

Civilization Seen Through an Addiction Model Lens: Linking social justice, societal maturation, and “collective sobriety”

Introduction

This is an essay about civilization, or more specifically, the *benefits of civilization* (a *boc*, so to speak). A “*boc*” in this essay refers to the array of important technological gifts we receive from modernity, the modern age in which we live. *Boc*’s are seemingly simple, everyday things like cars or telephones, clean running city water and electricity, things that connect us to modern life and livelihood. Things that may have begun as novelties but became vital building blocks to what makes life work. Importantly, these now vital things in order to function are totally dependent upon the existence of a highly evolved and complex infrastructure, systems such as power grids, cellular towers, highway systems, railways, and water and sewer lines. A whole web of high tech industries are needed to keep it all running. Unfortunately these necessary industries commonly come with unsustainable practices that make destructive demands on the environment and the people that live in it.

This essay looks at the parallels between addiction and the way we live life in modern America. We typically think of alcohol or other drugs when we list potential substances of abuse. This essay expands that list and frames a *boc*, when not used wisely and in moderation, as a potential substance of abuse. A picture of tolerance, dependency, and progression of disease takes shape with *boc* abuse just as it does with chemical abuse (or any of the process addictions such as gambling, sex, food, or internet use addiction, etc.). The (1) *tolerance* of negative effects that accompany a modern, advanced, industrialized civilization, along with (2) *dependency* upon civilization’s benefits (dependency rooted in denial), (3) *progression* (needing increasing amounts of civilization’s benefits despite increasingly damaging environmental results), and (4) *continued inappropriate use of boc’s* in spite of lethal consequences constitutes the classic profile of addiction *at the collective level*.

An addicted collective

By using *unsustainability in social practices* as one metric for this form of addiction (unsustainability representing out of control use of resources) we find other outcomes as well—*unmanageable (social) consequences* and *loss of control (of national economic, business, and social practices)*, two more big markers of addiction. Unsustainability sheds light on what looks for all intents and purposes like a society suffering from a “collective addiction.” Social justice and the tolerance for social injustice can also be used as a second metric for the impact of a collective addiction. Social justice is a developmental victory in the growth of a new nation. It follows then that social justice can be used as an indicator of the social maturation of a society, given the understanding that addiction impedes healthy human growth and development.

An industrialized socially immature society’s capacity to normalize unsustainability and injustice is used in this essay as a teaching tool and as prime characteristics of the thinking of a society “drunk on civilization”. An uninspected participation in the addictive implementation of civilization (that is, a civilization based on unsustainability) creates a culture of good people who would like to live in a sustainable manner but can’t quit. *(It should be noted that civilization with its “boc’s”, like alcohol, is morally neutral. It is not civilization or the use of boc’s, the benefits of civilization, that’s the problem. It’s the abuse and misuse of the intoxicating power of civilization that creates the social dilemmas.)*

Development

Civilizations and nation states rise and fall in history, indicating a lifecycle. Where American social development is in its short history and to what degree its development as a nation has been impaired is the question we’re

asking. Different fields of study use the term “development” differently. A behavioral health professional working as a clinician speaks of “human growth and development” when referring to the journey we take through life, the passages from infancy to old age. A successful journey is measured by the degree to which a person reaches his or her fullest potential. The hope is that we develop into the best versions of ourselves possible, that we have self-actualized (a highly valued Western concept) in a life well lived. This is how we talk about maturity and the maturation process. A sociologist uses “development” differently when referring to societies, especially in the geo-political sense. The difference between a developed nation and a developing nation is fairly self-evident by Western standards. In the West we often consider a nation developed by the technology and modern conveniences available to its citizenry. Generally, we as people with a Western worldview see our nation, the USA, as developed and other countries in the world as catching up.

There are some problems here, as you have probably noticed. There are some very culturally specific evaluations coming into play. When Western values shape the dialogue, we are attempting to define for the world what “developed” means and looks like. The discussion of developing versus developed nations, civilized versus uncivilized people, easily becomes pejorative in nature, placing Western values over the values of other cultures. Consciously or unconsciously, a sort of cultural imperialism can come into play. Non-western and traditional cultures around the world get disrupted, even dismantled, by the process of modernization, a synonym for development. Another word for it is “Westernization.” It can foster ill feelings internationally. And, the more dependent on technology we are as individuals the easier it is to say, “That’s progress, you can’t stand in the way of progress.” This is a dangerous sentiment when it gives permission to various forms of aggressive cultural and economic imperialism.

These are some of the problems with using technological development as the measure of a society’s maturity. This essay challenges the unconscious equating of modernization with social maturation while mistakenly leaving social justice and sustainability out of a nation’s definition of social maturity. When we create a society offering justice for some but not all or when we are content with or complacent about destroying our environment, how much progress have we really made in growing up as a nation, after all? This essay attempts to point out the detrimental impairments that a collective addiction presents to a nation’s maturation process.

Impaired Progress

Industrialized, technologically advanced civilizations¹ have developed so rapidly in our world that I fear humanity’s maturation processes have failed to keep pace. Among other things, one unwanted result has been the normalizing of social injustice and the ongoing trauma that injustice produces. This essay argues that unresolved social trauma can breed addiction in society itself, just as unresolved trauma can contribute to addiction in the individual person. Further, a society shaped by a culture of addiction with its underlying untreated trauma remains vulnerable to ongoing traumatic social turmoil. This setup impairs healthy personal and collective human growth and development. The social maturation processes needed to empower us to grow and live wisely, managing our technological power, are thus impaired.

An implicit assumption in this essay is the idea that civilization itself is a collective solution to problems facing a people group who are organized by a shared culture, meaning that civilization is fundamentally survival oriented. Likewise, addiction is not about thriving. It too is primarily about surviving. Here we find another relevant facet to using addiction as a lens on society. Addiction significantly arrests maturation and the development of emotional intelligence in the individual at approximately the age at which addiction takes hold. This means there are grown adults out there making decisions that affect the lives of the people around them but are doing so in some cases with the judgement of a child. It is not an adult-like decision to drink and drive.

¹ see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilization#Fall_of_civilizations for a description of “civilization”

Therefore, just as an individual ticketed with a DUI gets mandated for a drug and alcohol assessment, this essay argues for an objective assessment of the developmental age of a nation plagued by unsustainable environmental practices and a lack of social justice for all of its people, an assessment not solely based on years of existence or technological and economic achievement.

It is worth noting that this essay is specific in focus, looking at history through a bi-causal lens (sustainability verses unsustainability and justice verses injustice) and is therefore somewhat artificial, granted. This is done not to advocate for a simplistic view of history, but as a teaching device to bring clarity to central points in this essay—including (1) the point that social trauma left untreated blocks societal maturation resulting in significant and detrimental social consequences. Other key points are (2) that societal maturation is predicated upon the active presence of social justice and (3) that a socially immature society is predisposed to the kind of so-called progress that is a picture of impaired progress.

Societal Traumas

Generational trauma is recognized by mental health and substance abuse clinicians as a common theme in the clients we serve. More recently historical trauma, too, is being recognized as a significant factor in understanding our clients. Historical trauma is a form of generational trauma that impairs the wellbeing of a whole people group. Historical trauma is defined as social trauma perpetrated on one group of people by another more powerful group of people. Historical trauma's impact, "compounds over time in the lifetime of an individual and expands across generational lines (through the inter-generational transmission of trauma)", a definition developed by researchers such as Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, PhD. The concept of historical trauma has been studied as an ongoing after effect of the Holocaust in the Jewish community and was eventually applied to other people groups (in particular Maria began applying the concept to her people of the Sioux Nations in the 1980s as part of her doctoral work).

