Title of Lesson: Is modern civilization civilized?

Lesson By: Laurie Hughes

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<tr>
<th>Grade Level/ Subject Areas:</th>
<th>Class Size:</th>
<th>Time/Duration of Lesson:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School/Humanities</td>
<td>25-35 Students</td>
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Guiding Questions:
- What is the definition of civilization?
- What is the difference between civilization and modern civilization?
- What was Gandhi’s definition of modern civilization?
- Why was Gandhi critical of modern civilization?
- What do we need to do to achieve Gandhi’s view of civilization?

Lesson Abstract:
The purpose of the lesson is to engage students in a thoughtful conversation about the definition of civilization and how civilization has changed in the modern world. In looking at the students’ perceived definition, it will produce multiple viewpoints about what is valued in modern civilization. To further deepen their thinking, the students will learn about Gandhi’s critique of modern civilization, and how his philosophy may help contemporary society to improve. This lesson can be used as an introductory piece for many units from a service learning project to the study of civil disobedience.

Lesson Content:
Civilization according to the Oxford Dictionary and American Heritage Dictionary is a group of people who are connected through various cultural aspects such as education, law, or the arts. Additionally, civilization is often characterized by the existence of polite and courteous relationships. Civilization has existed throughout humankind, evolving as humans invented new technologies, governments, and relationships. This lesson asks students to consider how these additions have changed the quality of human life in modern times. The basis for the discussion revolves around Mohandas Gandhi’s criticism of modern civilization because of its focus on materialism as opposed to an ethical life.

Gandhi is famous for his dedication to nonviolence and its use in the creation of an independent India. He stressed that it was essential for the Indians to obtain self reliance through nonviolence, so they would be able to create a strong, moral and sovereign country. Gandhi thought that Indians, or any other group of people, would never achieve true self reliance within modern civilization. His concern was that modern civilization was focused on “bodily welfare [as] the object of life” (Parel, 1997, pg. 34). A society that viewed success only through a materialistic lens would never be able to sustain a healthy, vibrant and independent populace, since equality or ethical treatment of the citizenry was not its primary concern. Gandhi proposed that civilization should be based on a harmonious interweaving of wealth, power, pleasure, ethics and spiritual transcendence.

In his book, *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi clearly outlined his concerns that his fellow Indians highly
valued the British lifestyle and system of government. Indian independence would not be achieved if they only changed the rulers. An independent India that kept the tenets of British culture, or modern civilization, would only be switching the ethnicity of the leaders and not ending years of poverty and injustice. Gandhi repeatedly expressed that India’s problems did not lie in the lap of the British people, but in the misguided goals of modern civilization. He stated in his discourse the necessity for Indians to remove the shackles of modern British culture. While he did not despise all aspects of British civilization, he was deeply concerned that many leaders of the independence movement in India considered the British form of government as the appropriate model for an independent India. He stated that “Parliament has not yet of its own accord done a single good thing…and without pressure, it can do nothing” (Parel,1997, pg.30). While Gandhi valued the voice of the people and the ability for citizens to vote, he was deeply concerned that taking the British model of Parliament would only send India down the ineffectual and dangerous path of modernity. His views were based on his travels throughout his country, where he saw extreme poverty and the British government’s indifference to the injustices of their system. Gandhi envisioned a country where the benefits of democracy existed within a culture that embraced a more holistic system that incorporated not only the material needs of its citizenry, but also its spiritual well-being.

Gandhi argued for a society that valued both the body and the soul of each human being. He proposed that there were four objects of a good life: 1) wealth and power, 2) pleasure that encompassed sensual, sexual and aesthetic, 3) ethics and 4) spiritual transcendence. If all four of these qualities were interwoven into a community, people would achieve healthy self-reliance. From this perspective, he wrote, “Civilisation is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty…The Gujarati equivalent for civilisation means ‘sense of duty’”(Parel,1997, pg.67). Gandhi spent his life showing others the value of sacrifice and service. It was through these experiences that he found his truth. If modern civilization did not cherish these ideals, it would prevent people from achieving a harmonious and just society. This was a theme of his criticism of modern civilization, how could one create a sustainable and rejuvenating society within the narrow parameter of a materialistic view of the world? If one looks at the definition of civilization, it does not center around profit or material success, but of a cultural refinement of its people. Gandhi believed that Indians would be elevated by a life whose goal was to serve others, to raise everyone’s standard of education, justice and community.

Gandhi’s criticism of modern civilization included technological advances. He described how man was now able to quickly travel from one part of the country to another, or to manufacture cloth or clothing in vast amounts in a short period. Instead of viewing these technological advances as positives, he questioned how they were going to improve the quality of life for humans. Increased productivity was not based on improving the quality of life for all people, but on the neverending pursuits of profit. He stated that “Formerly, men were made slaves under physical compulsion, now they are enslaved by temptation of money and of the luxuries that money can buy (Parel, 1997, pg.36). Gandhi was opposed to the capitalistic system that only saw labor as a commodity. Since modern civilization is based on “bodily welfare” with little or no concern for ethics or spirituality, the mechanized world could never sustain an independent country or government that would foster economic, intellectual and spiritual growth. When technology was used justly, for example, without separate train compartments for different socio-economic classes, then it could be incorporated into a new India.
Gandhi devoted his life to putting his ideals into practice, so he established ashrams to bring his view of a sustainable civilization to fruition. Within the ashram, people worked together, sharing the necessary tasks of cleaning, cooking, and caring for one another. He also instructed everyone to participate in weaving with the use of handlooms. This activity was directly connected to his distaste of modern factories. Instead of relying on the products of a system that denied the humanity of its workers, Indians could weave their own cloth in their own communities. They would determine the quality of their work life, not absentee owners who were devoted to only profit. In these communities, not only were people devoted to manual labor that enriched the lives of the community, but there was also time for spiritual work. Gandhi advocated for Indians to recognize the value of their ancient civilization, where people in the villages provided for the sustenance of their community, respected the humanity of the individual, and incorporated an ethical and spiritual practice into the daily rhythms of their lives. While he recognized the merits of the older Indian civilization, he was also critical of the caste system that created a group of people who were considered “untouchables.” His purpose was to engage people in a serious critique of all civilization, so that they would be able to move forward in creating a country which valued all citizens.

In bringing a discussion of civilization to today’s classroom, it is valuable to look at Gandhi’s perspective of modern civilization. His lens brings an opportunity to question our civilization and for students to ponder what are the major values in today’s world. Gandhi’s critique of a materialistic civilization enables students to not only determine whether they agree or not with Gandhi, but to also consider what changes should be made to create a healthier civilization. Does modernity have to equal materialism? After reading the article by Akash Kapur just published in the New York Times on August 9th, 2009, students will see the relevance of this lesson. Kapur critiques the recent Indian economic development. He states that “a country that had been guided by the motto of self-reliance… ‘be Indian-buy Indian’- [had now] joined the world” (Kapur). He questions whether the economic improvements were really improving the quality of life in India. He writes about the increase of violence, young people leaving their villages, and a rejection of traditional culture. This article directly connects to Gandhi’s concern for his country. What happens when people embrace modern civilization and devalue the ethical and spiritual life of the community? This discussion of civilization provides an opportunity for discourse that can ground the students’ views of why social change might be necessary and what should we as a modern civilization be striving for?

**California State Content Standards**

**English Grades 11 and 12:**
1.0 Word Analysis, Fluency, and Systematic Vocabulary Development

**Social Studies Grade 11:**
11.11 Students analyze the major social problems and domestic policy issues in contemporary American society.

**Materials Needed:**
- Computer and internet capability
- Paper and writing implement
- (digital story)
Suggested Teaching Activities:

1) Begin the lesson with reviewing the Oxford Dictionary’s definition of civilize.
   
a. F. civil ad. L. civis of or pertaining to citizens (f. civis citizen), their private rights, etc., hence relating to the body of citizens or commonwealth, political, public; also, pertaining to the citizen as distinct from the soldier; and citizen-like, polite, courteous, urbane.

   Explain that this is the root of civilization. Then ask the students to define modern.

2) Next ask students to define modern and what they believe is the difference between civilization and modern civilization.

3) Show the digital story that asks “What is modern civilization?” Ask students to keep track of five important qualities of modern civilization. Share students’ notes and discuss what they think makes up civilization.

4) Provide the information on Gandhi’s view of modern civilization. If your students do not already know about Gandhi, provide a brief overview of his goals as a leader of nonviolence in India.

5) Ask students to explain the difference between their view of modern civilization and Gandhi’s view. One option is to create a list of characteristics of Gandhi’s goals for modern civilization and the students’ goals.

6) Students should read Akash Kapur’s article. Discuss how his article connects to Gandhi’s concerns about modern civilization.

7) Students could finish with a critique on Gandhi’s view of civilization or a list of things they could do to improve the quality of civilization in their own community.

Bibliography:
