### Title of Lesson: Another Perspective on Modern Civilization

**Lesson By:**
Christopher R. Mason

| Grade Level/ Subject Areas: Middle School Social Studies (easily adapted for High School Students) | Class Size: 25 (ideally) | Time/Duration of Lesson: Approx. 5 class periods |

**Guiding Questions:**
- What can we do about many of the problems or issues we confront in the world today?
- How can we react to these problems in a positive and productive way, rather than with violence, war and mistrust of other groups of people?
- What solutions can we generate, not only about the physical environmental problems but also about the affects of modern civilization upon us?

**Lesson Abstract:**
Students should have previously studied the process of modernization in order to benefit fully from this lesson. The process of Modernization is essentially the move that society in the West has made from a more agrarian/rural society to a more industrialized/urban one. The important question which Gandhi poses is, “what affect does Modern Civilization have on us as human beings?” By engaging in the ideas presented in this lesson, we can begin to understand the affects of Modern/Western Civilization upon us as it relates to war, crime, racism, punishment, terrorism and arguments like those over abortion or gay marriage.

**Lesson Content:** The purpose of this lesson is to extend the previous learning of students on the topic of Modernization. One of the ways this can be addressed is to expose the students to Gandhi’s ideas of Modern Civilization and its effects upon human beings. As noted in the abstract above, this lesson should ideally be explored with students who have some background knowledge on what is meant by Modern Civilization and/or the process of Modernization and its desired ends.

Gandhi defines modern civilization to be that civilization or society which grows from, or develops as a result of the process of modernization. Gandhi described it as, the system which gives the “people living in it… bodily welfare [as] the object of life. We will take some examples. The people of Europe today live in better built houses than they did a hundred years ago. This is considered an emblem of civilization and this is also a matter to promote bodily happiness.” (Hind Swaraj, p. 35) By bodily happiness, Gandhi means the material comfort that these more modern dwellings provide us. For instance, most of us would agree, better to live in a brick house than in a mud hut, with dirt floors and a thatched roof. By extension we can envision it is not simply the house itself which is desirable, but the modern technology we find in that house. Air conditioning, a refrigerator, a telephone etc. All of this serves to “make our lives better”. Another way
to describe this “betterment” may be to ask a question: Would you rather go down to your barn and milk your cow and then hand churn your butter or would you rather hop in your car and head down to your local supermarket to buy milk and butter. I believe that the vast majority of people living in modern civilization would choose the later option. While it is true that Gandhi did not precisely define his argument in this manner, I find it consistent with the descriptions he did provide.

Later in his discussion of the modern civilization, Gandhi describes weapons as now being revolvers, making the act of harming our fellow humans quicker, easier and more deadly, “now it is possible to take away thousands of lives by one man working behind a gun from a hill.” (Hind Swaraj p. 35-36) He goes on to illuminate his thoughts on the role of machinery.

This is considered the height of civilization…. Men will not need the use of their hands and feet. They will press a button and they will have their clothing by their side. They will press another button and they will have their newspaper. A third and a motor car will be in waiting for them…. This is civilization. Formerly, men worked in the open air only so much as they liked. Now, thousands of workmen...work in factories or mines. Their condition is worse than that of beasts. They are obliged to work, at the risk of their lives...for the sake of millionaires. (Hind Swaraj, p.36)

While this description may adequately match the more contemporary description above as well as adequately describing a life that many of us may wish to live, Gandhi did not view it as a positive situation. These “modern advantages” would not serve to improve people’s lives, rather they would serve to make people lazy and perpetuate their isolation. Gandhi had fundamental issues with this lifestyle as well as its effects on how human beings were forced to live because of its pervasive existence.

Gandhi essentially distrusted and disliked modern, western civilization. He felt that “the consciousness of the common people was frustrated by a system of ‘life-corroding competition’ which resulted in bondage rather than freedom…. [He] held that the fundamental guidance of the life of man can be only internal, and… arising from the will of the people…. Civilization seeks to increase bodily comfort, and it fails miserably in doing so.” (Iyer, R. p.1) Again, we see in this quotation Gandhi’s skepticism about whether or not modern civilization “improves” the lives of human beings. Instead he believed that each person had to figure out for themselves what sort of lifestyle would be best for them. It would be the innate goodness of people that gave them freedom, not the pervasiveness of an oppressive system. Examples of such systems might be the one imposed by the British in India or that of “modern civilization” which we live under today in America. Regardless of the particular system or its specific location, it would be detrimental to humans.

