## Title of Lesson
Examining Gandhi’s Critique of Modern Civilization: The Lessons of Modern Japan

### Lesson By
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### Grade Level/ Subject Areas
High School World History

### Class Size
Can be modified to any class size

### Time/Duration of Lesson
1-2 class sessions, depending on length

### Guiding Questions
- How does Gandhi define modern civilization and true civilization?
- What is Gandhi’s criticism of modern civilization?
- Does this criticism hold up in the context of the modernization of emerging societies, like Japan?

### Lesson Abstract
In this lesson, students will gain a deeper understanding of the political philosophy of Mohandas Gandhi through an investigation of his definition and criticism of modern civilization. Students will then test Gandhi’s critique through an exploration of conditions that have developed in Japan since the twentieth century. Students will learn that, within Gandhi’s seemingly archaic criticism, there are insights into the plight of developing nations.

### Lesson Content
Mohandas K. Gandhi was the pre-eminent leader of the Indian nationalist movement in the twentieth century, which culminated in the independence of the nations of India and Pakistan in 1947. But, Gandhi’s crusade was more than a desire for Indian self-government. His contributions can only be fully understood when couched in the new political philosophy that he developed—a political philosophy that called for a change in Indian government, and in the Indian citizens themselves. In fact, of the many roles that Gandhi played, his role as a philosophical critic of the modern civilization represented by the British Raj in India is one of the most important, if also one of the least discussed in modern classrooms. Teaching Gandhi’s critique of modern civilization provides both the intellectual context of Gandhi’s nationalism, and a chance to explore modern civilization as it is, and as it should be.

Gandhi’s criticism of modern civilization is delivered in its fullest form in the pages of his 1909 work, *Hind Swaraj, or Indian Home Rule*, as it was titled in its first English publication. In this book, Gandhi lays out a path for Indian self-government that not only seeks to elevate Indian civilization and culture, but deny the British the sense of cultural superiority and concomitant authority that they had always enjoyed, and that, from Gandhi’s perspective, too many Indian leaders were willing to cede to them. “The British Government in India constitutes a struggle between the Modern Civilisation, which is the Kingdom of Satan, and the Ancient Civilisation, which is the Kingdom of God. The one is the God of War, the other is the God of Love” (Parel, 2009, p. 7).

For Gandhi, then, the key to Indian independence is for his countrymen to not only rid themselves of the British, but also of the manifest changes that Britain had made in Indian society. In his response to the British in the last chapter of *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi lays out exactly what he means by this:
We hold the civilisation that you support to be the reverse of civilisation… We consider your schools and law courts to be useless. We want our own ancient schools and law courts to be restored… The common language of India is not English but Hindi. You should, therefore, learn it… We cannot tolerate the idea of your spending money on railways or the military. We see no occasion for either (Parel, 2009, p. 114).

In this passage, Gandhi disapproves of Western changes that many fellow Indian nationalists, and even his own hand-chosen successor Jawaharlal Nehru, looked upon positively: education, technological improvement, and the preservation of law and order. Gandhi had similar disdain for the most universally lauded of Britain’s “gifts” to Indian civilization, democracy: “That which you consider to be the Mother of Parliaments is like a sterile woman and a prostitute” (Parel, 2009, p. 30). Although he later admitted that his terminology was intemperate and hyperbolic, he continued to believe the essential truth of the statement, which was that British civilization produced members of Parliament that were too selfish and hypocritical to truly represent the people. And this is where Gandhi’s true criticism of modern civilization begins.

It is easy to look at Gandhi’s comments in the above paragraph as the ranting of any other nationalist leader—decrying institutions that were installed by the governing power simply because of that fact, or because the colonial people are given no participatory role in running them. However, Gandhi’s critique was different: he had no hatred at all of the British themselves for “stealing” India’s government (he placed as much, if not more, blame on India for allowing that to happen), but instead criticized the civilization that they represented for providing the conditions for the colonization of India, and for poisoning India with the values prized in any modern, capitalist democracy. “Civilisation,” Gandhi wrote, “is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty. Path of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms” (Parel, 2009, p. 67). For Gandhi, then, modern civilization is not a true civilization at all: by placing the pursuit of wealth and power above ethical and spiritual considerations, modern civilization and its institutions changed human nature for the worse.

It is important to be clear that Gandhi’s criticism is not a rehearsal of the classic Marxist criticism of capitalist societies, with the addition of a spiritual or religious component. Gandhi likewise would have criticized Marx and his communism for putting too much emphasis on material things, albeit in the context of providing material equality for all men. Duty, for Gandhi, was not simply helping your brother or sharing the fruits of one’s labor, although it may include that. It was a religious and spiritual idea that the pursuit of power, property, security, and pleasure could only be correctly pursued within the framework of ethics and religious truth (Parel, 2009, pp. xlix-l). Gandhi did not criticize modern civilization strictly because of its ends (a deeply unequal society whose institutions are co-opted to perpetuate that inequality), but also because of its means (the naked pursuit of wealth and power, without consideration for the transcendent).

It is also important to be clear that, within this framework, Gandhi was not, like Marx and the socialists, a critic of everything Western and modern. Gandhi approved of many of the cultural gifts bestowed by the British: the notions of civil liberty, rights, equality, religious toleration, and improved conditions for women, to name a few, were welcomed by Gandhi. What troubled the great Indian leader, ultimately, was that these gifts came to India and other colonial
civilizations at a great cost, for along with them came a tradition that emphasized selfishness over brotherhood; the pursuit of individual power over that of spiritual empowerment; and, above all and most famously, violence over nonviolence. In regarding these costs as an acceptable price for the improvements introduced by Britain, Indians became complicit in their own domination. This self-criticism, and all that it implies, can be applied to any colonized people.

The Example of Modern Japan

Gandhi’s criticism of modern civilization can thus be fruitfully tested and discussed by looking at the conditions of any modernized society: the United States, Japan, China, Germany, Britain, France, or even India itself. The history of modern Japan provides a good framework for this discussion for two reasons. First, Japan is a society that consciously decided to adopt Western civilization in the early twentieth century, partially to stave off the likelihood of imperialism and colonization, while maintaining the core of Japanese traditions. This can lead to all sorts of useful discussions about the aspects of Japanese traditions that may be considered empirically good by students, whether Japan was successful in keeping its values while adopting new ideas, and whether those new ideas were ultimately good or bad for Japan. Secondly, Japan has really had two movements toward modernity—the first taking place in the early twentieth century and ending disastrously in World War II, and the second from the war to the present, as the country deals (the use of the present tense is intentional) with the implications of American victory and occupation. Gandhi’s theory can thus be discussed and dissected twice in the framework of one country’s shift to modernity. The underlying questions in these discussions must be: is Gandhi right about modern civilization? And, if so, how can modern civilization be changed to correct the deficiencies that Gandhi finds?

Japan’s first wave of modernization had many impacts, both positive and negative, on Japan. During the Meiji Restoration (1868-1912) and after, Japan reacted to the forcible opening of the country after two hundred years of seclusion and isolation by the United States and Commodore Matthew Perry. The obsession of the Japanese during this period was to ensure that contact did not lead to colonization and imperialism, as it had for Japan’s neighbors in China and Southeast Asia. The key to this, for Japan’s leaders, was the rapid adoption of new Western ideas, within the context of ancient Japanese traditions, which would allow Japan to adopt for itself the supposed gifts of modern society. Over the course of the Meiji period, then, Japan: adopted a new constitution introducing limited democracy, eliminated most distinctions of class in the political and social structures, and adopted wholesale the idea of natural laws introduced to European societies during the Enlightenment. While the degree to which Japan adopted these traditions is arguable, few would disagree that these were the new political values of Japanese society.

In the context of adopting these new ideas, Japan sent missions to Western societies, primarily France, Britain, Germany, and the United States, to learn how Western ideologies could strengthen their new society. During these missions, Japanese scholars and government agents learned, and began to adopt, ideas and institutions that had become prominent in the West. These included Social Darwinism (which informed Japan’s takeover of much of their “inferior” Asian neighbors on the road to World War II), a system of land ownership and taxation to fund
Japan’s modernization, a modern education system, religious toleration, and modern factories and militaries. In a few years, from an historical perspective, Japan’s long-standing traditions outlawing individual land ownership; and providing order through a state-sponsored religion (Shinto), a strictly ordered social and political class system, and unquestioned obedience to the emperor vanished. Japan was entering a new era.

These movements toward modernization came with some devastating results. Japanese adoption of Social Darwinist ideas, along with their need for natural resources scarce on the Japanese mainland for modernization, led the country to its wave of Asian colonization in the years prior to World War II. The economic and political connection with Western societies necessitated by Japan’s need for knowledge and resources for modernization left it increasingly dependent on Western governments and economies for success. The modernization of the military, and its success in wars with China and European great power Russia (in the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars, respectively), gave the military authorities increasing power in Japanese society as the Great Depression ravaged the country. Meanwhile, the attempt to maintain Japanese traditions—borrowed from Chinese Confucianism—of cooperation over collaboration in the face of industrialization led to the increasing economic power of a few business-owning families, known as zaibatsu that controlled most of Japan’s economy. This created an ever-widening gap between rich and poor.

This first wave of Japanese modernization was derailed by the Great Depression, which ravaged the resource-strapped economy of Japan, dependent as it was on Western trade; and by World War II, which created a second wave of modernization in Japan. The occupation of Japan by the United States had two long-term impacts on the nation: first, the Japanese military was limited in both size and scope to a self-defense force, to be augmented when necessary by the United States military. Secondly, a new constitution was imposed on Japan that brought true democracy to the country. Japan used both of these developments to begin a program of economic modernization that continues to this day. The monetary savings realized by a smaller military has allowed the government to sponsor industrial development at home and abroad. This has made Japan one of the world’s largest industrial economies, and greatly improved the quality of life of the Japanese people. Japanese life expectancy figures and Gross National Product are now the envy of the world. Much like Westerners, Japanese citizens now consider themselves to be disproportionately middle class, and reflect that understanding with increased consumer consumption of automobiles, televisions, and household appliances (Hane, 2001, p. 428). These economic improvements have come along with expanded political rights, especially in the fields of freedom of speech and of the press, and improving rights for women.

Despite these successes, however, problems have emerged in modern Japan. The old Confucian ideals, which stressed a person’s duty to those outside of oneself, have seemingly deteriorated. While signs of individual economic success abound, Japan has failed to provide many of the social goods of modern civilization: the country lags behind other industrial powers in the provision of housing, roads, sewage and sanitation. Poverty is on the rise, especially in overcrowded urban areas. Pollution, too, has increased, despite Japanese traditions of Buddhism recognizing the sanctity of life and of the environment.

Modern analysts also point to traditional Japanese modes of thinking that are being discarded.
Respect for elders and for authority, long a bulwark of Japan’s social and political order, is on the decline. Younger Japanese citizens are placing their own needs above the needs of the community—selflessness is another value of Japan’s Confucian traditions. In Japan’s new age of religious toleration, adherence to religion is also falling among the younger generations, as it is in the Western societies of Europe. As much as Japan has become a modern, industrial society, it is arguable that it has also become a society that is increasingly secular, selfish, obsessed with signs of wealth and prestige, and, finally, divided by class, nationality, and generation.

In short, despite its successes, Japan appears to be falling into many of the traps that Gandhi warned of in his criticism of modern civilization. In its first wave of modernization, the pursuit of power and wealth through violence became the norm; in the second, the success of the individual superseded the concerns of the community. From Gandhi’s perspective, then, the Japanese, like his Indian brethren, misunderstood the true meaning of self-rule. While taking on Western political, social, and economic values during the Meiji Restoration, the Japanese may have saved themselves from Western political conquest, but they also lost the fundamentals of their own culture.

While Japanese culture prior to Western contact was not the same as the true civilization that Gandhi championed, its values did match many of the ideals of that civilization. Confucianism taught Japanese citizens to place their own needs and desires under their duties to their families, their elders, and, ultimately, to society. Shinto, the institutionalized religion of Japan, stressed the connectivity of all living things, and thus the unification of all Japanese, regardless of social class or other distinctions. Isolated Japanese society was also reasonably self-sufficient, as the island carried on little trade with the outside world. Of course, Gandhi would not have approved of the strong centralized government that enforced this sense of Japanese unity. Nor would he have approved of the near-feudal social class structure evident in Tokugawa Japan, or the honored place of military power in that society.

Like the Indians who, according to Gandhi, accepted the superiority of the British upon the arrival of the British East India Company, and thus tried to imitate them, the Japanese unwittingly began the process of taking on the worst ideals of the West by voluntarily conceding the primacy of brute force in refusing to stand up to the United States and its belching steamships. Japan became a society of voracious consumption—of land, money, power, and consumer goods. Just as this imitation changed the character of the Indian people, the people of Japan began to reflect their new social values. They became more individualistic, more competitive, greedier, and, in a vicious cycle, those values reinforced the values practiced by the country.

In light of these changes, it is important to ask whether Japan, or any modern civilization, is truly headed in the right direction, and whether, rather than have our society inform our values, it is possible to have our values inform our society.

State Content Standards:
Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework standards:

WHII.12 Identify major developments in Indian history in the 19th and early 20th centuries.
C. the rise of Indian nationalism and the influence and ideas of Gandhi.

**WHII.35** Describe the global surge in economic productivity during the Cold War and describe its consequences.
- A. The rise in living standards
- B. The economic recovery and development of Germany and Japan

**WHII.36** Explain the various factors that contributed to post-World War II economic and population growth.
- A. The long post-war peace between democratic nations
- B. The policies of international economic organizations
- C. Scientific, technological, and medical advances

**Materials Needed:**
- An updated world history textbook, or an article from another source, concerning modern Japanese society
- White board, chalkboard, smart board, overhead projector, or some other method of sharing student contributions for a full class discussion

**Suggested Teaching Activities:**
- Conduct an opening discussion with the students about the meaning of the word, “civilization.” What is civilization? What does it mean to be civilized? During the course of the conversation, introduce some of Gandhi’s concepts of civilization—do ethics/morality/spirituality have any role in civilization?
- Read a brief textbook entry or article about modern Japan. Construct a list, as a class or in small groups, of pros and cons about modern Japanese society. Compare the list to Gandhi’s criticism of modern civilization. Discuss with students whether Gandhi’s criticism applies to Japan. If so, should Japanese society change, and how?
- From the list of pros and cons above, have the students write a short passage about the values of Japanese society indicated by the characteristics of their society. Discuss with students whether these values are the same values as those that existed in Japan prior to modernization, and whether those values are the ones that modern societies should prize.
- Have students write a letter to the editor of their local newspaper adopting Gandhi’s view of modernization. Students should choose a current technology that has become ubiquitous in modern society, like cell phones, video games, iPods, Facebook and other forms of social networking, or even television, and reveal their thoughts about what Gandhi would say about these innovations. Have they truly improved modern civilization, or do they simply represent the civilization that Gandhi criticized?

**Bibliography:**

**Other information on Japan** may be found in the country’s Wikipedia entry or in any history textbook.