

# The Genesis and Evolution of The Modern Concept of Civilisation in The Eighteenth And Nineteenth Century Europe

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the historical emergence and transformation of the modern concept of civilisation in the eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe. It demonstrates how the concept gradually emerged out of the early-modern notion of civility in the second half of the eighteenth century. This emergence, it argues, needs to be understood in the context of the Enlightenment belief in progress. Some eighteenth century writers who promoted or believed in the progressive history of humanity saw ‘civilisation’ as a useful concept. Unlike ‘civility’ that merely refers to a static condition and lacks processual connotation, ‘civilisation’ articulates the dynamic process of human history. It enabled writers to show in a more effective way the gradual transformation of human society from barbarism to a more developed stage.

**Keywords:** The Concept of Civilisation, Enlightenment, Civility, Historical Progress, Civilisation.

*Mathematical concepts can be separated from the group which uses them. Triangles may be explicable without reference to historical situations. Concepts such as ‘civilisation’ and ‘Kultur’ are not - Norbert Elias, The Civilising Process.*

The word “civilisation” is a word known to many, regardless of whether or not they have the ability to provide the formal or dictionary definition. Rather, they are sufficiently familiar with the term; to know how to make

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sense of it or use it in the context of our average everyday conversation, writing, or action. For instance, labels of library bookshelves that read ‘World Civilisations’, ‘Western Civilisation’, and ‘Islamic ‘Civilisation’ seem sensible enough for us. And we have a feeling that a book entitled ‘Western Civilisation’ is misplaced when we find it on the bookshelf labelled ‘Western Cuisine’. We also have a sense of what people do when they use the term ‘civilisation’ and its derivatives in its context. For example, we know what someone does mean when he or she calls us uncivilised people. This means that even if we are not sure whether the saying is a factual statement, one cannot fail to see that it is an act to degrade. ‘Civilisation’ is also a category by which identity is defined, as it is common nowadays to look at ourselves as belonging to one of the world’s civilisations. Following this, there are individuals who promote the idea of inter-civilisational rivalry, and there are those who challenge that stance by encouraging civilisational dialogue. There is nothing strange about these encounters and experience. They are all too natural, and too familiar. ‘Civilisation’ is just always there in the background while we are navigating our day-to-day life.

As we are so immersed in identifying objects, behaviours, and people around us in terms of their civilisational affiliation, we do not really pay attention that the very category that serves as the basis of this identification and classification, namely, is the concept ‘civilisation’ itself. We hardly ask why we see ourselves, and our similarities and differences in terms of civilisation. The reason why we hardly raise this question is, perhaps, because our familiarity with it makes us difficult to disengage the concept and see it in its own terms. Civilisation is a conceptual lens through which the world and individuals are seen. It is the lens that ensures that the surroundings can be perceived and experienced as civilisational. However, what is often forgotten is how this lens or concept is of a relatively recent origin. The familiarity with civilisation and things civilisational is not actually natural but rather historical, the result of a process that started about three hundred years ago. This paper intends to contribute to this discussion by offering a historical perspective to the concept of civilisation. It rests on the assumption that, to know what ‘civilisation’ is, one cannot simply reflect on the meaning in the abstract; rather, one really needs to understand what the concept has become since the time of its emergence. In the

words of Droysen (1988), “we can completely understand something after we understand how this thing has come to be what it is” (p. 125).

### **‘Civilisation’ before ‘Civilisation’**

The word “civilisation” has been around for around last three centuries only. In one of the most authoritative English dictionaries in the eighteenth-century, prepared by Samuel Johnson and printed in 1755 C.E., the word ‘civilisation’ carried a completely different meaning from what it is now. Johnson (1755) defines it as a law, act of justice or judgment, which renders a criminal process civil. This, however, is not unique to English language. Across the channel, and in fact, slightly earlier, a French dictionary had also defined ‘civilisation’ in the same way as a: “Term of Jurisprudence. An act of justice or judgment that renders a criminal trial civil” (Bowden, 2009, p. 26). This could be referred to the juridical meaning of ‘civilisation’. This usage of the word, however, is unpopular, short-lived, and declined by the end of the eighteenth century (Bowden, 2009). Nevertheless, the presence of this usage suggests that if the origin of the concept of civilisation were to be traced back, it is vital to know who was the first in Europe to use the term ‘civilisation’ in a non-juridical or legal sense. Generally, scholars who study the history of the concept agree that the new non-juridical meaning of the word ‘civilisation’ appeared for the first time in 1756 in a book entitled, *L’Ami des Hommes*, which was written by a French aristocrat, Marquis de Mirabeau.

One of Mirabeau’s passages that contains the word ‘civilisation’ points to an interesting fact that the non-juridical meaning of civilisation had been used by his contemporaries at least in conversation that:

If I was to ask most people what civilisation consists ... they would reply ‘the civilisation of a people is a softening of its manners, an urbanity, politeness and a spreading of knowledge so that the observation of decencies takes the place of laws of detail’ (Sonenscher, 2016, p. 289).

Based on the quote above, the usage of the term ‘civilisation’ could be closer to its present day’s usage, although it is unclear whether or not the new meaning of the word was also used in England. However,

there is a possibility that Johnson was aware of this different sense of the term but purposely refused to include it in his dictionary. This is inferred from an account given by James Boswell about his conversation with Johnson on 23 March 1772. Interestingly, this conversation took place while Johnson was preparing the fourth edition of his dictionary. Boswell recommended the inclusion of the new sense of the term, but Johnson adamantly rejected it as he found it redundant. To Johnson, the word and the meaning of ‘civility’ was already established and widely used. Boswell, however, disagreed on this very point since he “thought civilisation from to civilise, better in the sense opposed to barbarity than civility” (Boswell, 1847, p. 186). This disagreement between Boswell and Johnson might reflect the divided opinions of their British contemporaries over the issue. Johnson’s view reflects how in that period, the idea of civility was still overshadowing the new concept of civilisation. If these were the cases, then what might have slowed down the reception of the new meaning of civilisation is the cultural dominance of civility.

### **‘Civility’ before ‘Civilisation’**

Students of the eighteenth century knew that ‘civility’ was one of the key concepts in not just British but also European culture at large. Alongside terms such as ‘politeness’, ‘gentility’, and ‘manners’, the word ‘civility’ helped contemporaries in making sense of their standing in relation to the immediate social, cultural, and political environments. In Johnson’s dictionary, ‘civility’ carried several meanings; some of which are close to the modern sense of being civilised. One is “freedom from barbarity; the state of being civilised” and the other one is “Politeness; complaisance; elegance of behaviour” (Johnson, 1755). As a word, ‘civility’ has been used since the Middle Ages. However, it started to become a culturally dominant concept only in the sixteenth century after the publication of Desiderius Erasmus’s *De Civilitate Morum Puerilium* in 1530 (Gillingham, 2002, pp. 281-282). This book taught children how to behave in a civilised manner in different socio-cultural settings. For instance, there were advices on how to blow one’s nose and spit in public. The warm reception of the book throughout Europe is evident by the fact that within Erasmus’s lifetime alone, it was reprinted for more than thirty times and translated into many European languages.

The first English translation appeared in 1532, just two years after the original publication (Elias, 1994, p. 47).

The early modern concept of civility as articulated by Erasmus was the successor of the medieval idea of courtesy. In the Middle Ages, courtesy literatures were produced to teach elite members of society correct behaviours and manners. What differentiated the discourse of courtesy and that of civility is the setting of social action. In courtesy literature, the setting was the manorial household, while the setting of civility was the civil institution. This shift reflects changes that took place in the early modern period which witnessed the increasing participation of aristocrats in civil institutions. For instance, in the Middle Ages, sons of noblemen were educated at their respective households, but starting from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many of them were sent to schools and universities (Gillingham, 2002, p. 286). Therefore, the difference between medieval courtesy and early modern civility is conceivable in terms of the different social spaces that they operated in. There are three things that are known about the cultural hegemony of civility which are relevant to the subsequent discussion on the emergence of the concept of civilisation. First, the socially discriminatory function of civility; second, its emphasis on external decorum and outward appearance; and third, the fact that it was mostly defined and epitomised by the French courtly culture.