It is now necessary to explore Gandhi’s notions of duty and service if we are to understand why he deplored modern civilization. He believed that a true civilization would help its people understand the purposes of life as well as the path of duty we each have in our individual lives. There are 4 objects (or aspects) of life in Hindu Philosophy, to which, as a Hindu, Gandhi adhered. First, wealth and power; second, sensual pleasure;
third, ethical behavior or how we behave toward one another; and fourth, the need for spiritual striving. (Parel, appendix A). In other words, it is essential, if we are to live a good life, to understand that life is not all about the here and now. It is not the sum total of what we amass while here on earth, either in terms of material possessions or of wealth. In the context of the Gandhian vision of civilization, the focus then shifts, from wealth, power and sensual (bodily) pleasures in “modern/western civilization”, to a more ethical behavior and a connection with the spiritual in “true civilization”. It is important to recognize that the focus shifts, but that all 4 aspects of life must be included and balanced out if his version of “true civilization” was to be realized.

This notion of balance is connected to duty for Gandhi. For instance, most civilizations, historically, focus on 1, 2 or 3 of these “aspects or objects of life”. Buddhism focuses predominantly on the third and fourth precepts, while it would be fair to argue that America focuses mainly on objects 1 and 2. In a Buddhist society such as Tibet, wealth and power take a back seat as it were, and overall the society can be marginalized. To wit in 1950 China, a much more wealthy and powerful civilization than Tibet, walked in and seized control. The Dahli Lama, being absolutely unable to counter the brute force of China, had to flee which adversely affected the people of Tibet. Gandhi would say that the Dahli Lama did not have the power necessary to fight back and so the civilization of Tibet was not in balance. (Parel, Appendix A) This is a fine present day example of why Gandhi believed that all four of the objects of life were essential for a good civilization to exist. In order to achieve this so called balance, duty and service was the key. “Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms. To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions.” (Hind Swaraj, p.67)

Notice how Gandhi crafts this definition. Morality, that which is right and proper conduct, and duty are interchangeable terms. The one flows necessarily to the other and then back again. Therefore, it is only when people can control their desires for wealth, power and sensual pleasures that our individual duties to society can adequately be fulfilled. Only then, can we have a successful civilization. The reason Gandhi felt this way is that he felt life without restraint of any sort is barbaric, and it is only one’s sense of duty and service to others which can give one that sense of restraint. Stated another way, when people do whatever they wish, whenever they wish with no regard for ethics, morality or spirituality, chaos will result. (Hind. Swaraj p.34, footnote 48 and Parel Appendix A)

This brings us to Gandhi’s idea of direct social action, Satyagraha or soul force. It was this action that would alter society and bring back into focus all 4 of life’s objects, rather than one or two, as commonly exhibited by modern civilization. Satyagraha, then, is not any sort of quest for the ultimate truth or the meaning of life. Instead it is intended to lift up and assist those who are oppressed or dehumanized by modern civilization. This demeaning of people takes place, nay is caused, by modern civilization’s preoccupation with bodily comforts, i.e. Wealth, power and sensual pleasure. (Parel Appendix A) Satyagraha is therefore, Gandhi’s method of integrating all 4 objects of life into a way of acting that empowers all human beings. Within this construct, how you behave is of the
utmost importance, hence our individual responsibility to duty and morality. We cannot establish a decent civilization for all humans unless this sense of duty is present and acted upon. Furthermore, this obligation toward duty will not be present under the current system because modern civilization narrowly focuses on wealth, power and sensual pleasures as the object of life, to the exclusion of ethics and spirituality.

In our country today, we can observe symptoms of what Gandhi means. Bernie Madoff, the extreme over valuation of housing prices, the over use of credit cards and the rampant consumerism of our population. (Parel Appendix A) Gandhi believed that people were not necessarily happy because they were rich, nor did he accept the premise that they were unhappy because they were poor. (Hind Swaraj, p.68) He did, however, view the root cause of poverty as being the greed of the rich and the “exploitation of the needy by the greedy”. (Iyer, p.2) Again, Gandhi’s antidote for this is for individual people to put aside their wants and desires so that they might unselfishly help those worse off than themselves. In other words, so that people would do their duty. This duty requires that “under the new outlook [of “true civilization as defined by Gandhi] multiplicity of material wants will not be the aim of life, the aim will be rather their restriction consistently with comfort. We shall cease to think of getting what we can, but we shall decline to receive what all cannot get.” (Iyer, p.2) This explains his over arching idea of service and duty, as it was the only way to ensure that the welfare of all humans was adequately achieved and maintained. It was simple: don’t take everything you want, but make sure that all of us will be comfortable. This then is the purpose and the essence of what Gandhi is best known for and the gift which he gave to the world, nonviolence.

