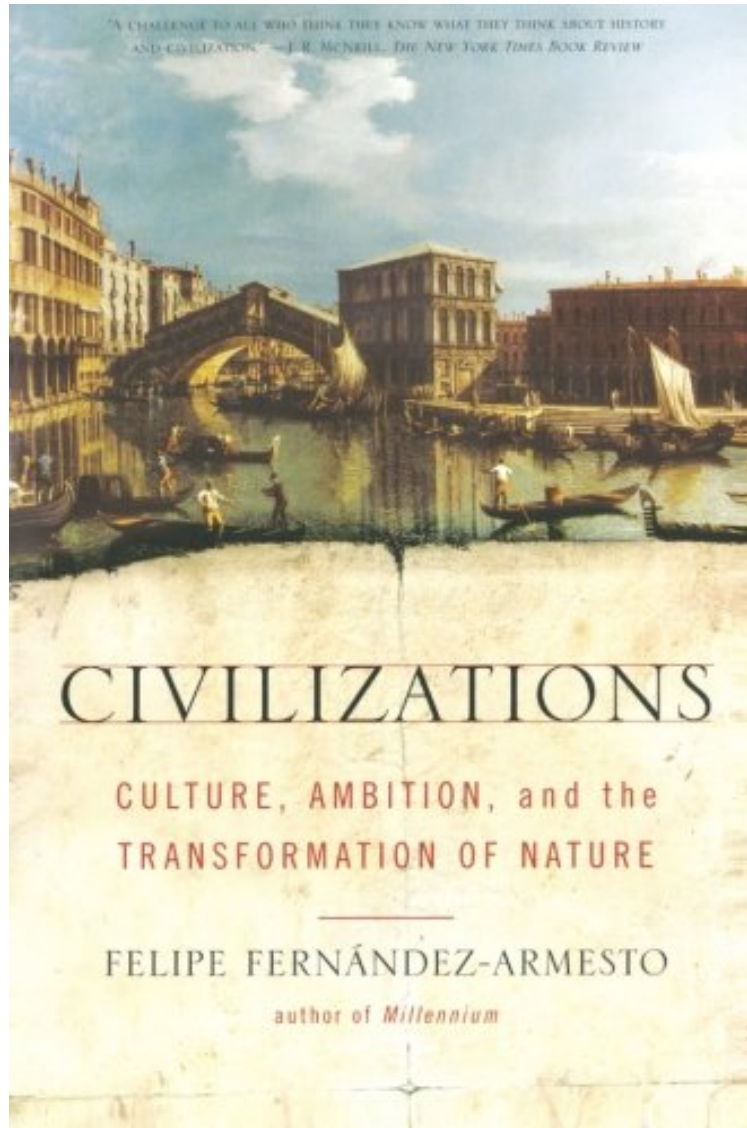


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## Civilizations: Culture, Ambition, and the Transformation of Nature

*Felipe Fernandez-Armesto*

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**Felipe Fernandez-Armesto : Civilizations: Culture, Ambition, and the Transformation of Nature** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Civilizations: Culture, Ambition, and the Transformation of Nature:

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long time to read this book and I undertake this review with less enthusiasm than that for any other review I've written. It's not that I think this book is particularly bad, I don't. Rather I find it hard to think of anything worthwhile to say and I fear that my review may bear a resemblance to its subject in that the whole may be less than the sum of its parts. The author tells us, I have written it in something like a frenzy, anxious to get down what I wanted to say before I forgot it. No mature deliberation has formed it. It shows. It is said though I don't think anyone has traced the source that when asked about modern/Western (depending on whose telling the story) civilization that Gandhi replied that it would be a good idea. This book was a good idea but not one properly realized. My first difficulty is with the book's title and a problem with word usage in the English language. The noun civilization and the adjective civilized may have the same root but members of a given civilization may deal with less powerful, uncivilized people in a very uncivilized manner e.g. the treatment of the Tasmanian Aborigines. In Felipe Fernandez-Armesto's own description of this work, "Unlike previous attempts to write the comparative history of civilizations, it is arranged environment by environment, rather than period by period or society by society." Each of the groups he examines is labelled a civilization. Now as Alfred Crosby has written, Civilization is a salt peter of a word, often triggering explosive arguments. I use it not in moral comment, but simply in reference to peoples settled in cities, villages, hamlets, and to the kind of political, economic, social, and military structures associated with such populations. For me for a culture to qualify as a civilization it has to have cities, an advanced level of social hierarchy and organization (including organized religion), and possibly except from the Incas a writing system. Fernandez-Armesto writes, I propose to define it as a type of relationship: a relationship to the natural environment, recrafted, by the civilizing impulse, to meet human demands. By "a civilization" I mean a society in such a relationship. If I may quote from *Through the Looking Glass*, "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean neither more nor less." "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things." I side with Alice. As with the author's work *Millennium*, the scholarship is impressive, the erudition vast. You or I may disagree with the author's views but I for one would be hard pressed to catch him out in a factual error. And he does make some interesting points, particularly on the importance of wind and sea current patterns and on the impact on the world of the cracking of the Atlantic patterns by Europeans to the extent that, Not only were virtually all maritime empires founded by Atlantic-side states; there was, effectively, no Atlantic-side state that did not have one. The only possible exceptions are Norway, Ireland, and Iceland; but these states did not achieve sovereignty themselves until the twentieth century and so missed the great ages of oceanic empire-building. The book contains many anecdotes only one of which I can remember. It relates to the brother of Mansa Musa, much beloved of authors of school history textbooks as they have a Sub-Saharan African they can write about. It was told by Ibn Battuta, the greatest of known medieval travellers, Cannibal envoys, whom the mansa presented with a slave girl, appeared at court to thank him, daubed with the blood of the gift they had just consumed. I haven't seen that one in any textbooks. While I can't particularly recommend this book, particularly for those who haven't read a lot of world history, it is worth dipping in and out of if you wanted to consider the effects of environment of the societies they shape and which in turn shape them.

