

COMPARATIVE AND INTERDISCIPLINARY:
PRACTICAL APPROACHES TO TEACHING WORLD CIVILIZATION

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It is widely suspected--and not without reason--that students entering college today are almost dangerously ignorant of the wider world. A 1979 report of a presidential commission on languages and international relations pointed out that, in one survey, 40 percent of twelfth grade students could not locate Egypt on a world map and 20 percent could not point to France or China.

Basic but remediable ignorance of this sort is one of the reasons many universities are returning to required general education courses in the humanities and social sciences. Four years ago, a faculty committee studying revision of the general education core curriculum at Murray State University recommended a required freshman-level world civilization course. The intent was to provide a course that would remedy deficiencies in the international awareness of entering students by introducing them both to the historical development of world civilizations and to essential ideas from the social science disciplines, in order to assist them in understanding world civilization. As part of the planning for this course, faculty members in the social science departments devised a course that focused on history but included essential and explicit elements from other social sciences. The administration of the university approved this interdisciplinary social-science world civilization course that has now taken its place beside interdisciplinary humanities, arts, and science courses as the foundations of the general education core requirements.

This approach, though hardly unique, is coming to be seen as an important one in a renewed emphasis on general education in institutions of higher education throughout the country. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching recently issued a well-publicized report arguing that interdisciplinary courses might be one of the major ways to achieve the goals of general education.¹ Theory, of course, is one thing, practice yet another; and the faculty who set out to design the interdisciplinary world civilization course at Murray State University were faced with making a reality out of a reasonable theory. Our central problem was trying to condense the enormous amount of material that we faced in presenting world civilizations from their origins until the present day. We wished to find a method of organizing this material which would provide not only what Professor Abdul Said insists should be an emphasis on "human solidarity and wholeness of human life,"² but would also create a framework within which students could understand and digest the information being presented.

Trying to design an interdisciplinary course helped us appreciate a comment made by George Bonham that "the world is divided into problems; the universities, however, are divided into departments,"³ which reflects both the difficulties we faced and one initial suggestion that we build a course around a problem/solution model. After considerable discussion, however, we decided instead to maintain an essentially chronological framework and to draw upon insights and approaches of all social sciences in building the course. This, we felt, would preserve the interdisciplinary nature of the course and also help make the material comprehensible to entering freshmen. With this in mind, a team of faculty designed, and has now several times revised, a syllabus that is not only interdisciplinary, but also includes comparative approaches as a second key in developing student understanding of this vast subject. The comparative approach is important in helping students see the way in which each civilization, though unique,

relates to others. But how to be comparative in the most useful way? For what we decided would be the second semester of the course, covering the period since about 1500, this appeared to be an easier task. We could use one of two well-established models. The first, based upon the idea of modernization and the contact between the traditional and the modern world, offered a means of assessing the relationship between civilizations since 1500 and the emergence of a world civilization. The second, a world system approach that considers a global political economy emerging since the period about 1500 onwards, offered the advantage of an integrated view of the emergence of the contemporary world.⁴ After much debate concerning which of these models might be more appropriate, we adopted elements of both, trying to create a useful course for our students and to balance the views of our divergent, interdisciplinary faculty group.

A more central concern, however, was how we might approach world civilizations prior to European expansion. This early period did not seem to lend itself nearly as well to either of the models; nor did it seem to be one in which comparisons could be made easily within the chronological framework we had decided upon. The answer came in an interesting approach utilizing the interdisciplinary nature of the course. After much consideration, we derived several key concepts, terms, and ideas from various social sciences. Using these ideas and constructs as the touchstones for comparison provided the means of making students see the way in which early civilizations shared similar characteristics and how people throughout the world were both alike and different. In the most recent version of our syllabus (see appendix), the concepts, terms, and ideas included are the following:

1. civilization;
2. social organization and stratification;
3. economic surplus and scarcity;
4. cultural diffusion;
5. centralized and decentralized government;
6. urbanization and urbanism;
7. concepts of time;
8. religion as a social and political force;
9. buffer zones and states; and
10. climate and disease as social forces.

We have selected four of these themes, and will briefly discuss ways that have been used in our teaching as the basis for student understanding and as the foundation for our comparative and interdisciplinary effort.