**State Content Standards:**

**North Carolina 11.04** Identify examples of economic, political, and social changes, such as agrarian to industrial economies, monarchical to democratic governments, and the roles of women and minorities, and analyze their impact on culture

**Materials Needed:**
- The Story of Stuff, [www.storyofstuff.com](http://www.storyofstuff.com)
- Notes from Lectures by Professor Anthony J. Parel (Appendix A)
- Excerpts from Gandhi’s book, “Hind Swaraj” pub. 1909 Chapters 6 & 13

**Suggested Teaching Activities:**
1. Show video “Story of Stuff”—have students take notes
2. Note format—Story of Stuff (Appendix B)
3. Present information from Hind Swaraj and have students practice skills in note taking (you may provide guided structure for this as needed)
4. Have students then compare Story of Stuff notes WITH notes from Hind Swaraj (Appendix A) by creating a Venn Diagram

**Bibliography:**
Appendix A

This appendix contains the notes I took from a seminar I participated in on July 15, 2009 with Dr. Anthony Parel, editor of Gandhi’s writing “Hind Swaraj.”

As is often the case with notes, there is an interpretive aspect to them. Nevertheless, I believe them to be a valuable resource for purposes of understanding this material. I also circulated them to several of my colleagues to ensure that my understanding of the content was accurate and consistent. The notes in this appendix are intended to provide additional insight and understanding of Gandhi’s ideas as expressed in “Hind Swaraj.”

THE NOTES: “In order to practice nonviolence, you must have an understanding or definition of the truth” Dr. Anthony Parel

You must see Gandhi’s ideas of what “truth” is, and that is an ever evolving search for what is fair, just, humble and compassionate and following proper behavior (my short definition).

If you want to practice nonviolence then you MUST have a civilization that will support that practice of nonviolence & truth……without this support of civilization then implementing those practices into the culture will be a STRUGGLE. AND then we have an obligation to improve or modify that culture IN ORDER to practice nonviolence.

Civilization helps its followers and members to understand the OBJECT (or purposes) of life AND it also helps us understand the PATH OF DUTY—this is what Gandhi says Civilization is.

4 objects of Life that Civilization packages for us in Hindu Philosophy: (this is order to help us understand these “objects of life” Gandhi discusses. PLEASE NOTE that these 4 objects of life are important to remember as much of the succeeding discussion refers back to them.

1. wealth & power
2. pleasure (sensual, sexual, ascetic)
3. Ethical behavior—how we behave toward one another—should be truth, honesty, compassion and nonviolence…..this can be understood as Dharma in Hindu religion (duty)—ideally for example, you must achieve wealth or power honestly w/out exploiting or manipulating others
4. Need for spiritual striving—transcendence, ethics teaches how to behave with
each other spirituality teaches how to behave in relation to the transcendent (God, Allah, Brahman, in essence the power that is bigger and more powerful, outside of our realm & at least somewhat mysterious

So this description/definition of Civilization is not same or even COMPATIBLE with how most of us would define Modern or Western Civilization.

Historically, most civilizations emphasize one or two of these objects of life MORE than others—EX. IN Buddhism, #3 & 4 are emphasized and wealth, power and pleasure are marginalized…..so one outcome of this marginalization is that (taking case of Dahli Lama) is that China became much more wealthy and powerful than Tibet and in 1950 they just walked in and the Dahli Lama had to run, and he’s been running for 50 yrs…this has had an adverse affect upon the people of Tibet-----Gandhi might say that Dahli Lama lost the ability to “fight back” despite being one of the world’s leading proponents and practitioners of nonviolence……..SO, ACCORDING TO GANDHI, IT IS IMPORTANT TO FOLLOW ALL 4 OF THESE OBJECTS OF LIFE IN AN INTERACTIVE WAY—IN THIS WAY WE CAN ESTABLISH SOME BALANCE AMONGST & BETWEEN THE 4 OBJECTS. In other words, one could argue that we’ve got too much wealth, power and pleasure (Western Civ.) so we need to get back to having more of an emphasis on ethics and spiritual striving. Note that Modern Civilization takes the opposite approach to that of Buddhism…it focuses primarily on #’s 1 and 2 of the Objects of Life.

SO GANDHI WRITES HIND SWARAJ IN THIS CONTEXT AND HE SAYS THAT WE NEED TO STRIKE A BALANCE AMONGST ALL 4 OF THESE OBJECTS OF LIFE (based upon Hindu philosophy which Gandhi grew up with and was immersed within)

Gandhi’s definition of True Civilization: “Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty” p. 67 Hind Swaraj

Duty then, according to Gandhi, would be the focus and establishment of a balance between all 4 of these Objects of Life.

Life without restraint is barbarism. (P. 34 Hind Swaraj, footnote 48) said another way, doing whatever you wish is a recipe for barbarism and chaos, so we must focus then on our duty, our responsibility and that REQUIRES restraint upon our behavior in liberal or modern society. EX: If you want to make some money you must go to work and you will have to restrain your desire to sleep a lot.

Therefore, barbarism is the alternative to civilization (true civilization as defined by Gandhi)

Hind Swaraj was written 100 years ago, in 2009

“Virtue is the avoidance of extremes”—Dr. Parel—and according to Dr. Parel this is very
consistent with Gandhi’s thought process and thesis.

**Modern Civilization:** According to Gandhi, “It makes bodily welfare the object of life” p. 34 Hind Swaraj

If, then you believe that it is important in life to not only focus on bodily welfare but also on ethics and spirituality, THEN THE QUESTION BECOMES…WHAT DO YOU THINK OF MODERN CIVILIZATION? Dr. Tara Sethia, Professor of History at Cal Poly Tech University said “that [question] is a catch 22”

Modern Civilization “takes note neither of morality, nor religion” p. 37 Hind Swaraj

In other words, according to Gandhi, it lacks numbers 3 & 4 of the 4 Objects of life. Gandhi believed HUMANS ARE GOOD, IF THEY FOCUS ON BOTH BODY AND SPIRITUALITY….or if you like…..BODY AND SOUL—we cannot therefore continue to accept a mind/body split or separation. This separation is commonly believed to be THE VIRTUE or STRENGTH of Modern Western Civilization…BUT GANDHI VEHEMENTLY DISAGREES; in his mind they must be INTEGRATED.

**Examples of this idea:** Marx takes first of 4 Objects as the supreme priority and builds or tries to build a civilization upon that (Soviet Union the manifestation of that) to the relative exclusion of the other 3….it has serious flaws. Freud takes 2nd of 4 Objects of life and runs with that, one could argue there are flaws there as well…………SO GANDHI CONCLUDES THAT THE MIND (SPIRIT) AND BODY CANNOT BE SPLIT AS THEY ARE IN MODERN/WESTERN CIVILIZATION.

**Additional present day examples of what Gandhi is talking about might be:**
In our country today we look at our current economic situation………what does the focus on wealth & power bring? Madoff, real estate greed, and on an individual level our personal yet collective decision to utilize (over utilize) credit cards………so as Gandhi said of the British in India—They did not take India from us, we gave it to them—we in America have given way our ideals, our founding principles, in pursuit solely of money and power and sensual pleasures…………look around our country today….what are your thoughts on this question????

It is fair to say then that Gandhi was trying to sort out various belief systems: Christianity, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, atheism etc….FURTHERMORE to sort out and INTEGRATE those 4 Objects of Life (previously described) through his experiments with nonviolence and truth…..AND HE FOUND THAT STATIC SYSTEMS COULD NOT BE TRUSTED, THEREFORE, one had to be willing TO EVOLVE, CHANGE YOUR MIND, REVERSE COURSE AND BE TRANSPARENT ABOUT THOSE CHANGES……..LIFE IS A JOURNEY, NOT A DESTINATION!

According to Gandhi **THE MAIN DIFFERENCE BETWEEN “MODERN CIVILIZATION” and “TRUE CIVILIZATION” is the lack of credence or focus or**
EVEN the relevance of ETHICS (#3 OF 4 Objects of Life) and SPIRITUALITY (#4 of Objects of Life) found in Modern Western Civilization

Gandhi’s criticism of Doctors and Lawyers is really about “treating the symptoms rather than the causes” and in his mind this creates problems. EXAMPLE: if one has a problem with alcohol, you go to rehab, you dry out, and you get clean and sober. BUT OFTEN you don’t treat, examine or perhaps even think about the REASONS for the addiction AND SO ONE ENDS UP GOING BACK TO SAME BEHAVIOR AFTER ONE LEAVES REHAB. Therefore, the individual is no better off than before they went into rehab DESPITE all the advances in medical and psychological treatment developed by Modern Civilization. THIS IS a good example of the BASIS OF GANDHI’S CRITIQUE. I think it is fair to say that Gandhi would also say that this problem arises in Modern Civilization BECAUSE of its LACK of focus on #3 and #4 of Objects of Life.

The Modern Civilization promises enhanced levels of “bodily welfare” (p. 35-37 Hind Swaraj) YET, no modern country has come up with a way to provide decent universal health care........Canada (Dr. Parel’s country) spends 47% of national budget on health care.....it can not continue in this manner.........in the USA we see health care costs literally spiraling out of control........ it can not continue in this manner. Again, these may be other examples of areas to explore in your investigation of the supposed “benefits” of Modern Civilization and Gandhi’s critique of it.

As for Lawyers, he comes to the conclusion that going to a third party to resolve disputes, ULTIMATELY leads to that 3rd party actually ENHANCING OR EXACERBATING the original dispute........this is PARTICULARLY TRUE IN A SOCIETY or CIVILIZATION that emphasizes or focuses upon Wealth, Power and Sensual Pleasures.....because the acquisition of money and power allows one to do “that which they wish to do”......one of the hallmarks of Modern Civilization.

“Hard cases make bad laws” Gandhi is credited with having said this, what he meant was that if you base a law on one case or one situation or one example, you will end up with a law that is “bad” in that it CANNOT address the diversity of human experience and emotion and circumstance that may develop in another place, with other people OR even in another time (say 50 years later). Martin Luther King Jr. would struggle with this same issue during the Civil Rights campaign of the 1950’s and 1960’s when he made distinctions between “just” and “unjust” laws in America dealing with segregation.

In conclusion then, this thought process, the critique of Modern Civilization as it is compared with Gandhi’s True Civilization, can be seen as CULMINATING in the need for a way to combat it’s ills. In Gandhi’s mind that way to counter the faults of Modern Civilization was NOT through any political. Legal, medical or social system (eg. Communism or Fascism) but rather Satyagraha.

**Satyagraha:** Gandhi’s primary method of social change and uplifting.
Often called “soul force” as it represents the unification of mind and spirit in a positive manner. There are 8 characteristics or components of nonviolence listed as follows: COURAGE—COMPASSION—TRUTH—TRUST—FEARLESSNESS—FORGIVENESS—SERVICE (selflessness)—SELF-RESTRAINT.

If followed by individuals, then the 4 objects of life defined by Gandhi are much more likely to become of people’s daily lives AND THEREFORE BY EXTENSION, a part of his “True Civilization”.

This soul force is NOT the search for universal, finite or a static truth…it is NOT the answer to the “meaning of life” it IS RATHER intended to help and uplift the oppressed and the less fortunate (disadvantaged) people among us BUT it must be FOCUSED on concrete, specific and concise situations and goals (eg: Salt March, registering people to vote, worker’s rights etc.). Gandhi and King both did MULTIPLE Satyagraha in their lives as prophets of nonviolence.

Appendix B
Note format for students
“Story of Stuff”

You may wish to have your students watch and take notes on this informative on-line video. It can be found at: www.storyofstuff.com

What follows below is a ready make note taking activity to help students focus on specific issues raised by the video and/or to clarify parts of the video they may not fully understand.

Notes “The Story of Stuff”
7th Grade Social Studies

DIRECTIONS: As you watch the video take notes on the following topics which the video will cover and discuss. IF you want to watch the video again tonight the URL is: www.storyofstuff.com

For each section you may have questions, thoughts or concerns, PLEASE WRITE DOWN AS MANY OF THESE THINGS AS YOU CAN!

You will be expected to write AT LEAST 2-3 paragraphs on what you thought about the information in the video. I will give you that direction after we watch it…….
SO, take good notes, don’t slack off! 😊!
Extraction (getting materials to make the stuff)
Questions I have:
Thoughts or ideas I have:
Concerns or worries I have:

Production (making the stuff)
Questions I have:
Thoughts or ideas I have:
Concerns or worries I have:

Distribution (getting the stuff to stores)
Questions I have:
Thoughts or ideas I have:
Concerns or worries I have:

Consumption (buying and using the stuff)
Questions I have:
Thoughts or ideas I have:
Concerns or worries I have:

Disposal (getting rid of the stuff, “Garbage”)
Questions I have:
Thoughts or ideas I have:
Concerns or worries I have:

Another Way (we can be more “sustainable” about our stuff)
Questions I have:
Thoughts or ideas I have:
Concerns or worries I have: