

# Civilization from the perspectives of freud and sarmiento



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Sigmund Freud's essay, "Civilization and its Discontents", and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's book, *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism*, both make bold and thought-provoking statements about their respective societies and contemporary civilization. Although Freud's and Sarmiento's ideas appear similar at first, the split between their notions of civilization grows noticeably wider as their works are more closely compared. This is mostly due to the disparity in their motivations for studying civilizations. Sarmiento, an Argentine statesman and revolutionary, wants to educate his countrymen about the benefits of civilized, cultured life as opposed to the barbaric ways of the Argentine gauchos and caudillos. In contrast, Freud scientifically analyzes civilization for the sake of gaining an understanding of the human psychological makeup. Sarmiento's claims about civilization appear to only serve his own political needs. They are based on false assumptions and contain numerous contradictions, which is especially evident when Sarmiento is compared to Freud, who bases his interpretations of human society solely on fundamental human instincts and clear logic. Thus, Freud's arguments are more plausible and more firmly grounded than those put forth by Sarmiento. Freud explicitly defines civilization as "the whole sum of the achievements and the regulations which distinguish our lives from those of our animal ancestors and which serve two purposes-namely to protect men against nature and to adjust their mutual relations." In essence, a civilization is a community of people that works together in order to create a sophisticated means for easier survival. This includes the study of the sciences, especially medicine, in order to allow for disease treatment and prevention. Also, in order for the community to function properly, rules or laws must be established to govern the relations between individuals. These

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concepts are echoed in Sarmiento's writing. Although he never truly defines civilization, there are several concepts that Sarmiento continuously associates with civilized society. These are mentioned when he speaks of the decline of civilization due to the rule of the caudillos and gauchos: " In San Luis, for the past ten years there has been only one priest, and there is no school or even one person who wears a tailcoat." He continues by outlining a similar situation in San Juan. " Only three young people are studying outside the province. There is only one doctor native to San Juan. There are not three young people who know English, or four who know French." Apparently, Sarmiento sees civilization as a community in which education, medicine, religion, and European culture thrive. A group of people without these properties is considered barbaric. Both Freud and Sarmiento stress the importance of technological and cultural advancement in their definitions of civilization. The two authors describe civilization similarly, but Freud provides a much more rigorous and lucid account. On the other hand, Sarmiento, who uses vague language in comparison to Freud, essentially describes civilization as European society, which makes his definition narrower and less applicable. The ambiguous language that Sarmiento utilizes creates certain contradictions throughout his text. For example, in describing the history of the Argentine revolution, he states, " In the Argentine Republic before 1810, there were two distinct, rival, and incompatible societies, two diverse civilizations: one Spanish, European, cultured, and the other barbarous, American, almost indigenous." Sarmiento certainly makes a clear distinction between the civilized and the barbaric. In fact, his description of the cultured, European society acts as a condensed version of his definition of civilization, which was discussed previously. However, he designates both

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cultured societies and barbaric societies as “civilizations.” This is a problem because throughout the remainder of his book, Sarmiento uses the word “civilization” to refer to educated, cultured societies. He refers to barbarism as simply a primitive way of life that is separate from civilization. As a result of this imprecise language, Sarmiento’s idea of civilization becomes blurred to the reader. It is entirely possible that the confusing wording is a product of the translation of the text into English. Nonetheless, it makes Sarmiento’s notions about civilization appear fuzzy and almost careless, especially when compared to Freud’s meticulous descriptions. Freud’s and Sarmiento’s ideas about civilization begin to differ in the discussion of what factors threaten civilization and where these factors originate. Freud emphasizes repeatedly that the greatest threat to human civilization is the aggressive nature of human beings. In other words, people are not naturally kind or generous, which guarantees conflicts when a group of individuals live closely together in a community. These often-violent confrontations have the potential to destroy civilization. In fact, Freud makes the point that one of the most important tasks in a successful society is the control of human aggressiveness and tendency towards violence. Sarmiento believes that the greatest threat to civilization is barbarism, which he essentially depicts as the opposite of civilization. Sarmiento describes the decline of Argentine cities towards barbarism by stating: “with the spirit, government, and civilization of the cities dominated, the final formation of the central, unitarist, despotic government of the rancher Don Juan Manuel Rosas, who sticks the gaucho’s knife into cultured Buenos Aires and destroys the work of centuries, of civilization, law, and liberty.” Sarmiento uses the name “Rosas” synonymously with “barbarism”, since Rosas was the leader of the caudillos

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and gauchos who held authoritarian control over Argentine cities throughout the early 19th century. Sarmiento gainfully utilizes the imagery of the gaucho's knife in order to show the aggressive, violent, and barbaric methods employed by Rosas during his control of Argentina. While it first appears that Freud and Sarmiento have the same outlook on the threats to civilizations, their ideas are actually fundamentally different. They both believe that aggressiveness is the main threat, but Freud refers to internal aggressiveness while Sarmiento describes external aggressiveness as the menace to civilization. Freud makes it clear that every individual in society has a tendency towards violence, writing that "the inclination to aggression is an original, self-subsisting instinctual disposition in man." These aggressive impulses, if not controlled or limited by society, can explode, leading to the destruction of civilization. On the other hand, Sarmiento believes that the threat to society lies in the violent ways of Rosas and his gaucho followers. He never acknowledges that cultured, European individuals have a natural tendency towards violence and destruction. Hence, while Freud and Sarmiento share in the belief that civilization is threatened by aggressiveness, their specific notions of this aggressiveness are quite different. The split between Freud's and Sarmiento's views on civilization continues to expand when both men express their ideas about the origins of aggressiveness. Freud takes the scientific viewpoint in describing these origins: throughout "Civilization and its Discontents", Freud makes numerous references to Darwinian theory and its consequences. Thus, it is clear that he believes aggression in human beings to be an integral part of their survival. In other words, humans must be instinctually aggressive in order to compete for food, shelter, and sexual partners, as <https://assignbuster.com/civilization-from-the-perspectives-of-freud-and-sarmiento/>

outlined in Darwin's theory of evolution. Sarmiento has a completely different view of the origins of aggressiveness. He believes that aggressiveness, namely the gaucho way of life, arises due a lack of education, isolation, and poor discipline. While describing the early development of a gaucho in Facundo, Sarmiento makes the point that the gaucho participates in few relations or activities with other people. This creates a feeling of restlessness in the gauchos. They begin to roam the plains of Argentina looking for any sort of excitement or action. They partake in dangerous horse racing, knife fighting, and gambling, fostering the fiercely competitive and aggressive gaucho character. Since these men are often not forced to answer to any type of authority, their aggressive and violent ways become uncontrollable due to their lack of discipline. Furthermore, since gauchos are not formally schooled, they cannot be taught the civilized way to live. Sarmiento, a pioneering educator himself, continuously advocates the importance of education for the advancement of society and for preventing individuals from developing the barbaric gaucho personality. He describes the inhabitants of San Juan: " how much they could progress if the government would concern itself with fomenting education and culture, the only means of raising the level of a people." Apparently, Sarmiento feels that individuals can be taught that violence is wrong and can be led towards a more civilized way of life. If people do not receive this type of education, they become violent and aggressive like the gauchos. In attempting to support his claim, he states that crime in San Juan declined when " moral precepts were inculcated in students with special diligence." Sarmiento refuses to acknowledge that violence is a natural tendency in human beings, but instead argues that it is a product of the lack of education and discipline

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in barbaric societies. Nonetheless, Freud's position on the origin of aggressiveness is much more cohesive than Sarmiento's because Freud's argument is built on scientific evidence and basic human instincts, while Sarmiento's claims are, essentially, his own observations and judgments. Naturally, since Freud's and Sarmiento's ideas about civilization are so different, it is not surprising that their insights into prospects for future civilizations are also diverse. Although Freud is careful not to adopt a strong opinion on what future civilizations will be like, his notions of civilization throughout the book suggests his viewpoint on the future. Throughout "Civilization and its Discontents", Freud explores the idea of the purpose of life and concludes, based on the pleasure principle, that happiness is the ambition for the majority of individuals. Hence, people created civilizations in order to bring about a more advanced society, which they thought would lead to greater happiness. However, as society became more advanced, the natural human instincts, namely aggressiveness and sexuality, became more repressed. Thus, Freud makes the point that people are less happy in advanced societies than they were in primitive societies. As a result, Freud implies that as civilization becomes even more advanced in the future, people will become less and less happy. Their stored and repressed aggressive instincts will come out through violence, and civilization will decline to a more primitive state. Sarmiento has the exact opposite view of civilization in the future. He believes that cultured society will eventually absorb the barbaric individuals of Argentina, namely the followers of Rosas, and civilization will flourish. Sarmiento describes Rosas' control as, "an absurd, insupportable government that has not yet ceded to the impulse of the many forces that must, of necessity, bring its destruction." Sarmiento

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implies that Rosas and his authoritarian system of control over Argentina is the only thing keeping the nation from becoming a great civilization. Once Rosas is defeated, Argentina can become a cultured, civilized society through widespread education and a democratic government. Although Sarmiento's reasoning appears sound, there is one factor that he fails to consider. Sarmiento never considers whether a cultured, civilized society will lead to greater happiness than the primitive society embodied by the gaucho lifestyle. In fact, Sarmiento assumes that a more advanced society will lead to greater happiness, but this is not necessarily true as pointed out by Freud. For instance, since the gauchos enjoy their rural lifestyle, they see no appeal in an advanced civilization, since it does not bring them greater happiness. Sarmiento's claims about the future of civilization therefore lack credibility because they are based on a faulty assumption. Sarmiento's and Freud's insights into civilization have contrary implications concerning politics and culture. Sarmiento looks forward to the day when Argentina will be controlled by a democratic political system. His views imply that, through a democratic government and high-quality education, the Argentine people will be able to create one of the most cultured and successful civilizations in the world. It is much more difficult to pinpoint what Freud's arguments on civilization mean for politics. However, one can form an opinion by analyzing Freud's view of communism: "In abolishing private property we deprive the human love of aggression of one of its instruments, certainly a strong one, though certainly not the strongest; but we have in no way altered the differences in power and influence which are misused by aggressiveness." Freud is a strong opponent of communism because he believes that it cannot change human nature. Although greed is eliminated, the tendency towards aggressiveness

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is still present. Hence, Freud implies that no type of government exists that that can truly govern well, because no government can change human nature. In essence, a political system only needs to control the innate aggressiveness of human beings to keep the civilization together. There is no purpose in attempting to eliminate greed or other such factors since they are intertwined in human nature. In comparing the two views of civilization, one realizes that Sarmiento's ideas contain contradictions and depend on suppositions that are not generally accurate. These issues make his assertions about civilization seem careless and unimportant. On the other hand, Freud forms his views based on objective, scientific evidence and lucid logic. Sarmiento never explains how he formulated his understanding of civilization at all. He merely uses his own observations and unsupported opinions to create an image of civilization that will benefit him in gaining popular support to defeat Rosas, an impetus that stems from personal interests. Not only are Sarmiento's ideas narrower and thus less useful than Freud's, but they are also difficult to believe because the fundamental assumptions supporting them are inaccurate. In conclusion, the two authors differ in their ideas on civilizations because their motivations are dissimilar. Sarmiento formed his ideas with the sole purpose of demonstrating Rosas's barbarism and malevolence, while Freud hoped to further society's understanding of the human psyche. Therefore, Freud's account is much more objective, precise, and reliable than Sarmiento's.