Religion as a Social and Political Force

In the early weeks of the semester, when discussing the earliest civilizations, in particular the Aryan civilization in India, as well as near the end of the first semester when discussing church and institutional conflict in medieval Europe, we have tried to help students see that religious beliefs and institutions have social, economic, and political consequences. Religion, students become aware, can help define social role (as in Islamic areas and in

medieval Europe), and can sanctify the economic distinction that accompanies the social role (as in the Sumerian city-states). In medieval Europe, in particular, the conflict between popes and kings or emperors shows clearly the political power of the church as an institution. To avoid the danger that students might see in religion the sole determining force in human socio-political behavior, we always point out that religious beliefs and systems of operation can themselves be changed, just as political or social institutions might be. For example, we explain that Christian and Islamic practices vary in different cultures, and that Buddhism--originally a religion for monks--had to adapt to the Chinese emphasis on the family when it moved to China.

Concepts of Time

Religion not only helps students understand social and political structures in civilizations, but also plays an important role in helping us introduce some concepts of time held by various peoples. Hinduism, for example, embodies a cyclical view of time that undergirds the Indian emphasis on tradition (if time moves in cycles, nothing really changes) and the apparent Indian discounting of the importance of material progress, as defined in Western terms. Confucian China is another past-directed society where peoples' lives are tied to the past in both religious and philosophical ways, and in which progress is often defined as the ability of one dynasty or another to recapture the imagined perfection of a golden past.

The attitude toward time in both of these Asian societies is strikingly different from that found in Greek and Hebrew culture. When discussing ancient Greece, we can show students a society in which some men and women began to orient their lives toward the present in a way different from that found in Asia. While recognizing the importance of tradition, and indeed of prediction of the future, in Greek life, we point out to students how the Greeks were firmly planted in the present. This is clearly illustrated in the Athenian devotion to the Protagorean dictum that "man is the measure of all things." Finally, we discuss the Judaeo-Christian concept of time, which is a clearly linear and teleological one. Because God had acted (and would continue to act) in time, the future as well as the temporal, material world was important in a way different from that in other societies. The Greek evaluation of the present and the Hebrew vision of the future, of course, become important elements in later western civilization, foreshadowing the Enlightenment idea of "progress." When the often repeated bifurcation between cyclical and linear concepts of time is presented in this fourfold way--emphasizing time as cyclical, past-directed, present-oriented, and teleological--students seem to find this way of comparing the attitudes and achievements of various civilizations easier to understand. We try not to present a particular concept of time; rather, we try to help our students see how people with different concepts of time have different capacities for dealing with problems that they face on a regular basis.

Centralized and Decentralized Government

We have often found that students tend to dichotomize all government as democracies or dictatorships, or into those which let people be free and those which do not. Although, in one sense, the entire course is designed to shake such simplistic notions by looking at a range of forces that promote or inhibit human individuals, many of us have made a deliberate attempt to look at local or decentralized government (whether de jure or de facto) as a logical response to general social, economic, and political forces in particular times and places rather than as a sign of "weakness," "underdevelopment," or "lack of modernization."

Even without its Marxist overtone, which our students generally are not aware of, feudalism suggests something barbaric, primitive, or at least not "modern" to students. We try to present this major example of decentralized government as a rational response to the breakdown of central political authority in the western half of the Roman Empire from the third to the eighth centuries. By contrasting western European feudal practices with those in Japan and Ethiopia, we try to make students aware that localized government and economic relationships are intelligent legal reactions to different political conditions in different times and places. Comparing the European vassal with the Japanese daimyo and the Ethiopian gwilt system may be one of the unique features of the course. In this area, as in many others, our generalizations are broad. We want students to understand that there are differences and similarities in economic and political systems, not necessarily what those differences are in detail.

Just as local or decentralized political system can be a sign of strength in a society, highly centralized systems can be a sign of weakness, as was the Roman political system which lacked a procedure for orderly succession of power. We try to illustrate the strengths of centralized political systems by emphasis on the wisdom of the Roman legal codes and concepts, the value of roads to Rome as well as to the Persian and the Incan empires, and the use of the "mandate of heaven" idea and a carefully selected bureaucracy by the Chinese emperors. We also try to suggest that centralization can become a problem when territory outruns technology. What might have been the outcome in fourth-century Rome if the gold and silver mines had not played out, if pumps had allowed the Romans to continue extracting precious metals to send to the east, or if a new military breakthrough equivalent to the crossbow had given smaller Roman forces an advantage over German tribesmen? We also want students to recognize that centralization can become a problem if there is not an efficient administrative system to hold center and periphery together, or if ethnic divergences cause differences of customs to magnify those of distance, as happened to the Arab Moslems by the twelfth century.

Urbanization and Urbanism

Since most of our students come from rural or small town backgrounds, we also attempt to introduce them to the demographic and sociological ideas of urbanization and urbanism. For many of them, large cities are foreign places; therefore, we want our students to realize that the formation of urban centers--urbanization--is not only an ancient phenomenon, but one essential to the formation of societies that have reached a level of development generally associated with "civilization." Thus, we focus on the formation of cities in Mesopotamia especially, but also in the Nile and Indus valleys, and in Mesoamerica. Most of us attempt to illustrate the processes of economic, political, and cultural concentration that lead toward what J.M. Roberts terms a "critical mass," necessary for the transformation of villages into towns and the expansion of small societies into civilizations.⁵

In trying to help our students overcome some of their misconceptions about urban life, we also deal with the sociological concept of urbanism, the lifestyles and attitudes which come with city dwelling. It is frequently hard for our students to grasp how cities--which they sometimes picture as squalid centers of poverty and disease, crime and corruption--are the well-spring of civilized life. We point out, for example, that most of the early cities were probably more like the small towns they know; even the largest of these centers, along the Indus River, counted no more than 30,000 persons among its inhabitants. Moreover, we attempt to disabuse our students of the notion that cities, especially these early examples, are all alike. By

comparing the archeological evidence from several of these towns, including maps of their street grids, we hope students will recognize the variety possible in city life. Indeed, some of us continue the point by later examination of cities in classical antiquity such as Athens, Alexandria, and Rome. In making these comparisons we try to help the students recognize the common element of what Kevin Reilly calls the "organizational revolution" brought on by urbanization while also understanding the great variety in the urbanism of the resulting civilizations.⁶

In a like manner, most of us use the other social science concepts, terms, and ideas we have developed for our course as a fulcrum for the comparison of early civilizations and as foci for helping students understand the relationships among ideas and between those ideas and the peoples whose lives illustrate them. By and large we have found this a fruitful approach, but it has not been easy. Although all the historians, political scientists, and economists teaching the course recognize these terms, teaching about them and, moreover, using them as centerpieces for comparison requires more than just a casual acquaintance with the concept. No doubt, from time to time we overstate comparisons or oversimplify some of the ideas. Nonetheless, as a means of condensing material, drawing comparisons, and preserving the essential interdisciplinary nature of our course, this approach has been useful.

From what evidence we can collect from students, it would seem that this approach has found favor with them as well. In examinations, students generally are able to define and illustrate the concepts we have developed in our classes. They also seem able, on a basic level, to understand the kind of comparisons we have been encouraging them to make. Student comments about the course frequently mention these "new ideas" and "new ways of looking at things" we are trying to achieve. But such impressions are almost hopelessly subjective. Perhaps most valuable in giving us confidence in our approach has been the results of the multiple-choice questionnaire students have completed evaluating this new course. In both our fall 1979 pilot program involving about 175 students and the first required offering of the course in fall 1980, with over 1,000 students, a high percentage of those who had an opinion agreed that the course "builds an understanding of concepts and principles." Even more important to an assessment of our approach, a much higher percentage of students indicated that they had been able to see the emphasis on "relationships between and among topics" covered in their classes; for most of us, those relationships were built upon the comparative analysis of the social science concepts, terms, and ideas that are central to the course. Moreover, correlation studies of these surveys indicate students who claimed they could see the relationships between ideas in the course also rated the course most favorably on other measures, including the overall evaluation of the course and its usefulness.⁷

From this admittedly imperfect evaluation, we have concluded that we are, at least, moving in the right direction in building a world civilization course for general education at Murray State University. Our course follows a narrative line from early man to the present, but we are trying to combine this with deliberate use of comparison and explicit attention to particular ideas and constructs drawn from the social sciences. While we continue to struggle with the best way to do this, given limitations such as time and textbook, we do believe that we are helping our students see issues and problems as complex, and causes and consequences as multiple. We doubtless leave some of our students with at least as many questions as answers. If we also leave them with the conviction that each discipline has its truth, and that truth, ultimately, transcends all disciplines, perhaps we have at least provoked the right questions.

NOTES

¹Harper's (May, 1981), 65. See, for example, the following report on the study: "General Education Called a 'Disaster Area' by Carnegie Official; Need for Revival Seen," The Chronicle of Higher Education, XXII (April 13, 1981), 50.

²Abdul Said, "As Old Order Dies, Pangs Precede Birth of New Global Politics," American: The Magazine of American University (Winter, 1981), 9.

³George W. Bonhan, "Education and the World View," Change, XII (May-June, 1980), 4.

⁴An excellent discussion of the use of these models in general education is provided by Craig A. Lockard, "Global History Modernization and the World-System Approach: A Critique," The History Teacher, XIV (August, 1981), 489-515.

⁵J.M. Roberts, History of the World to 1500 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 30.

⁶Kevin Reilly, The West and The World: A Topical History of Civilization, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 45. Much of our discussion of urbanism and comparison of life in ancient and classical cities draws upon Reilly's thoughtful analysis.

⁷We are indebted to Ms. Marian Posey of the Teaching and Media Resource Center of Murray State University for invaluable assistance in both developing and interpreting the evaluation of our course, and for her criticism of an earlier draft of this article.

APPENDIX

IDC 101: World Civilization to 1500

SYLLABUS

The purpose of this course is to help students understand the emergence of the major civilizations in the world to 1500, the way these civilizations originated, developed, and spread, and the roots of Western dynamism. By looking at political, social, economic and cultural forces in both Western and non-Western civilizations, students can better understand the historical origins of modern problems, the people and forces that are important in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

As a part of this course, students should acquire an understanding of the following ideas and concepts common to several of the social sciences, as well as an awareness of how they apply to the development of world civilization to about 1500:

1. civilization;
2. social organization and stratification;
3. economic surplus and scarcity;
4. cultural diffusion;
5. centralized and decentralized government;
6. urbanization and urbanism;
7. concepts of time;
8. religion as a social and political factor;
9. buffer zones and states; and
10. climate and disease as social forces.

The course will be divided into three parts and the following topics will be treated during each part; the order in which topics are covered may vary within each part.

PART ONE: EMERGENCE OF MAJOR CIVILIZATIONS (about five weeks)

1. Man's Path to Civilizations - prehistory, the emergence of homo sapiens and their success in adapting to and in controlling some aspects of their environment.
2. Early Near Eastern Civilizations - an account of the Tigris-Euphrates and Nile valley civilizations, looking at social forces and urbanization.
3. Early Civilization in China - an account of the major social, political and economic forces prominent in the Yellow River valley civilization, with attention to the role of Confucianism as the key to social organization.
4. Early Civilization in India - early developments in the Indian sub-continent before and after the arrival of the Aryans, with some attention to the caste system and the ways in which Hinduism defined man's role in society.
5. Early Mediterranean Civilization: The Heritage of Israel and Hellas - a look at the development of humanistic ideas, and in particular the Greek and Hebrew ideas of man and society.

PART TWO: THE SPREAD OF CIVILIZATIONS (about five weeks)

6. Mediterranean Civilization: The Heritage of Rome - major developments in Roman civilization, with emphasis on legal and political concepts and the process of empire-building.
7. Breakdown of Classical Civilization and the Birth of Europe - responses of Eurasian civilizations to social, political, economic and cultural attack, with attention to the birth of a new civilization out of the breakdown of the Western Roman world.
8. Eastern Roman or Byzantine World: Survival and Continuity - an account of the Byzantine achievement, with emphasis on economic forces and the diffusion of Christian and Greco-Oriental values and culture of the Slavic peoples.
9. The Islamic World: Political and Religious Unity - an example of religion and ethnicity as cohesive forces in civilization, with attention to political developments in Islam through the Abbasid period.
10. India and China: Enduring Civilizations of the East - a look at Chinese dynasties through the Mongol period and at Mogul rulers in India, with emphasis on tradition and social stability as factors limiting change in civilization.

PART THREE: ROOTS OF EUROPEAN DYNAMISM (about four weeks)

11. Feudalism: Socio-Economic Structure and Political System - a comparison of localized political and economic systems as they developed in Europe with those in either Japan or Ethiopia.

12. European Medieval Institutions: Church-State Conflict - a look at how tensions between political and religious institutions helped develop a dynamic Western civilization.
13. European Medieval Civilization: Expansion and Crisis - a study of the demographic, social, political, and economic contraction of the period 1300-1500 as contrasted with the expansive civilization of the high middle ages.
14. Isolated Civilization: Africa and America on the Eve of European Expansion - a study of major centers of civilization in America and Africa that developed in isolation from those in Eurasia.