Civility was an exclusionary discourse since it privileged those who had it over those who did not. In other words, it was one of the ingredients of the early modern outlook that enabled contemporaries to make sense of their social relations in terms of status distinction. Therefore, it is easy to comprehend how civility served as a marker of status. If one were to read literature on manners, civility, or politeness that were produced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it is evident that their intended audience were members of the aristocratic and gentlemanly classes. They were not meant for peasants, mechanics, tradesmen, or any other species of commoners. In fact, there was a prevalent assumption that people of the lower orders were barbaric and brutish by nature, and thus could never be candidates for civility. This assumption is obvious in the literature of the period. Readers were sometimes discouraged to behave in certain ways simply because those were the ways of peasants and servants. For instance, when a book of manners discouraged the undesirable act of grumbling on what had

been served, it alludes to such a behaviour as “fitting only for an ill-bred mechanic” (*The Man of Manners: Or, Plebeian Polish’d*, 1737, pp. 5-7). Though difficult, it was not impossible for people of humble backgrounds to attain the gentlemanly status. But once they attained that, they began to look down upon those beneath them. In other words, social mobility in this context simply reproduced and reinforced status distinction.

In a civil or social setting, a gentleman must be as pleasant and agreeable as possible to others. The emphasis, however, was not so much on the genuineness and authenticity of behaviours, but rather on their outward appearance and performance. Socially, this was considered essential if one were to earn respect from one’s inferiors and win the favour of one’s superiors. In the discourse and practice of civility, social life and expectations precede inner authenticity. It therefore involves, among other things, the practice of repressing one’s inner feeling and the exercise of civil dissimulation. Gentlemen, therefore, in this respect, were believed to be naturally different from the members of the lower orders who were emotional and excessive in their behaviours. The ability to control one’s feeling is reflected not only in behaviours but also in speech. According to Peltonen (2003), “Good manners and grace, beauty and attire were important, but speech and words were perhaps the most crucial factor in shaping a gentleman’s courteous image” (p. 55). Many books were written on this subject and one of the most influential books is *The Civil Conversation* (printed 1574) by Stefano Guazzo. The type of education given to gentlemen was known as liberal education. Unlike modern education, its emphasis is not so much on academic achievement but, rather, on the formation of a gentlemanly personality. As Rothblatt (1976) maintains, “The proof of liberal education lay in behaviour, expressed as style, taste, fashion, or manners” (p. 26). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the standard for civility in Europe was defined by the Italians and the French. Between the two, however, the influence of the latter was much more apparent. Many members of the European upper classes believed that to appear civilised, one must adopt the ways of the French.

The main source of the French model of civility is none other than the courtly culture of the grand and absolute French monarchy. European monarchs and nobles, therefore, modelled their behaviours and courtly practices after the French royal and aristocratic habits. It

had been the practice of those who belonged to the gentlemanly class in England, for instance, to send their sons to France to polish them. Among the aims were for them to acquire not just the French manners, but also the language. In the context of British aristocracy, the French language was deemed important since it was seen as “a prerequisite for entry into high society and high office” (Colley, 2003, p. 165). Many English gentlemen visited the French city, Blois, where the language was believed to be spoken in its purest form (Cohen, 1992). Apart from the language, they studied other things, such as horse riding, fencing, and dancing (Eagles, 2000). For those at home, they read French literature on politeness and civility, many of which had been translated into English. One of the books, for instance, was translated into English as *The Rules of Civility; or the Maxims of Genteel Behaviour*, printed in 1703. “Civility”, as the book maintains, “is a science that teaches to dispose our words and actions in their proper and just places” (*The Rules of Civility; or the Maxims of Genteel Behaviour*, 1703, p. 3).

Francophilia was even more evident among the German ruling elites than their British counterparts. One of the most notable among them is Frederick II of Prussia. Also known as Frederick the Great, the Prussian king spoke French elegantly and was in close contact with one of the leading French philosophers, Voltaire. He believed that the French had set the standard for arts and literature and any literary or artistic piece that failed to meet that standard was deemed inferior. It is, therefore, unsurprising that in some of his remarks, Frederick II looked down upon the German language and literature as he thought they were not as developed as their French counterparts (Elias, 1994, p. 12). In Prussia, German aristocrats only spoke German when they were conversing with their servants or other members of the lower orders (Brunt, 1983). This attitude among German elites was severely challenged by the middle-class intelligentsia who refused to acknowledge the French standard. This challenge contributed to the antithetical relation between civilisation and culture in German thought.

It seems that civility discriminated people, emphasised on externality of behaviours and a predominantly French enterprise. But how was this related to the emergence of the modern concept of civilisation? Indeed, Mirabeau’s usage of ‘civilisation’ with its emphasis on manners and politeness indicates its close affinity with the concept of civility. Perhaps, Johnson was, to some extent, right for not being able to tell the

difference between the two. Yet, in hindsight, it is clear that civilisation is not civility. Johnson's historical horizon has, to some extent, limited his ability to see the unique potential of the new concept of civilisation. Therefore, if one were to historically explain the genesis of the modern concept of civilisation, one must elucidate how it emerged out of the early modern concept of civility. This requires an examination of continuous elements as well as changes between the two concepts. In other words, to understand the emergence is to empathise with both Johnson and Boswell.

As Koselleck (2002) explains, a new concept "can never be too new not to have existed virtually as a seed in the pre-given language and not to have received meaning from its inherited linguistic context" (pp. 30-31). The concept of civilisation, therefore, certainly inherited some of the assumptions inherent in the idea of civility. One of the most essential assumptions is in terms of its discriminatory function.

As Elias (1994) maintains, both civility and civilisation had "practically the same function," namely as concepts that express the self-image of the European upper class in relation to others, whom its members considered simpler or more primitive and at the same time to characterise specific kinds of behaviour through which this upper class felt itself different from all simpler and more primitive people (p. 34).

Like the language of civility, the discourse of civilisation also features the normative distinction between the civilised and the uncivilised or barbarian. Therefore, when Sheridan (1789) expressed his admiration for the regulated speech of the French and Italians and compared that to the inferior way of the English, he saw the former as the reflection of "their progress in civilisation and politeness," while the latter suggests that "we still remain in the state of all barbarous countries." This usage suggests that to some extent in the second half of the eighteenth century, the words 'civility' and 'civilisation' could still be used interchangeably. One can also see in Sheridan's usage how, just like civility, civilisation was also associated with things that are French.

However, why did eighteenth-century Europeans still need the concept of civilisation? People invent a new concept for various reasons. According to Koselleck (2002), a "new concept may be coined to articulate experiences or expectations that never existed before" (p. 31). In other words, the need for a new concept arises if existing concepts



can no longer help in describing, explaining, and making sense of the surrounding world.

### **‘Civilisation’ in the Age of Progress and Imperialism**

What is so novel about the eighteenth-century European experience that made contemporaries feel the insufficiency of ‘civility’ and the need for ‘civilisation’? The eighteenth-century is also known as the Age of Reason and the Age of Enlightenment. The eighteenth-century European thinkers, such as Voltaire, Diderot, and Kant, were the direct heirs of the seventeenth-century scientific revolution. Many of them were inspired by the earlier achievements of Isaac Newton, Galileo Galilei, and other natural philosophers. However, unlike their predecessors who studied nature, they directed their attention to man and society. Their views to a certain extent reflected the self-image of the age and society in which they lived in. Many of these thinkers believed that the society in which they lived in was radically different from those of the preceding centuries. In knowledge, they witnessed the growing force of reason over tradition and revelation, and in economy, they saw the increasing influence of commerce in various aspects of human life.

Therefore, from their standpoint, the history of humanity is a history of progress. As a key concept in the period, progress helped contemporaries to think about the course of human history in terms of linear development. Its influence in the period marks a gradual break from the older cyclical view of history which understands human history in terms of repetition of earlier historical patterns. The idea of progress enabled philosophers and historians in the period to not only radicalise the difference between historical periods but also attribute greater normative significance to the latest. This is because, according to this scheme, the latest period represents the most developed state or condition of human society, which has no precedent in any of the preceding epochs. In that period, those who subscribed to this view of mankind preferred to call themselves ‘moderns’ and those who did not were known as ‘ancients’. The literary battles between the ancients and the moderns pervaded the eighteenth-century French and English intellectual landscapes (Spafadora, 1990, pp. 27-28). The moderns strongly believed that ancient wisdom and standards were no longer relevant to their age, and they could rely on superior knowledge and techniques that they themselves have produced.

In the time when the idea of progressive history of humanity was prevalent in Europe, contemporaries needed new concepts that could articulate its dynamic process. Some of them found that potentiality in the word ‘civilisation’. In this context, ‘civility’ was unhelpful since it was a static term that merely signified a state of affairs or condition, and thus cannot effectively describe a process (Pons, 2014). ‘Civilisation’ can be used to refer to both, a process and a state of affairs. Even as a reference to a condition or state of affairs, ‘civilisation’ strongly implies that it is the result of a process. In other words, compared to ‘civility’, ‘civilisation’ is a better concept to articulate and celebrate human achievements that were seen as the end products of a long historical becoming. One of the eighteenth-century philosophical traditions that utilised the new concept of civilisation in expressing the progressive history of mankind is the Scottish school of conjectural or philosophical history (Mazlish, 2004). Among the notable thinkers that are associated with this tradition are Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith, and John Millar. They promoted the four stages theory of human history in which the level of development of each stage is understood in terms of the simplicity or complexity of its mode of property relations.

Hence, according to this theory, history began with the hunting-gathering society, followed by the pastoral society, agricultural society, and commercial society. The last type of society which is a contemporary one represents the highest stage of human progress. Through their writings, it is observed that the Scottish writers benefitted significantly from the processual connotation carried by the term ‘civilisation’. Adam Ferguson, for instance, in his entitled *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), talks about ‘civilisation’ as a process of transition from rudeness to a polished state that: “Not only the individual advances from infancy to manhood but the species itself from rudeness to civilisation” (as cited in Elias, p. 43).

The rise of ‘civilisation’ as a key concept in European thought coincided with the growth of the modern idea of nationalism. Thus, the potentiality of the concept is observed once again. Unlike ‘civility’, whose usage was merely to denote the quality of certain social classes, ‘civilisation’ could be easily applied to a broader category of human collectivity, such as a nation. After the French Revolution in the late eighteenth century, the concept of civilisation played a vital role in the formation of national self-image. A nation could see itself as the bearer of

civilisation, and it was because of this, had the right and responsibility to spread it to the uncivilised parts of the world. Hence, during the conquest of Egypt, Napoleon reminded his troops, “Soldiers you are undertaking a conquest with incalculable consequences for civilisation” (Elias, p. 43). The concept of civilisation enabled Europeans to project outward their sense of cultural superiority. If European social elites, through the discourse and practice of civility, condescended their inferiors within their own society, European nations now, through the idea of civilisation, could assume the same patronising attitude towards other societies. It is interesting to see how European political elites saw similarities between the brutishness of their social inferiors and the barbarism of the foreign people that they colonised. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, some social commentators believed that the upper classes had successfully civilised the barbarians at home. However, in the colonies, it was widely assumed that the civilising process was still ongoing. In a parliamentary debate that took place on 24 May 1832, English politicians who supported slavery defended their coercive measures in the colonies by reminding their political opponents that the progress from savagery to civilisation is a long and gradual process. Anti-slavery activists were told to recall “the period when there existed in England a class of person corresponding to the slaves of our colonies” and see “the gradual means by which they were emancipated from their condition, and the progress from barbarism to civilisation throughout Europe.” It was asserted that until the indigenous populations of the colonies acquire the habits and manners of civilised people, Europeans should have the right to enslave and rule them (*Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, 1833, pp. 84-86).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the growing popularity of the word ‘civilisation’ coincided with the second wave of European imperialism. The concept of civilisation was useful to colonial powers as it helped them to legitimise their imperial ambitions. In the 1870s, for instance, French journals coined the well-known phrase *mission civilisatrice* (civilising mission) to characterise French imperialism. This was consistent with their claim that the aim of their imperial project was “to bring civilisation into empty voids” (Schaebler, 2004, p. 8). While speaking in a conference of the need to colonise Congo in Africa, King Leopold II of Belgium told other European delegates that such a move is vital in order to “open to civilisation the only part of our globe where it has not yet penetrated” (Pella, 2015, p. 127).

From the time it was coined, around the middle of the eighteenth century, until the second decade of the nineteenth century, the word 'civilisation' was only used in the singular form. This usage implies the assumption that there is one civilisation, which is of humanity in general; also, there is a singular historical path towards achieving civilisation. Therefore, with this early usage of the term, unlike that of the present time, it is almost impossible for contemporary Europeans to recognise or speak of various societies as civilisations. Even though, according to Braudel, the plural usage of the word was introduced in 1819, it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that it began to be widely used (Braudel & Mayne, 1994, pp. 6-7). However, it is important to know that not all Europeans in the nineteenth century were interested in the race for civilisation. In some European cultures, civilisation was not seen as the noblest standard of human achievement. This alternative attitude towards civilisation prevailed in the German-speaking world. If the British and the French were in a race with each other to prove themselves the most civilised people, the Germans were simply uninterested and, in fact, refused to recognise civilisation as a legitimate racing track (Bornstein, 2012).

### **The German Peculiarity**

In the nineteenth century German world, the word '*Kultur*' (culture) had primacy over '*Zivilisation*' (civilisation), as it was thought to represent the higher standard of human accomplishment. The relation between the two concepts, in this context, was in fact antithetical. When they spoke of *Kultur*, the Germans had in mind fulfilment in religious, philosophical, and artistic terms. In other words, the term referred to the inward development of the creative and spiritual dimensions of human beings, while *Zivilisation*, on the other hand, signified the outward and material attainments, as in the economic, political, and technological fields. Since it merely refers to external achievements, *Zivilisation* was deemed superficial; while *Kultur* reflects the deeper and more authentic sides of human potential. If the British and the French understood civilisation as something universal and thus should be spread to other human beings, *Kultur*, on the other hand, is unique to a particular group of people, be it a community or an ethnic group. In other words, it is a concept that celebrates a plurality of values and distinctness of various

human societies. Therefore, German *Kultur*, for instance, is and will always be meant for the Germans, and not to be exported to other societies. But how did this opposition between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* come about?

This contrast originated in the late eighteenth century. As discussed earlier, German rulers and aristocrats in the period modelled their behaviours and manners after their French counterparts. The French-speaking German upper class thought that the French had set the standard for civilisation, which is rational and universal; and to be part of the ‘good society’, one has to observe this standard. For them, German cultural elements, such as language and literature, were inferior. Things that were German were only meant for the lower orders who did not know how to appreciate the high civilisation of the French. This attitude of the social elites was strongly resented by the German middle-class intellectuals. Loyal to their indigenous identity, these intellectuals developed a counter-discourse to the French idea of civilisation. Among the thinkers that spearheaded this movement in Germany are Goethe, Herder, and Schiller. In this counter-discourse, the intellectuals contrasted the superficial and external decorum of the French to the genuine and deeply philosophical attitude of the Germans. The former was called *Zivilisation*, while the latter was called *Kultur* (Elias, pp. 9-20).

It is, therefore, not unusual for German writers throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to use the word ‘civilisation’ in a pejorative sense. They sometimes portrayed civilisation as a destructive force that can corrupt culture. As one of them remarked in 1851 that: “It is humanity’s duty today to see that civilisation does not destroy culture, nor technology the human being” (Braudel, 1994, pp. 5-6). This sharp opposition between civilisation and culture continued to dominate German thought until the beginning of the twentieth century. Oswald Spengler, for instance, talks about the difference between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* in his well-known masterpiece, *The Decline of the West* (1918); a discussion that is a reflection of his German intellectual inheritance. For Spengler, civilisation refers to “the most external and artificial states of which a species of developed humanity is capable” (Spengler & Atkinson, 1926, p. 31). He then made clear that, “The energy of culture-man is directed inwards, that of civilisation-man outwards” (Spengler & Atkinson, 1926, p. 37).

To sum up, the German case is a strategic one. At the outset, the purpose of this paper is to remind the present generation about the historicity of civilisation as a concept. The peculiarity of the German experience is important in this respect because more than the French and the British cases, it illustrates how the present generation's attitude towards civilisation is not actually natural; rather, it is merely the result of a specific historical and cultural formation.

## **Conclusion**

Concepts and categories in social sciences and humanities need to be understood in their own terms. However, this is often difficult to be done, especially if the concept is too familiar and appear too natural. In other words, even if it is not formally defined, the people of the present time already engaged with it. Therefore, how do we disengage with concepts that appear too natural? One way of doing that is by historicising them. To historicise something is to defamiliarise or denaturalise it. This is done by demonstrating "how [that] something is the product of history" (Beiser, 2016, p. 44). This paper, therefore, historicises one of the key concepts in social sciences - civilisation. It discussed the emergence and evolution of the modern concept of civilisation, by tracing its origin back into the eighteenth century, and then showed its gradual changes until the late nineteenth century. In approaching the concept historically, this paper did not treat it in isolation from the contexts of its usages. As maintained by Thompson (1972), "The discipline of history is, above all the discipline of context; each fact can be given meaning only within an ensemble of other meanings" (p. 45). Thus, it has been shown how the modern concept of civilisation had emerged out of the early modern context where notions, such as civility and progress, permeated the socio-cultural life of the people. This paper further explained how in the nineteenth century, the sense of being civilised found its deepest expression in European imperialistic ambitions. However, what is explained here is just half of the story. The development in the twentieth century, even though important, is beyond the scope of this paper. The century witnessed a significant conceptual shift as reflected in the assumption that there is not just one, but many civilisations; and when the term began to be increasingly used for descriptive rather

than normative purposes. In other words, that was the process leading towards the familiar understanding of civilisation of today.

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