost their states.”
- 3) Are “sophisticated” art styles really necessary? Is it even legitimate to use the term “sophisticated”? Monumental public architecture?

If we accept Childe’s basic description, do we agree with the following and why?

- 1) Is civilization fundamentally better or superior to non-civilized society—tribal society, for example?
  - a) Rousseau in “On the Artificiality of Civilization”: Civilized man is born, lives, dies in a state of slavery. At his birth he is sewed in swaddling clothes; at his death he is nailed in a coffin; and as long as he pre-serves the human form he is fettered by our institutions. It is said that nurses sometimes claim to give the infant’s head a better form by kneading it, and we permit them to do this! It would appear that our heads were badly fashioned by the Author of Nature, and that they need to be made over outwardly by the midwife and inwardly by philosophers! The Caribbeans are more fortunate than we by half.”
  - b) Thomas Hobbes in “The Leviathan”: “And in that state of nature, no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

If we accept that civilization is a complex organization of society designed to provide for the needs of a large number of people, how do we distinguish between different types of civilizations? Is “Western” civilization different from other civilizations? How?