Indigenous peoples around the world have survived massive genocidal histories. How could this have happened here in America? It is a difficult answer to hear on multiple levels but historical trauma provides a surprising insight. Within the frame of our relatively recent history as a nation, I propose that we (meaning all American people—not just Indigenous people) have suffered clinically significant (historical) trauma in our respective histories and our culture is deeply marked by it. This may at first be a surprising and unwelcomed statement to hear, and may sound like making excuses for the dominate society's past and present unacceptable behavior. It is not the norm to apply historical trauma to the general white American population. This application is made not to excuse anything, but rather to shift focus to the need of healing² for all members of society. If trauma is trauma, Euro-American descendants have layer upon layer of traumatic chapters stretching back in their histories, too. This is not to diminish the injuries done to indigenous people or to ignore the horrific human rights violations perpetrated all over the world under colonization and slavery. It is more to point out the tragic reality of how traumatized people have traumatized people throughout world history. This being so, we then as a nation must take full responsibility for our actions in history and in the present by noting when the problems we face as a nation state (internally and internationally) are handled in the energy of a collective trauma-response³ the outcome can not only be destructive, it can be a means of perpetuating trauma generation after generation—domestically and abroad.

² For a healing training program see <http://www.echohawkcounseling.com/ehc-resource/workshops/healing-generational-historical-trauma-training/> by this author

³ See http://www.ehcounseling.com/materials/societal_trauma.html ; http://www.ehcounseling.com/materials/measure_trauma.html

Sustainability, a lost lifeway

As already indicated, sustainability (one of the necessary conditions for the ongoing wellbeing of every civilization) represents the sober use of the environment. Sustainability is inherently undermined by what I would call a “dysregulated civilization” (meaning an out-of-control addicted society lacking in appropriate and wise use of its resources). The premise here is that the unwanted but full flowering effects of unsustainability are accelerated by the combined absence of (1) social justice⁴ and (2) the presence of unresolved societal trauma, no matter how deeply buried the trauma may be from social awareness or recognition. In such a case environmental resources, as well as people, are at risk of misuse and abuse. Civilizations become vulnerable to dysregulation in social functioning when a society demands and expects advancements without accounting along the way for social healing and justice, two social forces necessary for social maturation.

By way of illustration, we can look at the progression from sustainable tribal horticultural practices to unsustainable industrialized corporate agri-business practices. Unsustainable and socially harmful agri-business practices include a compilation of big money strategies such as the production and over use of toxic chemicals that are harmful to consumers and the environment, or the draining of huge aquifers by irrigating lands naturally unsuited for the commercial crops being farmed, or giant corporations controlling the seed market, forcing small farmers to comply, to their own detriment, with big business demands. The progression from sustainable to unsustainable practices obviously has far reaching consequences.

Haunting environmental degradations caused by an industry related to agriculture (industrialized farming being dependent upon oil and gas mining) are happening today reminiscent of the 1930s Dust Bowl era on the Great Plains. Today in the same locale that was once destroyed by the Dust Bowl due to agricultural practices of greed, lack of environmental understanding, and mismanagement of the land, we are again seeing new environmental catastrophes taking place. Currently there are daily man-made earthquakes from oil and gas fracking and waste water injection wells. Vast amounts of water are being drained from the environment and permanently poisoned. We are at the beginning of this new development and have yet to fully appreciate the scope of its threat. Big business has not learned from the past, and by our complacency neither have we. This is dysregulated social practices and thinking in action.

Historically, before industrialization, a collective of horticulturalists could sustain a whole tribe using stone and bone based implements, technology in its basic form. A tribal population could exist indefinitely with access to a resourced land base, the environment providing the natural infrastructure necessary for this organic way of life. While it is true that only so much produce could be provided by horticulture, it was provided in an environmentally sustainable manner. The technology and the infrastructure of this way of life was self-regulating in many ways, including resource management and population growth.

