civilization and its discontents

What is civilization? Is it good for us? What do we lose by becoming civilized? What happens to civilizations in the course of their development? What is a civilized individual?

For a start, please see this set of definitions I have taken from your entries in the Glossary:

- See entry on barbarism
  a. a form or type of society which binds individuals together in a new way
  b. a process affecting a change in the behaviour, sentiments, and wealth of individuals as well as the wealth of societies

Smith

See John Marshall's blog

On explanation why a European labourer can be better off than an African king, see Wenbo Fang's blog

On towns and civilization, see Zane Fisher's blog and Katrina Nygaard's response to Zane Fisher

Task 1 (week 2) - larks

On civilization understood as a higher standard of living, see Eli Edelson's contribution to Task 3 (week 2) - owls

A civilization is the coming together of individuals that make the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

Two different theories are given by Smith about the emergence of the binding force that creates the civilization. In Wealth of Nations, he posits that civilizations form for economic reasons. Individuals come together in need of the other's specialized skills where each individual's specialization complements the other's, and is traded, exchanged or bartered. In The Theory of Moral Sentiments, the factor that brings people together is seeking praise-worthiness. Though Smith claims no universal good, he prefers the common good which comes about in a society which gives praise to individuals possessing that value.

At the same time, Smith is also critical of civilization, especially opposing the governing force--the unproductive class of people that have the ability to control and limit the individual's action. Thus Smith warrants that with small governments, the force of the invisible hand would take care of individual's needs. Thus Smith felt the need for education of the masses. Education would carry along the corpus of knowledge good for the society, and deter itself from activities that are seen as a bane.

-Ahmad

c. a social process which is the result of commercialization, education and Enlightenment, and human emancipation from barbarism

d. a normative term used by bourgeois thinkers to distinguish their own society from more primitive societies and forms of behaviour

Marx

In The German Ideology, Marx claims that the "antagonism between town and country begins with the transition from barbarism to civilization." The historical metamorphosis from individualistic country life to a collective town life even agrees with Smith's idea on the formation of society. He writes "These serfs, persecuted by their lords in the country, came separately into the towns, where they found an organised community, against which they were powerless and in which they had to subject themselves to the station assigned to them by the demand for their labour and the interest of their organised urban competitors." In the early towns "the division of labour between the individual guilds was as yet [quite naturally derived] and, in the guilds themselves, not at all developed between the individual workers. Every workman had to be versed in a whole round of tasks, had to be able to make everything that was to be made with his tools." However, once division of labor was introduced, and each individual became a master at one art, "every medieval craftsman was completely absorbed in his work, to which he had a contented, slavish relationship, and to which he was subjected to a far greater extent than the modern worker, whose work is a matter of indifference to him."

Further development in civilization leads to Marx's claim that "antagonism between town and country can only exist within the framework of private property." And "labour is here again the chief thing, power over individuals, and as long as the latter exists, private property must exist." Marx sees the formation of civilization not as a miracle of Smith's "invisible hand", but as a force of alienation of the individual from his trade, and as a cause of division into classes.

-Ahmad

I would hesitate to apply "individualistic" and "collective/collectivistic" to country and town respectively. Countries also have their social bonds such as families. It's more a matter of the capitalist mode of production fragmenting the previous social relations, making people into individuals and then bring them to the market in town - a theme most obvious in Durkheim.

You may want to highlight the capitalist mode of production and "civil society" and their relations to civilization. - Zhiying

Durkheim

e. the organization of society resulting from the division of labor, characterized by its moral neutrality and lack of value

1893 DURKHEIM The Division of Labor in Society p.12 [the division of labour] is the source of civilisation; p.15 since civilisation comprises nothing that displays this criterion of morality, it is morally neutral; p.276 This is not to signify that civilisation serves no purpose, but it is not the services that it renders that cause it to progress&It cannot explain the existence or progress of that division, since of itself it has no intrinsic or absolute value. --Grace Pai