

Perspectives of Civilization: New Beginnings After the End

by Peter Anto Johnson, *University of Alberta*

ABSTRACT

Civilization and nature are quite intimately connected, and, as a result, a catastrophic change in the environment can produce significant alterations to both the understandings and perceptions of civilization. This paper examines the views of Henry David Thoreau in an excerpt of Walden, William Cronon's perceptions in "The Trouble with Wilderness; or Getting Back to the Right Nature," and James Berger's analysis of representations of the post-apocalypse in his book After the End to explore how they differ and align in the context of the post-apocalypse.

Humans have an innate tendency to construct civilization according to changes in their landscape, which becomes quite apparent in a post-apocalyptic setting: society chooses to either adopt novel social structures or forsake law and order. Literature portrays the degradation or progression of such post-apocalyptic societies to reflect changes in the environment, oftentimes creating a conflicting dichotomy between the societies present before and after apocalyptic events have altered the surrounding nature. Time and again, assorted theories and conceptions on this construct of civilization reflect an incomplete understanding.

Civilization is a broad term, derived from its etymological Latin root word, *civis*, for citizen. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines civilization in two main ways: “1. [t]he stage of human social development and organization which is considered most advanced,” and “2. a place that offers the comfortable way of life of a modern society” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). This essay aims to analyze the binary understandings of nature as both paradise and wasteland, the contemporary understandings of civilization and change, and nature and civilization's inseparable ties to the post-apocalyptic narrative.

In his essay, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” William Cronon (1995) employs the term civilization to denote an advanced social order—advanced not only in the economic and industrial sense but also in the moral sense. He deems that “it is all too easy to lose oneself in moral confusion and despair” when one oversteps “the margins of civilization” (Cronon). Instead of directly glamorizing civilization

as some form of moral compass with strictly defined conventions and social standards, Cronon belittles the “antithesis of an unnatural civilization”—wilderness. Presenting the heavenly appeal of nature as a sort of euphemism for the wilderness, Cronon attempts to define what civilization is not. Drawing a dividing line between human and nature, he strongly asserts that “wilderness leaves no place for human beings” and that “to protect sacred wilderness from profane humanity, would . . . be suicide.” He then ridicules the paradoxical portrayal of nature as both “Satan’s home” and “God’s Own Temple” in the Bible and early romanticized narratives. Stretching the rift between demonic, barbarian wilderness and the divine, paradisiacal Garden of Eden, Cronon ascribes a sentiment of fictional fantasy and pretentiousness to both classifications. When its antithesis is assessed, Cronon’s syllogistic deduction that civilization must then be the most realistic form of existence for humanity seems sensible. In line with the aforementioned dictionary definitions, it also becomes apparent that civilization provides the “most advanced” and “comfortable way of life” (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

After firmly establishing this denotation for civilization, Cronon consolidates this claim even further by refuting definitions “of urban-industrial civilization as confining, false, and artificial” that renders individuals “faceless, collective, [and] contemptible” (Cronon). Selecting for rebuttal the extended metaphor of civilization as the “human disease . . . infect[ing] the Earth,” he paraphrases these individuals’ claim that the “best antidote to the ills of an overly refined and civilized modern world was a return to simpler, more primitive living” (Cronon). Implicit sarcasm and reproach in Cronon’s tone are brought to light as he denounces nature and compliments civilization. In fact, this modified restatement also reveals Cronon’s mobilization of the term civilization to conjure connotations of refinement. This is one common sentiment that resounds with many of Cronon’s critics, such as Alice Ingerson. Refinement, as invoked by Cronon’s use of the term civilization, is often synonymous with concepts such as advancement and enhancement. How, then, does Cronon define these concepts? One can think of these terms in relation to evolution as a form of natural selection that follows the principle of the survival of the fittest—a principle that also appears in post-apocalyptic literature. Civilization would then be the society that is thriving under natural pressures that oppose survival. It becomes clear that “there can be no escape from manipulating and working and even killing some parts of nature to make our home” as it would be the most civilized approach (Cronon). Rather than a nomadic, primeval lifestyle, a modernized urban civilization is more pragmatic, as it offers better prospects of survival.

Henry David Thoreau (1854) turns the notions of human constructionism and survival on their heads in an excerpt from his book, *Walden*. The satirical work perceives civilization as chaotic bedlam as opposed to the “comfortable way of life” described by the second definition: civilization, to Thoreau, offers nothing but shackles and chains restraining the lives of individuals with social burdens (*Oxford English Dictionary*). (Notably, this epiphany often arises after an apocalyptic catastrophe.) It is neither comfortable nor a way of life; more precisely, it is a “chopping sea of civilized life”—a place unfit for living (Thoreau 119). It is a place in which we are awoken “by the mechanical nudgings of some servitor” instead of our “Genius” (Thoreau 116). This mechanical artificiality of civilization constantly drains us of life, physically and mentally.

Thoreau is also a devout advocate of simplicity. In his argument, urban sprawl, busyness, and hectic affairs are aspects of civilization that make it “deadly slow” (Thoreau 124). Civilization is not some social refuge; on the contrary, it is a pandemonium of social indoctrination and classical conditioning of the mindless masses. Exhibited by Thoreau’s slate of individuals as “sleepers,” the insentient and comatose state of mental consciousness within the institution of civilization is fully unveiled (120). Those deluded and comforted by the monotonous and perpetual design of civilizations are those whose vitality and vigor have been numbed by “slumbering, and consenting to be deceived by shows” (Thoreau 125). They “establish and confirm their daily life of routine and habit” in spite of its “purely illusory foundations” (Thoreau 125). Ironically, it is the presence of the plethora of labors and affairs that create such a trance-like lethargy in individuals. Civilization conditions these sleepers to awake, not by “Genius” (Thoreau 116) or conscious rousings, but rather by “mechanical aids” and “factory bells”—programmed stimuli (Thoreau 117). The robotic and automated response displayed by the “sound sleepers” who “devote days and nights to the work” are, in Thoreau’s mind, foundational to schemes of civilization (120). Otherwise, “who will build railroads?” (Thoreau 120). Progress would not be feasible if these sleepers were conscious of their fate under civilization, which is a destiny often only fully realized following the disaster of a post-apocalyptic scenario. Without these human drones, projects like the railroad would be incomplete, and society would be incapable of advancing, which is no loss to humanity as such “internal improvements . . . are all external and superficial” (Thoreau 120). Thoreau employs the extended metaphor of civilization as “an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense” (Thoreau 120). With Thoreau in mind, it becomes obvious that civilization is the polar opposite of the socially organized and most “advanced society”

painted in the first dictionary definition and envisioned by Cronon (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Under Thoreau, nature is an entity that, while derelict in modern society, holds a supreme value, an entity that could be fully understood when the environment is disrupted by an apocalyptic event that forces society to desert their modern tools.

In contemporary society, however, the view of civilization as “comfortable” and the “most advanced” still dominates the dubious Thoreauvian censure by far, even in more objective resources such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*. By ignoring Thoreau’s criticism, the mauling, brainwashing tendencies of modern civilization continues to permeate humanity, as seen in the article “Why Modern Civilization Is a Vicious Circle” by Shane Parrish (2016). The distinctive notion that civilization “has its priorities messed up, [and] that we need to live in the moment” raises the same issue Thoreau identified (Parrish 22). Modernity and materialism are instruments of civilization that “stimulate our sense organs until they become insensitive,” until we become sound sleepers (Parrish 22). This opinion is extended to suggest another reason as to “why all affairs of civilization are rushed” (Parrish 22). It is essential to note that “the civilized man does not know what he wants” and works under civilization for unattainable, abstract purposes: “success, fame, a happy marriage, fun, to help other people, or to become a ‘real person’” (Parrish 23). Such promises and guarantees of civilization are “constantly retreating phantom[s],” as one is eternally chasing but never attaining these goals (Parrish 22). According to Parrish, humans differ from animals in that they must utilize “the highest possible amount of consciousness, alertness, and chronic insomnia” in the pursuit of more material stimulation (Parrish 22). This utensil of civilization—this bombardment of luxuries and wants—progressively functions to desensitize the individual, rendering them “incapable of real pleasure, insensitive to the most acute and subtle joys of life” (Parrish 22). In this way, modern civilization is a vicious cycle—a world in which natural selection has yielded not an ethically upright, progressive society but has rather provided a contradictory stage of social regress and moral decay under a material hegemony.

After reviewing the positive and negative commentary on the nature of modern civilization, one might then question how civilization would evolve or regress after a core-shaking apocalyptic event. The theory is tested and analyzed in James Berger’s *After the End* as he combines historical, academic, and literary evidence to consider civilization’s “aftermath and remainders,” many analyses of which are reminiscent of Thoreauvian conceptions and Cronon’s ideas about civilization (xii). In his introductory examination of trauma, Berger makes an explicit connection to historical events such as the Holocaust, the

Vietnam War, and slavery in early America—events which mirror much of apocalyptic literature and which underscore its relevance to modern day civilization. He sheds light on the irony of the end as post-apocalyptic literature rarely ever offers any ending: in fact, a catastrophic event generally paves a new beginning to a different form of civilization, whether that is a dystopia or utopia.

Additionally, Berger contemplates ideas of trauma from a perspective suggested by Sigmund Freud in his psychoanalytical works. While Freud's discussion centers around identifying the internal, psychological factors that are modified as a result of calamity, Berger examines a larger picture, analyzing the role of social culture in trauma by bringing in Slavoj Žižek's contemporary thinking on the "destabilizing intrusion of the Real into a symbolic order" (Berger 25). The representational systems—the symbolic orders that play a role in all societies—suddenly, in post-apocalyptic literature, become disrupted by catastrophic changes in the environment—the Real. Such a violent interruption paves the way to anarchy and other persisting social products, which are direct results result of this trauma. This is seen most vividly in Žižek's later reference to a "natural cycle of generation and corruption," a concept which parallels Parrish's description of the vicious cycle but also expounds upon it by suggesting that the "absolute death—the destruction . . . liberates nature from its own laws" (Berger 43).

Berger's analysis of underlying ideologies that shape a new post-apocalyptic civilization is strongly rooted in his belief that there are two-part, internal variables, such as trauma, and external variables like geography and surrounding environment, contributing to the adoption of new social structures suggested by Doyle and the resulting formation of novel cultures (Doyle). Berger expands his commentary on social environment as he evaluates the scenery following the abolishment of slavery. One might believe that Berger's investigation of the abolition of slavery would yield a perception of civilization that aligns with the first dictionary definition, as abolition constituted what many deem to be advancement in human rights and law. However, Berger's analysis goes further to imply the legacies of slavery still permeate even after the end; in this way, civilization has not aided humanity in becoming its most ethically advanced iteration—the view espoused by Cronon—but has rather served as a safe haven for degrading and inhumane practices—as posited by Thoreau.

Evaluated independently, each text conveys civilization with utterly different or identical denotations; taken together, the texts show the multidimensional and multifarious propensity of the term. In "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong

Nature,” Cronon supports the definition of civilization as the “most advanced” form of human organization by juxtaposing its practicality against the hyperbolic and embellished claims concerning wilderness, its antithesis (*Oxford English Dictionary*). *Walden* depicts civilization as an anesthetizing establishment intended to brainwash its civilians by promoting lives as what essentially amounts to hurried, mechanical humanoids and programmable tools. Parrish’s commentary also sheds light on this progressive computerization, systemization, and exploitation that civilization perpetrates by proclaiming apparitional vows of success, money, and an unattainable better future. In juxtaposition, Berger’s *After the End* plays a culminating role in drawing lines that connect progression and deterioration of civilization as consequences of cataclysmic changes in the environment. Taken as a whole, Cronon’s views are contradictory to the beliefs of Thoreau and Parrish, while Berger recognizes the persistence of both views post-apocalyptically. Critically, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature” presents a definition of civilization consistent with the dictionary definitions that advertise civilization as advanced in every aspect and as the most rational solution for human progress, whereas *Walden* denies these claims, insisting instead that civilization is an immoral and degenerating organization with superficial purposes that program its civilians to become more automated, mechanical, and repetitive. While Cronon persists in epitomizing civilization as a prototype designed by, and refined by, the pressures of survival to overcome the savagery of primeval nomadism and hunter-gatherer lifestyles, Parrish exposes the fact that such an advanced model only deprives mental energy and deteriorates our lives by employing exhausting amounts of rush, hurry, and superfluity. Both *Walden* and “Why Modern Civilization is a Vicious Circle” correspond in stance; however Thoreau is more apprehensive of the exhaustive, inertial feature of civilization to render individuals paralyzed and disoriented, where Parrish emphasizes the illusions of modernity, the materialism contrived by civilization, and the insatiable hunger for pleasure that results in an eternal, progress-hostile immobility. Berger examines these views in their entirety, coming to the conclusion that the forces of nature have the power to progress or diminish a civilization after an apocalyptic catastrophe; however, more importantly, Berger claims that the new beginnings and changes that occur rely greatly on the sociopolitical environment and sentiment that remains even after calamity. These findings are significant as it demonstrates that the post-apocalypse can become a moment of hope in rebuilding civilization in a better image.

WORKS CITED

- Berger, James. *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*. University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Cronon, William, editor. *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. W.W. Norton & Co., 1995. Rpt. in “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.” *William Cronon*, http://www.williamcronon.net/writing/Trouble_with_Wilderness_Main.html.
- “civilization.” *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*. Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/civilization>.
- Doyle, Briohny. “The Postapocalyptic Imagination.” *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 131, no. 1, 2015, pp. 99–113. doi:10.1177/0725513615613460.
- Ingerson, Alice E. “Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature. William Cronon.” Review of *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* by William Cronon. *The Quarterly Review of Biology*, vol. 72, no. 3, 1997, pp. 314–315. doi:10.1086/419867.
- Parrish, Shane. “Why Modern Civilization Is a Vicious Circle.” *Time*, 20 Feb. 2016, pp. 22-23.
- Thoreau, Henry D. *Walden*. Ticknor and Fields, 1854.