In due time, when a shoulder bone hoe was replaced by an iron plow (i.e., when a so called “primitive” horticultural society advanced somehow to an early-stage industrialized society, or was colonized into such a society) production increased. Things evolved. The farmer displaced the horticulturalist. One farmer with a good team of mules and a metal plow could feed more people. This meant that a class of people could emerge that was freed for other pursuits (pursuits necessary to the existence of things like metal plows). The population grew. But note, these same people were now not only dependent upon the more powerful farmer, they (including the industrialized farmer him or herself) no longer knew the skills necessary for a former, indigenous way of living. Furthermore, the infrastructure that was necessary for the former lifeway (i.e., populations of wild animals living in their natural habitat, habitat that was likewise “wild,” free running rivers for salmon, open prairies with prairie grasses evolved over the eons for the hard winters and long droughts, in other words, the

⁴ See <http://www.echohawkcounseling.com/terms/> at this author’s website, under “terms” for an unpacking of “justice”

natural infrastructure) looked like unused and wasted resources to a new people geared by industrialized technology. The industrial infrastructure was wholly missing for that way of life. The solutions to this so-called deficit involved clearing away the wildness and replacing it with the domestic. Gone and replaced was the centrality of river ways by modern highways and railways, transforming irreversibly one type of infrastructure (a wild environment and ecosystem) into another type suited for industry (power grids, pipelines, mining and factories). Industrialization meant that a simpler way of life was lost the more that man-made infrastructure displaced natural infrastructure as the foundation for making life work.

Tolerance (the normalization of so-called progress)

Tolerance and dependency are synergistically related. Tolerance facilitates dependency and dependency builds tolerance ever higher. The higher the tolerance the greater the dependency. Tolerance in an addiction model means a person can consume large doses of their drug of choice, in this case the benefits of civilization, or boc's,

and seemingly remain unaffected. It's how a dependent person feels normal. Indeed, in the presence of tolerance a person *must* consume their achieved level of boc's to remain in a normal, secure state of mind.

Ever advancing levels of civilization seem to be irreversible—no one wants to live without the benefits of progress once they have become the necessary entitlements for a well ordered life. As moderns, we need access to the basic boc's that make the world go round. A life organized by boc's means cars and highways to get to the grocery store and to work, cell phones and the internet to maintain vital connections, a house to come home to warmed by fossil fuel complete with labor saving electrical appliances, basic medical insurance for our families to have access to advanced medical

care so we have a good quality of life and to keep us fit to work, etc. We're at an unfair disadvantage in the modern age without the basic boc's of industry that everyone is entitled to, right? This has become an unquestioned given in civilized societies over the centuries.

Once our lives depend upon these things, to lose them would have serious consequences. We would be in a helpless place. A failure of critical systems of infrastructure on a large enough scale would precipitate a crisis of depopulation in areas dependent upon those failed systems.

Tolerance also means that any reduction in boc levels when the functioning of infrastructure is threatened induces personal and social "withdrawal symptoms" (symptoms such as a sudden lost sense of wellbeing leading to outbursts of social fears, public insecurity, collective panic or aggression, etc.). Once tolerance is built, with any reduction in supply withdrawal sets in. In an addiction model a sustained withdrawal for an individual is not a pretty sight. Certain kinds of withdrawal symptoms are even life-threatening when the nervous system goes into

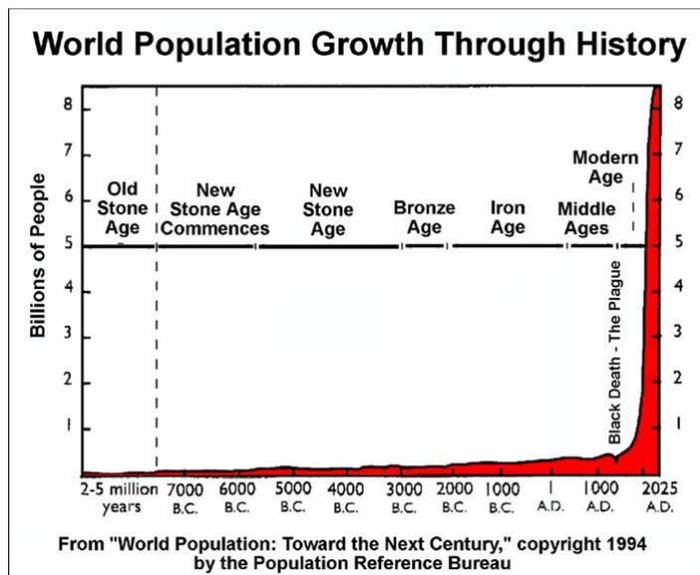


Figure 1: World population growth in response to technological advances and industrialization

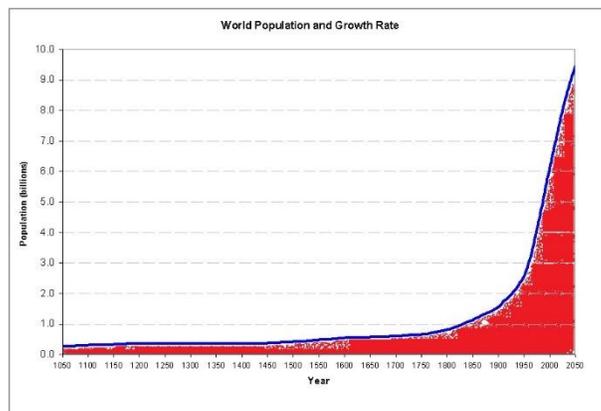


Figure 2: The shaded area under the curve represents growth in human dependency upon technology and infrastructure

a state of riot. The same can be said of social withdrawal from a sudden loss of access to boc's. Our basic "right" to riot gets triggered to avoid lethal boc withdrawal (perhaps rioting is a good picture of a society in severe boc withdrawal). Think about the regional mayhem and danger when people are confronted with shortages at the gas pump or empty shelves at the grocery store during a crisis. The vital necessity of boc's is a convincing argument that we are entitled to them because without them we can be faced with life and death situations.

Dependency and Denial

For modern life to continue on its long-term trajectory in the face of disconcerting questions about sustainability we find ourselves needing to participate in a "culture of denial," in order to ease our minds and maintain our current pursuits. Unfortunately we all fall prey to denial. It is easy to focus on recycling our cans and cardboard while all the while not thinking about the whole industrial processes necessary to make the convenient little cans. It remains to be seen if new greener industries can fix the problems of industrialization. One thing seems clear, there is no way to give up the industries and infrastructure of modern life today and still keep everything in place that makes life as we know it work. If it's a trap, we're all in it together.

Distorted beliefs and rationales are necessary to support the illusion that the mismanagement of the environment can be ignored indefinitely and that unjust and unsustainable practices are "normal". This destructive illusion thrives as long as collective denial is maintained (denial being another core ear mark of addiction). Denial masks the realities of unsustainability and leads to the lethal side effects below.

As civilization advanced, the emerging modern working class of people (as mentioned above) no longer retained the knowledge and skills to do what the former sustainable horticulturalists once knew and did. As said, they became dependent upon the knowledge and agricultural prowess of the civilized farmer. Population centers grew, creating divisions of labor that fed the growth and development of an ever more technologically sophisticated civilization. Farmers competing for a share in the market place had to keep pace in order to remain viable. Not only was the farmer dependent upon keeping pace with changing technology, civilization itself became dependent upon its own technology. Technology bears the preponderant weight of its dependent civilization. If technology vital to infrastructure fails it all comes crashing down. This is where we find ourselves today, in a modern society severely threatened by any disruptions to infrastructure, coupled with the growing power to addictively mine the environment for its resources faster than the environment can naturally replenish itself. This isn't scary only by virtue of collective denial.

Meanwhile as new levels of civilization become normalized (the corollary to building tolerance) they become expected entitlements by the citizenry. The innovators of new technologies are highly sought after and rewarded in the marketplace. Newer and newer developments are in higher and higher demand to sustain and grow the economy and its infrastructure. The hopes are for an even brighter future, however imperialistic it may need to be. Newly achieved levels of advancement, with every advent of higher technologies, are soon insufficient (as is characteristic of tolerance—you need more of the same substance to maintain the next high). Never mind the cost to the environment. This is dysregulated collective addict thinking.

Increasingly lethal side effects: Progression

There are very real economic pressures bearing down on people to advance with the times. If we don't advance we fall behind and can't compete. In a sense we suffer withdrawal (due to insufficient doses of civilization's power to bring about benefit). As alluded to above, if one farmer gets a big tractor, the old school farmer can no longer compete and is exposed to the pain of failure in the marketplace. To provide for his family the old school farmer must get a tractor, too. Deprivation and poverty can descend upon those who get left behind, even though the environmental and social side effects get more and more lethal (hence, progression). Large scale industrial farming requires machinery that costs hundreds of thousands of dollars, creating debt burdens that

are crushing. More and more small family farms that were once passed down from one generation to the next are getting assimilated into corporate farming.

The ever faster turning wheels of civilization create environmental potentials that did not exist in “primitive” society. Consequently, the world’s population has more than doubled, growing exponentially by billions in my lifetime (see figure 2, above). This has not happened apart from the industrialization that has taken the globe by storm. Environmental limits are now more readily reached and exceeded by immature civilized societies in denial of the consequences. The lack of maturity in a society’s collective judgement and behavior leaves the door open to the worst of human nature taking charge and setting agendas. A flaw in modernity is the belief that the wisdom of ancient cultures are artifacts to be discarded and have no bearing today.

Exceeding natural limits invariably leads to destructive environmental conditions and, not surprisingly, destructive social conditions. Dynamics of greed and denial go to work producing a growing list of lethal social side effects. Social conditions based on ill-gotten wealth, the exercise of unjust power and privilege over others as a sign of success, inhumanity and routine wars of aggression for territories and resources, economic policies undergirded by racism that insures unjust disadvantage for the marginalized and unjust advantage for the privileged, and the like, create an atmosphere of normalized abuse. These abuses aren’t normal; they’re traumatizing. Without justice to regulate the power of civilization, society fails to provide for the wellbeing of each other, to say nothing of caring for the environment. The collective breaks down into braided streams of societal immaturity, rife with the potential for violence. What looks like a toddler screaming and hitting at a playmate who is taking his toys on the small scale, on the larger scale of societies and nation states looks like, in the worst case, inhumanity and horrific violence.

In a dysregulated and addicted society, competition for resources becomes fierce. If just processes fail to regulate human behavior—social justice being a requisite for and an expression of social maturity—a socially immature society is at risk of tragically self-destructive outcomes. It is this author’s hope that self-destruction isn’t what it will take for human activity to rebalance itself with nature. That would truly be a sad case of “hitting bottom,” as AA puts it in the recovery world.

Summary

When an unjust society feeds the machine in ways that the environment cannot sustain while everyone benefiting from so-called civilization complacently looks the other way, denial is engrained into the fabric of society. We are trapped by modernity seemingly with no realistic way out. Denial protects unjust social practices and keeps us stuck on a self-destructive course. We become a society “drunk on civilization,” a society anesthetized by the benefits of civilization stumbling down the road of unsustainability—unless there is a major course correction. No one wants to “detox” (migrate from unsustainability to sustainability). It’s too painful. It means giving up something at great cost to the way we live. Even then, can it really be done?

It also means squarely facing a history of injustice and the underlying unresolved, unrecognized trauma that is an ever present source of sabotage blocking social maturation. We are at a cross-roads. Are we to continue our path unchanged or do we chose a difficult, seemingly impossible, but higher road into the future?