Erudite, wide-ranging, a work of dazzling scholarship written with extraordinary flair, *Civilizations* redefines the subject that has fascinated historians from Thucydides to Gibbon to Spengler to Fernand Braudel: the nature of civilization. To the author, Oxford historian Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, a society's relationship to climate, geography, and ecology are paramount in determining its degree of success. "Unlike previous attempts to write the comparative history of civilizations," he writes, "it is arranged environment by environment, rather than period by period or society by society." Thus, for example, tundra civilizations of Ice Age Europe are linked with those of the Inuit of the Pacific Northwest, the Mississippi Mound Builders with the deforesters of eleventh-century Europe. *Civilizations* brilliantly connects the world of ecologist, geologist, and geographer with the panorama of cultural history.

.com "Civilization" is a tricky term, one that means many things to many people. For some, it denotes great buildings, canals, codes of law; for others, it offers a contrast between one group and another, with the advantage always going to the more "civilized" bunch against the "barbaric," "savage," or "primitive." All such distinctions, writes Oxford University historian Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, are arbitrary and laden with subjective value; they speak to unscientific notions of progress, to hidden agendas. What matters, he continues, is the extent to which a culture has developed means to separate itself from nature: "Civilization makes its own habitat. It is civilized in direct proportion to its distance, its difference from the unmodified natural environment." A culture such as the ancient Han Chinese, the medieval highland Maya, or the Renaissance Venetian, then, is highly civilized inasmuch as its members dammed and diverted rivers, drained lakes, stripped forests, and built monumental structures to celebrate their achievements; people content or resigned to "live off the product and inhabit the spaces nature gives them" are markedly less so by virtue of that accommodation. No culture, Fernandez-Armesto writes, is inherently exempt from becoming civilized; nor, he adds, does "civilized" equate to "good." In exploring history as a branch of historical ecology, he sometimes abandons his thesis, intriguing and provocative as it is, to engage in a wide-ranging survey of the world past reminiscent of (but

much better-written than) Toynbee and Durant, touching on the ancient Greeks here, the herding peoples of the African savanna and Central Asia there, the Moundbuilders of prehistoric North America and the hunting peoples of the Arctic there. Unlike many standard textbooks, his narrative manages to offer something new wherever he turns. Allusive and learned, his book repays close reading--and should inspire plenty of argument along the way. -- Gregory McNamee

From Publishers Weekly

Enthusiastic readers of popular history have come to expect the author of *Millennium* and *Truth: A History and Guide for the Perplexed* to deliver a read filled with wonders, important insights, wit and outrageous opinion. In this marvelous new work, Fernndez-Armesto, a member of the Modern History Faculty at Oxford, starts with a simple premise: civilization is not evidenced by a formal political structure, aesthetics, ethical principles or religion, but rather by a culture's attempt to refashion its environment. His overview of the world's civilizations (arranged by habitat desert, tundra, etc. rather than by more traditional categories such as chronology or technological aptitude) admits no progress, and, in fact, alleges that to believe otherwise is a dangerous business that breeds complacency in the face of moral perils. The vivid writing is equal to the scope of the author's ambition, to catalogue most, if not all, of the civilizations the world has seen. So infectious is Fernndez-Armesto's passion for his subject that no exotic person (Khmer King Suryavarman II) or place (the Inca retreat of Quispaguanca) no matter how remote seems superfluous to the text. Scattered within the fact-filled portraits are numerous opinions on topics large and small, opinions that mark Fernndez-Armesto, if not a contrarian, a formidable iconoclast: civilization did not "originate" in the "alluvial soils" of Mesopotamia, the idea of Proto-Indo-European language developing in isolation is "an obvious fantasy" and "most" accounts of history include "too much hot air and not enough wind." But, despite a chilling evaluation of "western civilization" (for which he claims affection) and its global influence, he concludes on a pragmatic, almost optimistic note, resolving that "there is no remedy except to go on trying." Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

From Library Journal

In the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Jared Diamond sought to reexamine traditionally held views relating to the distribution of wealth and power, as well as the differing rates of technological development found throughout the world. He refuted racist theories that differing development was based on genetic superiority and argued instead that geographical, agricultural, environmental, and social factors directed the rate of advancement or growth among peoples on different continents. Along similar lines, Fern ndez-Armesto, a distinguished author (*Millennium*) and professor at Oxford University, examines world history from the unique perspective of environments and ecosystems. Not a comparative history of civilizations, his book is arranged by 17 distinct environments, from ice, tundra, and desert societies to sea and oceanic cultures. Fern ndez-Armesto believes that civilizations are most successful when they occupy an area that either straddles environments or has several microclimates to draw on for resources. He also argues that civilization can happen in any type of environment and that similar environments in different parts of the world do not guarantee a similar development. Unlike Diamond's work, *Civilizations* does not have the polished presentation or coherency of argument to make this an essential purchase. Still, educated readers who enjoy looking at world history from an experimental model will find much to consider. Recommended for larger academic libraries. Gloria Maxwell, Penn Valley Community Coll., Kansas City, MO Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc.