Ahimsa Center K-12 Institute Lesson Plan

Title: What Is Civilization and What Is It Not?

Name, School Affiliation, Location:
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Grade Level/Subject Area: 9th or 10th grade, World History

Duration of Lesson: 1 43-minute and 5 58-minute class periods

Relevant California State Standards:
10.4 Students analyze patterns of global change in the era of New Imperialism in at least two of the following regions or countries: Africa, Southeast Asia, China, India, Latin America, and the Philippines.
1. Describe the rise of industrial economies and their link to imperialism and colonialism (e.g., the role played by national security and strategic advantage; moral issues raised by the search for national hegemony, Social Darwinism, and the missionary impulse; material issues such as land, resources, and technology).
3. Explain imperialism from the perspective of the colonizers and the colonized and the varied immediate and long-term responses by the people under colonial rule.
4. Describe the independence struggles of the colonized regions of the world, including the roles of leaders, such as Sun Yat-sen in China, and the roles of ideology and religion.

Lesson Abstract: Mohandas Gandhi has a distinct view of what civilization is and what it is not. In this lesson students explore his critique of modern civilization as well as his suggestion for how to build a "true" civilization. Students will compare this analysis with other definitions of civilization, and develop their own vision.

Guiding Questions:
→ What is Gandhi’s critique of modern civilization?
→ How does Gandhi say society should be organized?
→ What do you think about his concerns and how do they apply to us today?
→ What is the best way to organize society?

Background on the class I teach, and the place in the curriculum that this lesson series will fall in:
The 9th grade World History class that I teach begins with the beginning of human history, looking closely at how we as humans lived for tens of thousands of years- as gatherer-hunters. We study the collaborative, interdependent relationships people had with each other and with the earth, and why. We look at groups that have lived more recently as gatherer-hunters as well, with a case study of the Aboriginal people of Australia and their clash with the British. This is the students' first introduction
into questioning the divide between what is often considered the epitome of civilization and how they treat the Aboriginal people. We then back up again to 6000 to 11,000 years ago and the discovery of domesticating plans- the agricultural revolution. We spend weeks investigating how the agricultural revolution revolutionizes the way humans interact with each other and the land, and how that leads to iPods and Facebook as well as problems such as war, economic inequality, sexism, heterosexism, and the current myriad of food and environmental challenges we face today. After introducing a traditional historian definition of civilization students then do group case studies of “Ancient Civilizations” from around the world, researching their political, economic, religious, social, intellectual, and artistic histories.

One of the paramount reasons we have students do this research is to help them see that all over the world there are “civilizations”, not just the Western Civilizations that most of the Western world focuses on. We do an activity where we have students mark on a world map each time a country or continent is mentioned in the California High School World History Standards. Africa is mentioned approximately 3 times, Latin America 7, the Middle East 3, Asia much more (but mainly in reference to wars with the United States), and Europe the most, with about 17 each in Russia and Great Britain, and the United States also about 17 times. The world history that we teach in freshmen year is actually earlier chronologically than the high school World History Standards ask for by California, and we cover way more of the world’s history, as well as we cover history that is not taught in most parts of the United States (I had not been taught most of it before either college or having to teach it myself). James Loewen examined 18 U.S. History textbooks to find out what was being taught, how, and what was being left out, and, in the result of his research, the book Lies My Teacher Told Me; What Your American History Textbook Got Wrong, points out the danger of the current standards:

Eurocentrism blinds textbook authors to contributions [from outside of] Europe, whether from Arab astronomers, African navigators, or American Indian social structure. By operating within this limited viewpoint, our history textbooks never invite us to think about what happened to reduce the Indian societies whose wealth and cities awed the Spanish, to the impoverished peasantry they are today. They also rob us of the chance to appreciate how important American Indian ideas have been in the formation of the modern world. [This keeps] students from understanding what caused the world to develop as it has-including why Europe (and its extensions: the United States, Canada, etc.) won. (Loewen 64)

Our curriculum aims to counter that. The reading and studying of Gandhi’s views on civilization and the questions it raises will come after the ancient civilizations research, before the final reflection on the semester and analysis of the questions: How should society best be organized? What can we learn from past civilizations? What does it mean to be civilized?
Content Essay:

Cecil Rhodes, British colonialist in Southern Africa, said there must be “Equal rights for all white men south of the Zambesi”, but when asked to verify his statement, “clarified” it (which is what then was written down in history) as "Equal Rights for all Civilized Men South of the Zambesi.”

The word civilization conjures up words like “progress” and “advanced.” It connotes power, technology, solid governments, and intellectual contributions (books, music, art). It invokes Rome and Greece, the two major Western civilizations that modern Western—including United States—civilization looks proudly back to as its roots. Closer examination of the idea and history of civilization reveals important areas that require further investigation. Along with the fact (not explored in this essay) that the United States’ roots are much broader and more complex than just Western civilization, it is important to note how civilization has been used for the last 500 years as an excuse for dominating and taking over those deemed “uncivilized.” The underlying assumption has been that “civilization” implies “being civilized” and is best, right, good, etc. There has thus been a corollary pervasive cultural idea of what is the best way to live and set up society, which has been used as the justification of differing economic statuses and racism. Today, the question of what is civilization and what should it be is not just a question of European countries versus countries filled with colonized people of color. This is a question of and for humanity. Our survival as humans will depend on our ability to shift our vision of what we want civilization to be and how we want to set up our civilization. We need to shift away from the current Western and increasingly globalized mainstream view of civilization, and a critical alternative to consider was written over a century ago, by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.

The Common Western Understanding of Civilization

Historically the idea of civilization has been used to differentiate a better way of being and living from a worse way. Those who came up with these ideas reflected on their way of life and what they saw as their own history, and looked down on those they saw as different and thus uncivilized. Living in a civilization, according to this view, means progress. This perspective sees moving away from being gatherer-hunters into more settled living and all that comes with that, as better, more advanced, more progress. Those who live in a civilization are civilized. The image that perhaps best exemplifies this is that of the “refined” Englishman “delicately” sipping his tea. The idea of civilization from its naissance was essentially equivalent with Christianity, thus to be civilized was to be Christian. Conveniently for Europeans, this syllogism allowed them to justify inequality, domination, slavery, colonization of most of the world, and

1 Cecil Rhodes, (1853 –1902) was an English-born businessman, mining magnate, and politician in South Africa who founded the diamond company De Beers, founded the country of Rhodesia, and funded the prestigious Rhodes Scholarships.

2 From Gordon LeSueur, Cecil Rhodes: the man and his work, 1914.
The need to Christianize and civilize people for *their own sake* is pervasive throughout justifications of colonization and slavery across the world for the last 500 years. Language about civilization, and arguments about the assumed associated definitions of progress and technology continues to be used to justify many policies and attitudes towards countries, continents, and people today. It is therefore imperative to question what civilization is and what it is not. The “traditional historian definition” of civilization that we propose to students is that to be a civilization there has to be organized government, ability to produce and store surplus food, written language, and specialization of labor. We ask students to critically examine if this is a good definition and if not what would be. Gandhi presents an important alternative view to consider.

**Gandhi’s Critique of Modern Western Civilization**

In 1910 Gandhi wrote what is considered his seminal work, *Hind Swaraj.* After growing up in India Gandhi spent 3 years in England studying the law, and then after a brief return to India moved to South Africa to pursue work. By 1910 he had therefore had the opportunity to observe, study, and learn from Indian and British culture both in their respective home countries and abroad, and Black South African culture. Gandhi had read extensively a variety of Western and Eastern authors before writing *Hind Swaraj.* He also had already been imprisoned three times in South Africa, by the British, for working with other Indians to challenge the racist laws they were under. Gandhi continued to modify his views over the rest of his life but his main critique of modern Western civilization did not shift much from what he articulated in *Hind Swaraj.* It is crucial to note that Gandhi emphasizes that the point is not to hate the West, but to hate the unhappiness of modern Western culture. As he writes in *Hind Swaraj,* without critically appraising current Indian civilization in their struggle for freedom, Indians will run the risk of having “English rule without the Englishman. … the tiger’s nature, but not the tiger.” (Gandhi 27)

According to Gandhi, modern Western civilization makes “bodily welfare the object of life. … The people of Europe today live in better built houses than they did a hundred years ago. This is considered an emblem of civilization.” (Gandhi 34) Gandhi notes the attitude of not only Europeans but also non-Europeans who have internalized European values, that if they “adopt European clothing, they are supposed to have become civilized out of savagery.” (Gandhi 34-35) Gandhi continues, in his chapter of *Hind Swaraj* entitled ‘Civilization,’ to remark on other changes from older civilizations to ‘modern’ civilization. He claims that the move away from humans using their hands and feet to make things and go places to the speedier use of machines has worsened the human experience. He posits that now people can kill each other more easily, that diseases can spread more quickly, that people with harmful intentions can more easily spread their ill will, and that people are now “obliged to work, at the risk of their lives, at most dangerous occupations, for the sake of millionaires.” Furthermore, Gandhi is

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3 It would be interesting to research whether other countries that have been colonizers, such as the Japanese, have used language of civilizing, and if not what justifications they have used.

4 The literal translation of Hind Swaraj is freedom for India. The book covers in detail what Gandhi actually means by swaraj for his home country.
concerned by the material wants people have acquired with industrialization, declaring that although previously “men were made slaves under physical compulsion, now they are enslaved by temptation of money and of the luxuries that money can buy.” (Gandhi 35) Gandhi accuses this civilization of not caring for morality nor religion. He asserts that this civilization makes humans turn to alcohol to deal with their problems, not be able to be happy alone, “lack real physical strength or courage”, and furthermore leads to oppression of women. (Gandhi 36) As Dr. Tara Sethia summarizes in her book, Gandhi: Nonviolent Pioneer of Social Change, Gandhi saw modern industrial civilization as the ultimate source of the vexing problems in his world. Driven by competition and greed, modern civilization led to dehumanization of a large mass of humanity through colonization and subjugation, enslavement and exploitation, discrimination and denial of justice, and unending violence and wars. … despite its material progress, [it] was a hindrance to the needs of the human spirit and the attainment of good life. (Sethia 4)

Gandhi was particularly concerned with how what is considered progress—technology and machines—allows for and encourages exploitation of the earth and people and leads to colonization, which is then justified by the lack of “progress” of countries that are not as “advanced.” He felt, according to Sethia, that “modern civilization promoted a worldview in which humans have the power to control nature and use natural resources for satisfying their growing greed. In such a civilization, the advancement of material progress also became the object of politics, supported by a coercive state.” (Sethia 83) Thus control of nature and people through violent means, along with the advancement of the few at the expense of the many, were the inevitable results of the current civilizational trend. In this view, countries are divided into those that have figured out how to control nature more and have more machines (industrialized countries) versus those that are non-industrialized with less control of nature. The industrialized countries, during the period of colonization and in less direct ways today, were considered to be worthy of having their own representative institutions and making their own decisions about their nations. The “uncivilized”, non-industrial world on the other hand was to be conquered, colonized, and controlled through colonial institutions. (Sethia 83)

**Gandhi’s View of True Civilization**

Alternatively, Gandhi suggested, there is what he termed “true” civilization. He posits that civilization is actually a “mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty” which means the “observance of morality” which means to “attain mastery over our mind and passions” which will lead us to “know ourselves.” (Gandhi 65) Gandhi argues that “happiness is largely a mental condition” and—which has become an oft-ignored adage—that money does not bring happiness and in fact often bring unhappiness because it makes people want things and thus be slaves to their desires, and amoral. He suggests that to be happy people try to be as self-sufficient as possible in small, decentralized communities, and own few luxuries to avoid competition. (Gandhi 67) The goal of civilization, he asserts, should be **sarvodaya** (well-being of all), and this
is accomplished through swadeshi (relying on one’s own strength and creations, and valuing oneself thoroughly).

This society, according to Sethia, “nurseries among its members ethical qualities necessary for good life and “good conduct,” and it measures progress by the ethical and spiritual advancement of its people.” (Sethia 4) Gandhi felt that everyone had a “civilizational duty” to “resist… oppression and injustice, violence and poverty.” He thus “brought the concept of duty into the discourse of citizenship.” (Sethia 4) This was a significant shift away from the normative Western scholarship which focuses on individual rights, coming out of the Enlightenment thinkers.\(^5\) “True” civilization is much more collective and collaborative, focusing on sarvodaya, which implicates that there be production by the masses instead of mass production, and individual mastery of mind and passions not control of nature.

**Implications For Our Lives**

Gandhi’s view of civilization raises several questions that challenge the common conceptual understanding of civilization, and can be used to guide us to our own definitions. It further persuades me to critically scrutinize my own life and then present those questions to my students to grapple with as well. For the most part I agree with Gandhi; he raises serious questions about my lifestyle, and our society, all of which I would like to engage with. The first major question is should the goal of society be sarvodaya? The second question is whether swadeshi is the proper route to, and goal for, civilization. The former is clear to me, and the latter seems to follow as a strong suggestion at the very least. Moving towards “true” civilization would cause many changes to my current lifestyle. There are many bodily comforts and privileges that I regularly enjoy due to the globalized civilization I participate and live in. I thus also benefit on a daily basis from the structural violence\(^6\) that is part of our current civilization, and I need to look carefully at how.

Gandhi felt that there were many changes that we all need to make, as individuals, as small communities, as nations, and as the world, in order to have happy, fulfilling, and productive lives. The society he envisioned was in direct opposition to the current modern civilization that is a “disease.” To quote Dr. Sethia’s description of the problems our current civilization causes:

...Driven by the desire of profits and self interest, modern civilization remained unconcerned with developing an ethical code to guide humans toward their duty to fellow humans. Characterized by the rat race, this civilization made people restless and their lives stressful, generating a growing sense of insecurity and unhappiness. A civilization devoid of ethical

\(^{5}\) It is worth noting that even as many of these Enlightenment theorists were writing about individual rights they were simultaneously obstructing the rights of millions of people through their direct benefit or involvement in slavery in Haiti and other colonies and joint-stock corporations such as JS Mill with the East Indian Company.

\(^{6}\) Structural, or institutional, violence is “when social institutions unevenly distribute income, education, medical services, or access to the power to distribute these resources, in a way that arbitrarily and adversely affects the quality of life for numbers of people.” (Orosco 73) This happen without individual actions or purpose.
values inevitably led to exploitation of humans by humans. In such a civilization, poverty became disdainful, and, therefore, poor people came to be despised and disrespected.

Conquered races were considered weak and subhuman, fit to be colonized. The only way to sustain such a civilization was through violence and war. At a global level, the consequences were disastrous as human greed in modern civilization led to imperialism and colonialism, exploitation and enslavement, brutality and dehumanization. (Sethia 83-84)

Becoming a society where humans care about their fellow humans and poverty is considered the enemy of all will require many changes. We will have to take a hard look at what we eat and wear, and the various tools (phones, computers, etc) that we use on a daily basis. This will be challenging because of the way cultural violence works. As Johan Galtung explains, cultural violence (to paraphrase peace theorist Johan Galtung paraphrased by philosopher Jose Antonio Orosco in Cesar Chavez and the Common Sense of Nonviolence) “uses some aspect of a society’s culture to justify or legitimate direct or structural violence.” Cultural violence, according to Galtung, is when “the culture preaches, teachers, admonishes, eggs on, and dulls us into seeing exploitation and/or repression as normal and natural or into not seeing them (particularly not exploitation at all).” (Galtung 113 (quoted in Orosco 74)) Looking at the way I and my students are parties to structural violence will challenge us deeply.

There is no other choice if humans are to continue living. Our world is changing very fast. The human population is exploding and our natural resources are becoming scarcer. We are seeing changes in technology, in our economies, and in our governments. At this moment in time it is of paramount importance for us to make new decisions about how to best live on this planet and with each other. We—me, my students, and the world—need to look at the questions: What could/should society look like? How should it be organized? How do we make it like that? so that we can begin to change the vast problems that have overrun the humans in our world for too many years. Studying Gandhi’s ideas of how to make those changes is a good place for us to start.

**Bibliography:**


**Materials:**

Sections of Hind Swaraj, Gandhi: Pioneer of Nonviolent Social Change, and Cesar
Chavez and the Common Sense of Nonviolence

Teaching Activities:
Day 1: Give background on Gandhi, in the form of a story and/or video from the digital stories on the Ahimsa Center curriculum website. Go over key vocabulary that will be included (content specific vocabulary, and proposition/support and elaborate/describe vocabulary) and note-taking form (writing what it says, what it means in their own words, and why it matters) and big questions they are trying to answer through the reading:
- What is Gandhi’s critique of modern civilization?
- How does Gandhi say society should be organized?
- What do you think about his concerns and how do they apply to us today?

Day 2: Take notes while reading as a class. Reading: Intro by me, then excerpts from Hind Swaraj, Orosco, and Sethia’s book. Pause every 1-2 paragraphs for students to fill out Says-Means-Matter note-taking sheet in pairs

Day 3: Create gigantic Venn in small groups that includes 1. their life, 2. Gandhi’s view of what is civilized, 3. Gandhi’s view of what is not civilization, 4. and 5. Two examples of civilizations we have studied throughout the semester, 6. “Traditional” historian definition of civilization, 7. Their group’s idea of civilization

Day 4: Present Venn posters, taking notes in their own mini version of the big one

Day 5: Write a paragraph summary using description/elaboration language and proposition/support language to answer (one? All?): What is Gandhi’s critique of modern civilization? How does Gandhi say society should be organized? What do you think about his concerns and how do they apply to us today?
Edit each others, write 2nd draft.

Question for myself: Will I have already introduced the summary template and/or how will I be scaffolding the writing of this paragraph?

Day 6: Have students as a group create a poster and then present on how Berkeley would look if it was more “civilized” based on their own definition.