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Civilization on Trial - Again. Civilization and the Study of World Politics: Reading Arnold Toynbee Today

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Content: 1.- Introduction; 2.- The problematic revival of civilizational discourse; 3.- Toynbee's life-work, an introduction; 4.- Toynbee's approach to history: positioning the nation-state; 5.- Genesis and growth of civilizations; 6.- Civilization and the individual; 7.- The end of the cycle: breakdown and disintegration of civilizations; 8.- Intercivilizational encounters; 9.- Modern encounters between contemporaries; 10.- Theorizing intercivilizational encounters; 11.- Modernity, globalization and world-unity.

1. - The collapse of the Cold War, and the analytical paradigms within the discipline of International Relations that accompanied it, was sudden and unpredicted. It led from the early 1990s to a scramble for new frameworks with which to explain and conceptualize world politics. IR scholars began to trawl the waters of the other fields of social science, especially anthropology and sociology, and belatedly began to incorporate well-established approaches such as social constructivism, feminism and postmodernism. At the same time a revival of meta-theories and meta-narratives was under way, and some of these sought to incorporate history of the *longue durée* and the re-introduction of large-scale societal/cultural complexes. Among the forefront of these was the 'Clash of Civilizations' thesis proffered by Samuel P. Huntington¹. While generating widespread debate and not a few polemics, Huntington's contribution produced relatively little in the way of empirical research purporting to test the hypothesis (and to the extent that this did take place, the research tended to contradict Huntington's main point: statistically, the larger part of political conflicts today still take place within states and within 'religions').

The debates that arose in the aftermath of Huntington's work also produced very little theoretical development within the framework of civilizations, or actual 'civilizational analysis'. As we will argue below, this is hardly surprising, as Huntington most basically posited 'civilizations' as rather essentialist time-space units, while pay-

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¹ Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" in *Foreign Affairs* 72(3), 1993, pp. 22-49; and Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, London: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

ing little attention to civilization as process. More surprisingly, the return to 'civilization' as a master concept generated even less reflexivity on the part of IR theorists regarding the tradition of civilizational analysis within their own discipline, and ways in which the 'civilizations' concept might be cultivated to produce more valuable yields in IR theory and research. In short, IR scholars by and large failed to take stock of their own canon of civilization studies and they did not attempt to move beyond Huntington. Facing these facts, this article has a simple aim: it wishes to readdress the civilization debate, and it wishes to do so by revisiting the work of Arnold J. Toynbee. It will be argued that Toynbee, despite evident shortcomings, developed a conceptual and theoretical framework that might be of some use for contemporary studies of world politics.

The argument will proceed as follows: after shortly situating the 'civilization-debate' in contemporary scholarship, we will briefly introduce Toynbee's intellectual trajectory and shortly state his 'philosophy of history'. In the following sections, the fundamental characteristics of Toynbee's theory of civilizational mechanics, as expounded in his *Study of History*, will be elucidated. Throughout, the links between this work and his thinking on IR, which are recorded in his voluminous writings in the *Surveys of International Relations* and in published papers and lectures, will be highlighted. We will then address 'intercivilizational encounters', firstly because it is precisely at this point that Toynbee's conception of civilizations as self-enclosed 'intelligible units' became problematic, and secondly because it is also in this field that relations between 'parochial communities' (e.g. states) from disparate civilizations likewise become problematic. We will conclude by relating Toynbee's thought to that of other social theorists who elaborated similar concepts and ideas and tentatively point both to fruitful and problematic prospects of the concept of civilization in studying politics in a period of 'globalization' – the period in which we live.

2. - Within IR debates, the levels of analysis remained fairly stable since the post-World War II period, ascending from the individual through the state up to the international system at the global level². The very name of the discipline indicates a natural focus on interactions between nation-states and IR scholars have, as a consequence, engaged the civilization debate with some hesitance. The dramatic changes that have taken place on a global scale since the 1980s have, however, called into question the state-centric focus of IR. The conception of a 'closed' sovereign state is no longer tenable, and even neo-realist scholars have come to accept the multi-sited nature of international politics. To a varying degree, IR scholars have therefore come to accept that the state should be considered one among several layers of analysis. While this debate has often been surrounded by claims concerning the 'novelty' of our post- Cold War period, and the particular challenges posed by 'globalization',

² J.D. Singer, "The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations", in *World Politics* 14(1), 1961, pp. 77-92; Nicolas Onuf, "Levels", in *European Journal of International Relations* 3(1), 1995, pp. 35-58; J.L. Ray, "Integrating Levels of Analysis in World Politics", in *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 13(4) 2001, pp. 355-388.

one might bear in mind Toynbee's more radical claim, made 70 years ago, that the state is not and cannot be an intelligible unit of study. Below we debate Toynbee, not in order to argue that 'civilizations' should be considered the only meaningful level of analysis, but in order to consider more in detail why and how it can be considered *one* such level of analysis. Pace Toynbee, a proper understanding of world politics must incorporate civilizations as one among many levels of analysis and perhaps considered as 'intervening variables'³.

Besides opening up the level-of-analysis question, the civilization debate also touches upon the temporal horizons of analysis. While the disciplines of sociology, political science and international relations branched off into separate spheres of inquiry during the 20th century, they often shared the premise that analysis could and should be retained within 'the contemporary period', i.e. the modern period. Even when the understanding of 'contemporary' differed⁴, this understanding perpetuated the Enlightenment self-understanding that 'our time' is radically different, and that references to earlier periods mostly serve to trace the genealogy of certain terms and ideas (like state and democracy) that only came to full maturity and institutional accomplishment in modernity. In contrast to this standard view, a number of scholars have increasingly started to question the belief that the period of modernity can be studied in its own terms⁵. This recognition was indeed anticipated by classical scholars like Max Weber and Eric Voegelin, who both turned to antiquity in their attempts to diagnose the problematics of the present. In IR, the recognition was part and parcel of Toynbee's vision.

The invocation of the civilization concept also relates to the broader culture debate which has challenged IR theory since the 1990s. As argued earlier in this Journal⁶, the attempt to introduce 'culture' as both a descriptive and conceptual-analytical term in IR theory has represented quite a hurdle. It is increasingly recognized that cultural factors (identity, religion, ethnicity) are gaining salience for the articulation of political and social movements, for the establishment of legitimacy in politics, and for the escalation of conflict in world politics. However, the concept of culture is extremely difficult to pin down and operationalize. Cultures can exist at multiple levels and in various dimensions for each individual, from the local community to nation to civilization, from kin to ethnic group to religion, and some would argue that there is now emerging a shared global culture. Tersely put, 'culture' cannot itself explain anything. To insist on the importance of the concept of civilization certainly does not mean to solve this hurdle and, pace Huntington, offer a bullet-proof 'cultural realism', where 'culture' or 'civilizational outlook' simply replace 'state interest' as the independent variable. On this point, Toynbee, albeit largely unaware

³ Stephen D. Krasner, "Structural Causes and Regime Consequences: Regimes as Intervening Variables", in *International Organization* 36(2), 1982, pp. 185-205.

⁴ IR scholars have always tended to see 'their' modernity as starting with Westphalia, while sociologists tend to stress modernization processes following scientific break-throughs and the industrial revolution.

⁵ Arpad Szokolczai, "Civilization and Its Sources", *International Sociology* 16(3), 2001, pp. 369-386.

⁶ Bjørn Thomassen, "Culture and International Relations: The Challenge of the New 'Identity Politics'", in *Historical Processes and Peace Politics*, no. 3, 2007, pp. 135-155.

of the anthropological culture-debate which loomed large already then, did in fact offer some insights worth pursuing, especially via his analysis of mimesis and self-articulation.

This all indicates that while there may be strong reasons to suggest a return to the question of civilization, that 'return' needs to be made with care. One can identify two sets of challenges concerning the use of 'civilization', and they should be stated very explicitly at the outset. First of all, the very fact that Huntington published his original article in *Foreign Affairs*, in a journal devoted to foreign policy – and in particular American foreign policy – reminds us about the strongly ideological connotations of the term. This is of course nothing new. As the ideological counterpart to political colonialism, evolutionist ideology of the 19th century took Western civilization as the taken-for-granted starting point and measure for inquiry. This involved a self-glorifying moral hierarchy between civilized people (the West) and the less civilized or un-civilized Other (the rest). To accept that the West is only one among multiple civilizations (as does Huntington) only superficially tackles this problematic inheritance. And indeed, as Huntington's vocabulary has imploded in political and ordinary discourse, the tendency to re-install a moral hierarchy of western superiority is evident enough. It is therefore not surprising that many social theorists resist, on these grounds alone, any re-introduction of the heavily loaded term Civilization, too reminiscent of worn out ideas supposing Western supremacy, and today mimetically reproduced in well-known versions about 'Islamic moral superiority', not to mention politicized versions of a particular 'Chinese civilization' (routinely used by Chinese political leaders to dismiss Western notions of democracy). 'Civilization' seems too inflated. Too many bombs have been thrown in its name.

Second of all, a major problem concerns the very fact that 'civilization' is a noun – and it is exactly as noun that it so easily becomes *norm*. To speak of 'a civilization' implies both to give 'it' a substance, in terms of cultural content, and to locate 'it' geographically with fairly delimited territorial boundaries. This usage is in itself a discursive creation of the object, a far-from-innocent process of reification that needs to be studied in its own terms. However, in terms of a starting point for analysis, the unquestioned existence of 'civilizations' is hardly tenable. It blocks us from asking what should indeed be considered the major questions to tackle: how and when do 'civilizations' emerge, develop and (eventually) disappear? How do 'civilizations' merge, fuse and sometimes contrast with each other, and how do civilizational encounters spur development and innovation and (sometimes) violent conflict?

One can also reformulate the issue more fundamentally by turning civilization into a verb: to civilize. Here again one encounters the problem of an unbearable ideological luggage, as the notion 'to civilize' was exactly the ethical command of Western Imperialism. However, if one infers the notion of a 'civilizing process' this problem is overcome, as it can be taken to refer in a value-neutral way to infra-societal dynamics within larger areas. This was indeed the aim in Norbert Elias' by now famous work, *The Civilizing Process* (1994). In the *Civilising Process* Norbert Elias elegantly demonstrated how a specific kind of self-formation within the European court socie-

ties produced a fundamental and wide-ranging transformation of Western culture, which would affect the transformed, monopolised political rule called Absolutism. For Elias, therefore, the civilizing process was very much about how constraints on human behaviour were internalized, best summed up in his expression, the ‘courtization of the warrior’. Elias recognised that while this implied a historical process of ‘taming violence’, it by no means immunized societies from outbreaks of infra- and intra-societal war. Elias published the *Civilising Process in Germany* in 1939 – shortly after he barely escaped the clutches of the Nazis.

A larger discussion of Elias’ work is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is clear that we need to separate very clearly two very different understandings of ‘civilization’: civilization as bounded, territorial wholes, and civilization as process⁷. In the final analysis, the two meanings will of course overlap, as civilization processes, as suggested by Elias himself, do of course take place within some kind of delimited areas. However, these areas are much more open-ended than Huntington’s approach allows us to accept, and in terms of the *longue durée* approach advocated here, they can and will change over time.

This distinction should help us to overcome the false dilemma looming in the discipline of International Relations: that of either adopting a misguided and ultimately a-historical and a-processual approach to civilizations through Huntington or, alternatively, dismissing the concept altogether due to a confusion of the concept itself with its ideological baggage⁸. To avoid this, we see no other route but to engage the established but heretofore marginal canon of civilizational analysis. While there are significant works that antedate Toynbee’s *Study*, for the IR scholar his work is the most accessible point of entry into the civilizations discourse. The argument that follows is therefore an attempt to redress the reflexivity gap in IR thought on civilizations by situating the work of Arnold J. Toynbee at the heart of the canon of civilizational discourse in International Relations. As the first scholar who was seriously occupied with the study of civilizations while simultaneously being deeply engaged in the study of international affairs, Toynbee and his whole *corpus* merit greater attention. Toynbee might not be an end point for this discussion, and the below presentation is by no means exhaustive. However, he might be a starting point. It should be stressed that we engage this discussion not merely with the aim of recovering a lost piece of intellectual history. It is a telling fact that the very notion of ‘World Politics’ which was routinely used in the interwar period, by Toynbee and others, has recently resurfaced, and may be about to replace the notion of ‘International Relations’ (this is already happening in several US degree programs). This change of vocabulary should not be mistaken for a simple question of changing fashions: the notion of World Politics, in contrast to International Relations, implies that the ‘world’ must be studied as a unit, not reducible to interstate relations, and it implies that the total is more than the sum of its components – that there is a ‘bigger

⁷ Our argument is here inspired by Roland Robertson, “Civilization,” in *Theory, Culture and Society*, 23(2-3), 2006, pp. 421-436.

⁸ For critiques of the Huntington Thesis, see Thomassen, *op. cit.* and Johan Arnason, *Civilizations in Dispute: Historical Questions and Theoretical Traditions*. Leiden: Brill, 2003, pp. 11-13.

picture'. In short, there might be something about the present period that invites a reconsideration of ideas that were developed in the prewar period, and ideas which came to the fore in the immediate post-war period.

3. - «In an hour of crisis, when the order of a society flounders and disintegrates, the fundamental problems of political existence in history are more apt to come into view than in periods of comparative stability⁹».

Eric Voegelin

Toynbee is a puzzling figure. His name has moved between the forefront of fame (Newsweek wrote in 1947 that Toynbee had become more influential than Marx), to complete oblivion. Toynbee is rarely even mentioned in contemporary textbook Introductions to International Relations. Hence – and this is sad enough – a short biographical introduction is needed before we move on to the substance of his thought.

From early childhood, Arnold J. Toynbee (1889-1975) was exposed to the classical education that was usual of a British gentleman. His mother, who had studied history at Cambridge, would frequently read to him historical stories and both she and an uncle consistently “encouraged a precocious bookishness and cultivated the child’s skill with language”¹⁰. A critical juncture in Toynbee’s intellectual development came in 1903 when he fell ill with pneumonia. While he was recuperating at the home of a relative who lived in the country nearby, he was given an historical atlas, which turned out to be a formative reading experience. On the basis of the historical maps of the world contained in the atlas, Toynbee began reading history books available in the house to gather data which he used to reconstruct various political maps of different eras in his ‘Drawing Book’¹¹. This liminal figuration¹² – illness, withdrawal from the ordinary routine of school life and a prolonged stay in the country – stimulated new ideas in Toynbee’s imagination of multiple civilizations as units of study, and particularly of Asia. This presented a stark contrast to the formality of his school studies and allowed him to think of the past “on a grand scale, bridging time and space as specialists [and his professors] habitually refused to do...”¹³.

Toynbee continued his education at the prestigious Balliol College at Oxford University, where the don of the school, Alexander Lindsay, imparted to Toynbee the evolutionary thinking in the manner of Henri Bergson, whose philosophy would

⁹ Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987[1952], p. 1.

¹⁰ William H. McNeill, *Toynbee: A Life*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 7. One of the exercises that his uncle had him perform was to memorize and recite scriptural verses. Interestingly, the same uncle wrote a religious tract in which he declared “man’s greatest failing to be idolatry of the self”, a phrase that Toynbee would use in discussing the “nemesis of creativity” in regards to civilizational breakdown (see below).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

¹² Norbert Elias, *What is Sociology?*, Hutchinson & Co., 1978, and *The Civilizing Process*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.

¹³ McNeill, *op. cit.*, p. 17

play prominently in Toynbee's *Study*¹⁴. Another influence was the Regius Professor of Greek, Gilbert Murray, who "did a good deal to set the tone for Oxford classicists. What he sought, always, was to connect the ancients with the contemporary world, making their words, thoughts, and lives relevant to his own time"¹⁵. This tone contributed to Toynbee's preexisting tendency to make wide-ranging parallels between historical periods, which would become stock-in-trade in all of his writings in subsequent years.

When the Great War erupted in 1914 Toynbee was a don at Balliol, tutoring undergraduates in Greek. For the first time, Toynbee threw all his intellectual energies into the serious study of international affairs, producing his first book, *Nationalism and the War*, in 1915. In the same year he began working for a propaganda office in the government, focusing on Ottoman affairs. This led to his transfer two years later to the newly created Political Intelligence Division (PID), from where he would influence British foreign policy during and after the war¹⁶, although at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 he became disillusioned as it was apparent that British Prime Minister David Lloyd George was uninterested in entertaining the advice of his experts, academic and diplomatic alike.

This failure to get his ideas accepted at the peace conference, combined with financial stress and dissatisfaction in his post-war appointment to the Koraes Chair¹⁷ at the University of London, led to a physical and moral collapse. His dream was to begin serious work on his "great book" of a philosophy of history, an idea that had been germinating in his mind since his college days, but the magnitude of the project and the lack of a clear framework for undertaking it, together with lingering identity issues from the war (for which he did not enroll) left him demoralized: "I feel uprooted and bewildered. Everything is in such a flux that I had to take the professorship... I am in a loathsomely neurasthenic and self-centered condition"¹⁸.

It was during this psychological lapse that he claimed to have had a vision of the great span of history. While drawing parallels between ancient and modern societies was commonplace among classically educated Europeans, in was done in "diffuse and unfocused ways" before the war: "For Toynbee, the war made the comparison crisper and far more compelling"¹⁹. During this personal and civilizational crisis period, Toynbee began to draw the connections between the processes that took place in Ancient Greece and what had just taken place in Europe. This represented a shift in Toynbee's thinking about history from a Herodotean perspective, typified by an em-

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26. Lindsay would also play an instrumental role, by supplying philosophical arguments, in Toynbee's rejection of Christianity. The other element in this rejection was his awareness of the historicity of Christianity as a "monument to the sensibilities of a particular time and place, with no valid claim to universal and eternal truth" (29). Voegelin would take issue with exactly this part of Toynbee's theory, as it would lead Toynbee to place Christianity as a peripheral part of the 'Syriac civilization', clearly understating its role.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27. Toynbee would, in 1913, marry Murray's daughter, Rosalind.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹⁷ A new chair, supported by the Greek diaspora community in London, where he was expected to teach history, literature and language of the Greeks from the Byzantine period up to the modern Greek nation-state.

¹⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 87.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

phasis on a perennial east/west dialectic, to a Thucydidean approach, characterized by tragic, recurrent patterns and compartmentalized units²⁰. This reflexive experience was complemented and compounded by a second formative reading experience in the work of Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes (The Decline of the West)*, in 1920. This reading helped Toynbee to give shape to his conception of civilizations and their mechanics as well as to locate some problematic aspects of earlier false starts and of approaches taken by others²¹. Toynbee would use the Koraeas Chair professorship as a platform from which to work out the details of his philosophy of history, regardless of whether his explorations fell within the parameters of Greek history. He did not however abandon his immediate concern with international affairs, and when the Greco-Turkish war broke out in 1920 he obtained permission to travel to Greece and Turkey in the following year to observe firsthand the events.

It was during his travels in Turkey that Toynbee became convinced that civilizations are closed, monadic entities that are fundamentally incomprehensible to each other, taking up the view posited by Spengler. The atrocious behavior on both sides of the conflict led Toynbee to conclude that it was the result of the “breakdown of traditional civilized moral codes” and the “desperate efforts Greeks and Turks were both making to fashion nation states on the west European model. Aping the West in this way required the repudiation of an older and distinctively Near Eastern mode of political and social order...”²². The culmination of this expedition was another book, *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey: A Study in the Contact of Civilizations*, where he argued that the longstanding ‘Eastern Question’ in European diplomacy was in fact a Western question inasmuch as it was the consequence of the West having prevailed in the encounter with the Byzantine and Islamic civilizations, and the disastrous resultant breakdown of the latter two.

It was during Toynbee’s journey back to England in September 1921, on the Oriental Express that Toynbee first formulated his mature vision for *A Study of History*, which he drafted on twelve pages of notebook paper. The most significant heading, which he would expand to comprise nearly the entirety of the final *magnum opus*, was the third heading entitled “Comparison of Civilizations”, under which were subheadings that more or less corresponded with the outline of the final work²³. Home again, Toynbee then took a position at the British Institute of International Affairs, where he was contracted to write a survey of world politics in the years 1920-23. This led to a full-time position as the Institute’s Director of Studies, where he was responsible for producing the annual *Survey of International Affairs*. With a secure and steady means of living, Toynbee was able to settle into an intensely rigorous work routine, producing the *Survey* during the winter and spring months and dedicating summers, beginning in 1929, to *A Study of History*.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 98. This shift of thought was marked in Toynbee’s written *corpus* by the important lecture at Oxford in 1920, “The Tragedy of Greece”, which “in effect provided an occasion for Toynbee to put the impress of the war upon his prewar mastery of Greek and Roman history and literature” (p. 97).

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99 Another thinker that helped to clarify Toynbee’s thinking on civilizations was F.J. Teggart, but the impact was much more minor, and in fact was overshadowed by that of Spengler.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 103.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 94, 111.

4. - While Toynbee was not unaffected by the “scientific worldview” of his times, as historians were making attempts at modeling their discipline after the “hard” sciences, his writing was equally influenced by a Romantic style – and this alone makes him difficult to place in the academic landscape, then as today. Instead of attempting to obscure all traces of imagination, according to McNeill he made “the poetic dimension of his achievement more transparent than the conventions of academic history, as defined in German seminars of the late nineteenth century, had allowed”²⁴.

Toynbee held the belief that historians must possess a “second sight that is called intuition” and claimed that “Art and history resemble each other in both being activities of the imagination working upon experience”²⁵. He rejected the view that valid history must rest on meticulously researched articles and monographs, arguing that these were the product of the “industrialization of historical thought” which produced a division of labor and a deprecation of “works of historical literature which are produced by a single mind”²⁶. His command of historical facts and his powerful memory allowed him to oscillate between disparate periods to illustrate correlations and parallels.

Neither did Toynbee shy away from moral judgments of historical events and actors. While arguing that, especially in writing contemporary history as in the *Surveys*, the historian ought to be both charitable, tentative and dispassionate, he insisted that if the historian’s duty was to communicate to readers all of the relevant facts and considerations of a given subject matter, it was inherent to that duty to make explicit one’s own value-judgments²⁷. This was to him vital for the writing of *fair* (as opposed to ‘objective’) history, since because humans are social animals “it is of the essence of human actions that they do evoke moral judgments; and these judgments are an intrinsic part of the acts to which the judgments attach”²⁸.

Toynbee also denied any strict dividing line between history and contemporary events, another position that seems particularly relevant for current debates: “I could not, I believe, have done either piece of work if I had not been doing the other at the same time. A survey of current affairs on a world-wide scale can be made only against a background of world-history; and a study of world-history would have no life in it if it left out the history of the writer’s own lifetime...”²⁹.

In terms of methodology, Toynbee argued that the human sciences should follow the natural sciences insofar as they used a comparative method to categorize their data and events and to discern patterns and structures. Thus, an “inquiry into civilization should therefore begin discursively with an examination of the several civilized societies which have regarded themselves as distinct from the rest of the hu-

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁶ Ian Hall, “Challenge and Response: The Lasting Engagement of Arnold J. Toynbee and Martin Wight”, in *International Relations* 17(3), 2003, p. 393.

²⁷ Arnold Toynbee, “The Writing of Contemporary History for Chatham House”, in *International Affairs* 29 (2), 1953, p. 138.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 138. Also here, of course, Toynbee could have elaborated his methodological points by incorporating Max Weber.

²⁹ Arnold Toynbee, “A Study of History: What I am Trying to Do”, in *International Affairs* 31(1), 1955, p. 1.

man race. When we have noted a number of phenomena common to some or all of these, we shall have obtained material for an analysis of civilization itself"³⁰. While denying that specific encounters were subject to scientific laws, it would appear that the larger processes of societies reveal patterns consistent enough to be categorized as such.

From this Toynbee deduced that the "intelligible unit of historical study" was not the nation-state, but a larger society which was the field of these larger processes. Any one nation-state's history was in effect incomprehensible without reference to its foreign relations with other (especially contiguous) states. Civilizations, on the other hand, were self-contained historical units in that their historical processes could be explained without reference to entities beyond their own parameters, however defined³¹. Once such units are discerned and categorized according to their principal shared characteristics, they become amenable to comparative study. Toynbee clearly understood civilizations as referring to larger entities where interaction is intense and where mutual influence and exchange of ideas, world-views, techniques and institutional arrangements happen relatively undisturbed across internal boundaries. Civilizations encompass minor units like nations or societies, and Toynbee would identify 26 such units during the entire history of mankind. The only larger unit bigger than civilization is humankind itself. In Toynbee's simultaneous projects, therefore, there was a dialectic between civilizations as intelligible units and the parochial communities into which civilizations were articulated and which were the primary acting units of history.

5. - When Toynbee began publishing his *Study* it was initially widely read, debated, acclaimed and criticized, but it rapidly fell from stardom and has in the passage of time fallen largely by the wayside. His occasional use of language in the vein of positivistic physical science, and especially his argument for causal laws in civilizational processes, has led many to dismiss *A Study of History* as an artifact of an earlier generation of social scientists, among whom the "hard" sciences were held as *the* model of scientific legitimacy. To later scholars, his work was approached as a reflection of the interwar and wartime mood or was outright ridiculed for its religiosity and emphasis on mysticism³². The result is that the excitement over his *Study* rapidly waned and it became the clichéd work "more talked about than read", and in contemporary scholarship it hardly even receives that distinction.

While much of the academic criticism of *A Study of History* is justified (the work is riddled with difficulties, incoherence and not a few absurdities) Toynbee approaches several key insights – specifically *self-articulation*, *mimesis* and *schism* – that were or would be apprehended and penetrated more thoroughly in the course of diverse in-

³⁰ McNeill, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

³¹ Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, abridgement of volumes I-VI, by D.C. Somervell, New York: Oxford University Press, 1946, pp. 1-11.

³² Cornelia Navari, "Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975): Prophesy and Civilization" in *Review of International Studies* 26, 2000, p. 289; William H. McNeill, (1988). "Toynbee Revisited", *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 41(7), 1988, p. 22; Hall, *op. cit.*

dependent projects by such social theorists as Eric Voegelin, Gregory Bateson and René Girard. These concepts, as well as that of the *creative personality*, which bears considerable resemblance to Max Weber's *charisma*, are of direct relevance for the study not only of domestic politics and society, but also civilizations and world politics, and need attention.

The stages through which civilizations pass in their historical development are, according to Toynbee, four: genesis, growth, breakdown and disintegration. While most commentators refer to this formula as his "cyclical theory", Toynbee himself rejected cyclical theories of history, remarking that history in fact is composed of two distinct movements. There is a minor, recurrent movement of back-and-forth challenge and response, out of which is born the major, irreversible movement that is not a repetition of a pattern but is rather a developing, progressive design³³. This did not mean, however, that he believed in the inevitability of progress – the specific direction of human affairs was unpredictable in his view, a view which did not however prevent him from "prophesying".

5.1. Stage One: Genesis of civilizations

The first civilizations, such as the Sumerian, Egyptian or Mayan, were primitive societies which underwent a transition from a static to dynamic condition – they shifted their gaze from the traditional to the new and creative. This transition is brought about by a confluence of challenges from the human environment in the form of external blows (foreign incursions), external pressures (extended strain on the frontiers), and internal penalizations (the loss of a particular collective capacity due to specialization), and from the physical environment. In short, the explanandum being sought "is something not simple but multiple, not an entity but a relation."³⁴ This nexus of elements confronts societies with a series of problems each of which challenges them to undergo an ordeal. As the challenge is greater so will be the ordeal to which a society is subjected, resulting in a proportionately greater stimulus to creative forces substantial enough to generate civilization.

At this point Toynbee has identified five types of stimulus: hard country, new ground, external blows, external pressure, and internal penalization. "As for the human protagonist's part," Toynbee says, "suffering is the keynote of [genesis] in every presentation of the drama"³⁵. The stress on human suffering and the centrality of the ordeal for transformative experiences is reminiscent of the Nietzsche-inspired Weber (to which Toynbee does not refer) but also of the work that anthropologist Victor Turner would later do on the subjective transforming capacity of liminality in ritual processes³⁶.

Even in affiliated – as opposed to hearth – societies, Toynbee sees these general

³³ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1946, p. 253. This view was adopted during the process of writing the first six volumes, during which he underwent two spiritual experiences: the first while traveling in Asia, and the second when his eldest son committed suicide.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

³⁶ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*, Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1969; see also Bjorn Thomassen, "The Uses and Meanings of Liminality" in *International Political Anthropology*, 2 (1), 2009, pp. 5-27.

stimuli as fundamental for the genesis of civilization. In his analysis of the competition between the East and West blocs in the ‘Third World’ during the Cold War, he highlights the fact that the fundamental movement among the peoples in Asia, Africa and Latin America is not between one ideology or another, but in the struggle to improve their material conditions³⁷. These regions, he argues, would be able to carry out such a technological and economic “revolution” unaided, but only at a very great cost in human suffering. As Toynbee notes, “Until one satisfies these elementary needs, ideologies, different forms of governments, and so on are far beyond one’s horizon”, further adding that “the revolution for getting the basic material necessities of life is... only the foundation for another revolution which is a spiritual one”³⁸.

If the greater challenge produces a proportionately greater stimulus for the emergence of civilizations, can this be increased *ad infinitum*, or is there a point beyond which the severity of the challenge produces diminishing returns? Toynbee sifts through his historical illustrations and emerges with the conclusion that “the most stimulating challenge is to be found in a mean between a deficiency of severity and an excess of it”³⁹. Four terms stand in relation to challenges according to the degree of exposure or severity. The extreme terms of insipid immunity and overwhelming bombardment suffer respectively from lack of stimuli and annihilating severity of them. The middle terms of optimum stimulus and pyrrhic victory both achieve a positive response of creation, but the latter’s overexposure stultifies full emergence and growth. In other words, the extreme terms result in abortive civilizations while the pyrrhic middle term culminates in an arrested civilization.

5.2. Stage Two: The Growth of Civilizations

While a combination of challenges posed by the physical and human environments is sufficient for stimulating the genesis of civilizations, Toynbee makes it clear that while necessary for their growth they are no longer sufficient. The outward challenges can produce a *tour de force*⁴⁰ on the part of a society to respond to those challenges, which in highly specialized environments can result in adaptation that is equally specialized and the society will arrest its growth. He gives as classic examples the Eskimos (Inuit) and Steppe nomads.

What is needed for growth is rather is a recurrent rhythm of challenge/response: “The real optimum challenge is one which not only stimulates the challenged party to achieve a single successful response but also stimulates him to acquire momentum

³⁷ Arnold Toynbee, “Communism and the West in Asian Countries”, in *Annals of the American Academy of Political Social Science* 336, 1961, pp. 30-39.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 32, 31. Toynbee does not, of course, restrict this to religion but uses it to apply to all forms of individual and collective self-development, such as education and other forms of self-improvement.

³⁹ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1946, p. 140. This analysis is congruent with the Axial Age thesis of Karl Jaspers (*The Origin and Goal of History*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), since the decisive breakthroughs of the axial civilization happened in “middle-regions”. Toynbee in several areas of his *Study* perceives and recognizes the importance of the fundamental characteristics of what would be conceptualized as the Axial Age.

⁴⁰ A technical term for Toynbee, this concept carries the implication of a superhuman-like (unnatural) exertion on the part of a society. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

that carries him a step farther"⁴¹. This momentum is supplied by an *élan vital*, a vital leap or burst, which carries the civilization through equilibrium to overbalance and a fresh challenge. That is to say that the response provided by a civilization must in itself be *problematic*.

Growth can potentially be achieved in both an outward and inward aspect: outward, or Macrocosm, growth is manifested in the "progressive mastery over the external environment"; inward, or Microcosm, growth is revealed "as a progressive self-determination or self-articulation"⁴². Yet Toynbee argues that neither physical nor human environments show a correlation to civilizational growth (as opposed to genesis), and in fact mastery over the environment – whether in the form of technical advance or military expansion – would appear to be more concordant with civilizational breakdown. The quintessential example of this correlation is for Toynbee the Roman Empire: the period in which the empire was expanded and consolidated took place only after the "time of troubles" of Hellenic civilization – the Peloponnesian Wars in Greece and the Punic and civil wars in Rome – which stalled the growth of that civilization, causing it to break down. Needless to say, this conclusion may have direct relevance for understanding contemporary US foreign policy.

There exists in this discussion, however, an ambiguity inasmuch as in the earlier discussion where he attributes the mastery over the external physical environment to civilizational genesis. According to Toynbee, "human development is a process in which human individuals are moulded less and less by their environment... and adapt [it] more and more to their own will. And one can discern, I think, a point at which, rather suddenly, the human will takes the place of the mechanical laws of the environment as the governing factor in the relationship"⁴³. This view accords also with the illustration above regarding the development of the Asian, African and Latin American regions in which it was argued that material improvement must be antecedent to spiritual growth. Despite this confusion regarding the causal significance of the environment in terms of the genesis and breakdown of civilizations, it does not directly interfere with Toynbee's explanation of growth.

While these material aspects fail to provide, for Toynbee, a criterion for growth, the progress of technics reveals a governing principle: the law of progressive simplification. Simplification is not here used by Toynbee in the sense of diminutive omission, but instead as an "enhancement of practical efficiency or of aesthetic satisfaction or of intellectual grasp", liberating forces heretofore bound to a material medium "to work in a more ethereal medium with a greater potency". This formula might be restated as the "law of progressive etherealization" in which there occurs "a transfer of energy, or shift of emphasis, from some lower sphere of being or of action to a higher"⁴⁴.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 189. At *ibid.*: 199, he defines self-articulation and self-determination as coterminous. Although, following the introduction of the concepts, he predominantly uses self-determination throughout the work, we prefer here to adopt articulation in order to affect a confluence of terminology with the thought of Voegelin.

⁴³ McNeill, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

⁴⁴ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1946, p. 198.

Civilizational growth, then, occurs when the society exhibits a progressive shift of emphasis and scene of action from the Macrocosm to the Microcosm. This shift to the internal field gives the rhythm of challenge/response an arena in which challenges are self-generated and responses take the form of self-articulation. "Growth", Toynbee tells us, "means that the growing personality or civilization tends to become its own environment and its own challenger and its own field of action...[T]he criterion of growth is progress towards self-[articulation]"⁴⁵.

Europe and Western civilization provide for Toynbee the clearest illustration of this process. The first step towards self-articulation in Europe began during the *Völkwanderung* of the Scandinavian northmen, which stimulated in England and France the internal transfiguration or reordering of those communities into feudal societies⁴⁶. While this response was effective in dealing with the conditions from which it emerged, that figuration contained problematic elements in regards to relations among the social strata in the communities in which they existed. Once the conditions of emergence of the original figuration were no longer present or had themselves been transfigured, these internal contradictions and frictions would become more pronounced, thus posing a new and self-generated challenge.

The recurrence of challenge and successful response in civilizations, then, generates growth. The experience of the parochial communities into which the civilization is articulated is, however, not uniform and different communities can formulate variations of response⁴⁷. This tendency can be seen most apparently in the European case, where the state emerged in the early modern period in response to the problematic character of feudalism. This particular model was elaborated in diverse ways in the differing geo-historical regions of the subcontinent, with some being absolute monarchies, others parliamentary monarchies and yet others becoming composite states.

This differentiation into multiple, heterogeneous states, Toynbee argues, will always result in the emergence of a "balance of power"⁴⁸. The pressure in any balance of power system will always be greater at the center than at the periphery of the civilization because the center is the locus of the greatest contest for resources, not least importantly culture and ideas. Further, it is at the center of civilizations where the articulated communities compete with each other for the power and prestige to be the leaders of the civilization as a whole and influence the direction and character of its development. This can be witnessed in the struggle in Europe between France and its neighbors, most pronounced during the dynastic wars throughout the 18th century.

In time, however, the radiation of the spiritual and ideal civilization transforms the peripheral communities – which, being situated outside the center have far greater latitude for expansion outwards and thus greater material resources – and this "creative power at the centre equips the outsiders with the means to dominate

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 201-202.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 241-243.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 233-234; Arnold Toynbee, "Historical Parallels to Current International Problems", in *International Affairs* 10(4), 1931a, p. 479.

the creative centre, and, even against their will, to sterilize it and, with it, the whole of society”⁴⁹. While perhaps so equipped, this eventuality is not inevitable, and the maintenance of equilibrium is attainable under certain circumstances, including: a benign “holder” of the balance, moderation of resources of power, and continued creative attraction of the periphery by the center.

Political philosopher Eric Voegelin also acknowledged the significance of articulation for the development of societies, which he says is the symbol expressing the rise and fall of political societies⁵⁰. He takes the issue further, moreover, by positing that problems of articulation arise not only (indeed, not even particularly) during growth, but are most pronounced in the emergence, epochal phase, and disintegration of societies. Articulation is a society’s historical process of structuring itself through institutions, stratification, and symbolization. In this process some of the society’s members must be enabled with the power to rule, and when such rule is “effectively imputed” within a society, those members can be considered “representative” of it⁵¹.

Though originated in a discussion of acting political societies – which most civilizations are not, in the strict sense – this notion of effective imputation contains clear implications for understanding Toynbee’s distinction within a civilization between the two groups of the creative minority and the uncreative majority. It would appear also that this notion will illuminate as well the modality by which creative individuals from varied communities can form into a discernible class. Effective imputation bears the connotation of carrying “force”, not in the sense of coercion but rather as an undeniable “authority”. If we allow the term to be extended in this manner, then it can be seen how intellectuals, artists, entrepreneurs or statesmen might all exercise effective imputation beyond their provincial society in the civilization at large⁵². Through their creations, these individuals attract admiration and imitation, and the more truly those creations represent the true order or nature of things the more effective and enduring will be their imputation.

6. - Before continuing with the last two stages in Toynbee’s analysis, break-down and disintegration, it is necessary to account for the role played by historical individuals in Toynbee’s analysis. For, contrary to Huntington and almost all other “system” thinkers, Toynbee places a great deal of emphasis precisely on *individuals*. It is in particular Toynbee’s postulate of growth as progressive self-articulation that brings to the fore the question of the relation in which societies and individuals stand to one other, for self-articulation can only take place via interpretative acts of recogni-

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 482; Kenneth W. Thompson, “Toynbee and the Theory of International Politics,” in *Political Science Quarterly* 71(3), 1956, pp. 369, 377-381.

⁵⁰ Voegelin, *op. cit.*, p. 41. Though he discusses articulation in the sense of “organization of political societies for action”, such as kingdoms or states, the relevance of the concept at the broader level of civilizations is clear, and is even indicated by Voegelin when he twice makes reference to Toynbee (pp. 41, 50-51).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

⁵² The modalities by which creative minorities are formed and exert influence *at the level of civilization* is never clearly dealt with by Toynbee, who seems often to fall into the trap of “misplaced concreteness”, often discussing civilizations as an entity organized for action (in Voegelinian language).

tion. Toynbee rejects the sociological models prevalent in his time for reifying the individual as an atomic unit, a *homo clausus*, and society as an independent whole. He adopts instead a definition of society as “a product of the relations between individuals, and these relations of theirs arise from the coincidence of their individual fields of action”⁵³ – a formulation which at least rudimentarily approximates Norbert Elias’ concept of *figuration*⁵⁴.

According to Toynbee all acts of social creation are the work of individuals or minorities. The individuals who initiate civilizational growth processes have a specific character that he describes as “creative personality”, and of which mystics are illustrations *par excellence*. These are individuals that have undergone a personal, internal transfiguration of self-articulation and attained what was described a moment ago as a transfer of energy and shift of emphasis to a higher sphere of being and action⁵⁵.

One cannot help but take notice of the affinity this “creative personality” bears to Max Weber’s “charismatic leader”. Weber defines charisma as “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities”, which are “not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin”⁵⁶. For Weber, this concept was critical for understanding social action. “The concept of charisma implies a *social relation*. Charisma is a quality that someone has because followers *believe* the person to have it”⁵⁷. Indeed, Toynbee very nearly affiliates himself with Weber in a later section where he uses the phrase “gift of charm” to describe his creative personality⁵⁸.

These creative or charismatic personalities tend to follow a “mystic path” that results in a recurrent “*motif* of withdrawal and transfiguration leading up to a return”⁵⁹. In all fundamental respects this mirrors the universal tripartite formula of ritual passages – separation, liminality, reintegration – developed by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep⁶⁰. In the withdrawal phase, the personality is removed from mundane, taken-for-granted existence, released from “social toils and trammels”. During this period of withdrawal the individual undergoes a psychic experience or

⁵³ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1946, p. 211.

⁵⁴ Elias, *op. cit.*, 1978, pp. 74-95 and 2000. The concept of *figuration* denotes the integrated power ratios, functional interdependencies, and the rules – whether explicit or implicit – that govern the actions of the players. Yet it is also more than these component parts: it is also the structure that emerges from the interweaving of the players’ actions on the basis of these components and their conception of the “game”, i.e. the *figuration* itself. The *figuration* that emerges from this interweaving of individual moves of many players very often (if not always) “takes a course *which none of the individual players has planned, determined or anticipated*”. The greater the complexity of the *figuration* – i.e. the greater the number of players, relationships and moves – the greater will be its autonomy from the individual players.

⁵⁵ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1946, pp. 212-213.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Bjorn Thomassen, “Alexander the Great as Charismatic Leader”, in *The AUR Working Paper Series*, 2005 (<http://www.archive.aur.it>), p. 4-5.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁵⁸ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1946, p. 366.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 221. Elias notes this as well, seeing the need for detachment exactly at the height of a conflict, and it is what initiands learn during liminality. Norbert Elias, *Involvement and Detachment*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1987.

⁶⁰ Arnold van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960[1909].

subjective transformation that makes possible the realization of internal powers, penetrating insights and novel ideas. Finally, the transfigured personality returns to the social milieu from which he came, but no longer on a level plane with the other members of society⁶¹.

Apart from the mystics which were mentioned earlier as creative personalities *par excellence* Toynbee takes the personalities of Mahatma Gandhi and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin as his “ideal types” to illustrate the creative personality⁶². Both of these charismatic leaders were able to diagnose the problematic of their respective societies – namely modernization, as a result of earlier intercivilizational encounters (to be discussed below) – and each formulated a response. These responses were aimed primarily at the wholesale transfiguration of the society, but this was carried out in such a way that the very element of disruption was incorporated in a newly interpreted form into the society.

For Toynbee, it is through *inward* development of personality that individuals are able to achieve creative acts in the *outward* field of action⁶³. But because the transfigured personality of the creative individual is no longer in consonance with the untransfigured majority of the society, he is compelled to bring about the same creative mutation in the whole of society. The creative mutation which has taken place in the microcosm of the mystic requires an adaptative modification in the macrocosm before it can become either complete or secure; but *ex hypothesi* the macrocosm of the transfigured personality is also the macrocosm of his untransfigured fellow men, and his effort to transform the macrocosm in consonance with the change in himself will be resisted by their inertia⁶⁴.

Failure of the creative personality to transform his milieu will leave him in the dangerous position of the outcast. Danger similarly arises, however, with success in overcoming social inertia. By upsetting the inertia, the traditional ordering codes of society are disrupted, creating profound anxiety among those members of society who transform more slowly or fail to transform altogether.

To maintain social cohesion and secure a uniform thrust – in both vigor and direction – towards transformation, the “generic feature of social life”, mimesis, must be enlisted⁶⁵. Charisma induces the uncreative majority to redirect their mimetic faculty from tradition and ancestors towards the creative personality. Mimetic processes allow individuals, civilizations and societies to acquire social “assets” – such as aptitudes, emotions or ideas – not originated by them and which they might not otherwise have attained. In a word, it is a short-cut to growth. As Toynbee notes, however, for Plato the only means of transmitting philosophy is by “strenuous intellectual

⁶¹ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1946, pp. 217-221.

⁶² Arnold Toynbee, “The Trend of International Affairs Since the War”, in *International Affairs* 10(6), 1931b, pp. 815, 816; Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1957, pp. 153, 166, 187-188, 226, 235-236; Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1946, pp. 203-205; Arnold Toynbee, “A Centenary View of Lenin,” in *International Affairs* 46(3), 1970, pp. 490-500. It will be recalled that both personalities spent extensive periods of time expatriated from their native countries, during which their characters and ideas were formed.

⁶³ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1946, p. 212.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 213. This line of thinking in Toynbee’s work echoes Plato’s problematization of the situation of the philosopher in his cave metaphor in *The Republic*.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

communion and intimate personal intercourse...”⁶⁶. Mimesis, then, would in a sense be a “sham”, at best only a partial approach to genuine transformation and yet perhaps a necessary expedient, but one that inevitably exposes the civilization to breakdown. The problematic nature of mimesis and the consequences it entails therefore require further consideration.

7. - Two issues raised in the last chapter – creativity and differentiation – and a third only touched upon – mimesis – are keys to understanding the breakdown of civilizations. The growth of civilizations relies on both of these social mechanisms insofar as differentiation is closely linked to innovation, which is a necessary element for the successful response to challenges posed to the civilization, and in the unavoidable fact that, to maintain social cohesion and to fully implement the necessary innovations, mimesis is indispensable. The problem, however, lies in the dichotomy of the two mechanisms: innovation, on the one hand, is by definition *not* imitation, while on the other hand mimesis requires relatively stable models. In addition, the differentiation that derives from innovation generates a multiplicity of such imitative models.

Such differentiation, however (which Toynbee fails to note), also bears with it the decreasing intelligibility between communities and strata. Franz Borkenau, though arguing against Toynbee, says in a similar vein that civilizations rise as the institutions are elaborated and permeate society⁶⁷. As the civilization becomes increasingly complex and elaborated in response to social adjustment, the less firm will be the fundamental ‘tissues’ holding it together, allowing for greater scope in questioning the social order, which in turn requires more adjustments. At some point the forces of disorder outweigh those of order and gradual disintegration will begin. The crucial insight that Borkenau perceived and which Toynbee lacked is that civilizations do not emerge out of static, custom-bound societies, but rather from periods of disorder and disarray: “the emergence of higher civilizations is presaged by the collapse of traditions left over from anterior high cultures and from the primitive tribal units in contact with them”⁶⁸.

7.1. *The Breakdown of Civilizations*

Toynbee uses the term “breakdown” not in the sense of “falling to pieces” or dissolution – which he reserves for the term “disintegration” – but to denote the termination of a period of growth. If it was determined earlier that civilizational growth is brought about by creative personalities who were successful in infusing the macrocosmic society with their microcosmic self-articulation, then breakdowns are in turn a consequence of the loss of creative power. From this follows a withdrawal of mimesis which results in a loss of social cohesion⁶⁹.

⁶⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*

⁶⁷ Franz Borkenau, (1981). *End and Beginning: On the Generations of Cultures and the Origins of the West*, edited and translated by Richard Lowenthal, New York: Columbia University Press, 1981, p. 53.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1946, p. 246.

In Toynbee's scheme there are three fundamental weaknesses that subject civilizations to breakdown: the mechanicality of mimesis, the intractability of institutions, and the nemesis of creativity – idolatry.

Mimesis, because it is a kind of drill, is in a sense a “mechanization of human life and movement”⁷⁰. That is, it is the vehicle of mechanization in social relationships, comparable to the physiological mechanization of functions such as breathing, digesting, muscle coordination, etc. Precisely because it is a mechanical response to a suggestion from outside, it is not self-articulated, and “the best safeguard for its performance is that the faculty should become crystallized in habit or custom...”⁷¹. Creative personalities, however, redirect custom-bound mimesis towards their own charisma, disrupting the safeguard and endangering the social balance.

Moreover, the danger is perpetually imminent, since the condition which is required for the maintenance of growth is a perpetual flexibility and spontaneity, whereas the condition required for effective mimesis, which is itself a prerequisite of growth, is a considerable degree of machine-like automatism⁷². Here again, Toynbee approximates Weber, who raised the question of ‘routinization of charisma’. The nature of charisma stands in opposition to structures and institutions, yet if the vision and characteristics introduced by the charismatic individual are not formalized in such a way there is the threat that they will perish with the individual's death⁷³.

The problem inherent in mimesis appears to be that so long as it is institutionalized and regulated, it works; when, however, these frameworks for regulating mimesis are brought to collapse by a catastrophic event, its operations go awry. According to René Girard, imitation within an institutional framework, or based on “transcendental models”, is externally mediated and innovation is stultified; when external mediation is negated there will be a proliferation of innovation. This innovation will produce rivalry, between the innovative and the orthodox as well as between different innovations. But this rivalry itself takes place within the context of mimesis: “in a truly innovative process, it is often so continuous with imitation that its presence can be discovered only after the fact, through a process of abstraction”⁷⁴. The breakdown of institutionalized mimesis does not dispense with mimesis, but rather unleashes it within the now undifferentiated societies where the mimetic rivalry, or “mimetics of desire”, spirals uncontrollably into ever-escalating violence⁷⁵. Nor, on the other hand, does mimesis negate innovation or learning. Girard notes that what begins as straightforward imitation gradually produces innovation, often without the imitator's knowing it⁷⁶.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 278.

⁷³ Thomassen, *op. cit.*, 2005, pp. 9-10.

⁷⁴ Girard, “Innovation and Repetition,” in *SubStance* 19(2/3), Issue 62/63, 1990, p. 14.

⁷⁵ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001, p. 22; Szakolczai, *op. cit.*, p. 374, fn. 3. “Mimetics of desire” captures Girard's argument that desire is not evoked merely by the inherent characteristics of the “object”, but that desire is elicited through the imitation of others' already existing desire.

⁷⁶ Girard, *op. cit.*, 1990, pp. 13-15. He uses the example of business: when one business is making less money than a competitor, they very often imitate that competitor to bring themselves up to par. During

The creative personality, it would seem, initiates the “incongruous juxtaposition” of new social forces and old structures and institutions. Ideally, this introduction of new social forces would be accompanied by a concomitant overhaul of all institutions – in growing societies more or less continuous readjustments are carried out to “rectify flagrant anachronisms”⁷⁷. As mentioned briefly earlier, however, social inertia intervenes, causing the new social forces to take two different paths simultaneously. One path is the creation of new, parallel institutions and adapting old ones that are susceptible, leading to a harmonious channeling of new forces to promote the welfare of society. The other path, lying in those zones of society where the first is blocked, is the commandeering of any convenient institution or structure, leading to revolutions or social enormities.

Revolutions are defined by Toynbee as “retarded, and proportionately violent, acts of mimesis”, which erupt when old institutions attempt to dam the potent surge of new social forces. Further, “the mimetic element is of their essence; for every revolution has reference to something that has happened already elsewhere...”⁷⁸. Social enormities, on the other hand, are the “penalties which a society has to pay when the act of mimesis, which ought to have brought an old institution into harmony with a new social force, is not simply retarded but is frustrated altogether”⁷⁹. The result is that adjustment allows for continued growth, revolution – which is delayed and discordant adjustment – permits hazardous growth, while social enormities result in the termination of growth – breakdown.

Though Toynbee did not live to see it, the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s seems to be an apt illustration of the concept of social enormities. The resistance of the Politburo to the processes of globalization that were gaining momentum in the post-World War II period created an unsustainable build-up of social pressures. When Gorbachev attempted to steer the USSR towards a transfiguration to bring it into consonance with the new forces – typified in his policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost* – the social enormity which had been accumulating surfaced with explosive repercussions. The failure of the Soviet leaders to confront the radical social, economic and political developments can be attributed, staying within Toynbee’s framework, to the third weakness leading to civilizational breakdown.

This final weakness is the nemesis of creativity, which takes the form of idolizations of the ephemeral self, institution and technique. Toynbee here argues that idolatry – “the intellectually and morally blind worship of the creature instead of the creator” – results in an infatuation with the past that prevents the individual or minority who dealt with the last challenge creatively to deal with subsequent ones in like

this process of imitation, however, the business grasps something of the principles involved and makes adjustments and improvements, placing them now ahead of their previously dominant competitor. “Many people innovate when they think that they imitate”.

⁷⁷ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1946, p. 280. The continuous readjustment of institutions relates to Toynbee’s discussion of differentiation (pp. 241-243) which reasons that because each successful response to a challenge faced by the society is creative, i.e. *innovative*, it opens a new direction in the civilization’s development. The longer the succession of successful response to challenges, therefore, the greater will be the differentiation of that civilization.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 280-281.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

manner⁸⁰. Essentially, the creative minority has become enamored with the characteristics and techniques that gave them success in the past, and have therefore ceased to be creative. They are, to use the well worn phrase, generals planning for the last war. An alternative, more active nemesis of creativity manifests itself in militarism and is expressed by Toynbee in the following formula⁸¹:

	Objective meaning	Subjective meaning
κόρος (koros)	surfeit, excess	spoiled by success (and excesses)
ὑβρις (hubris)	outrageous behavior, wantonness, insolence	loss of mental and moral balance
ἄτη (atē)	disaster	ungovernable impulse to impossible feats, delusion

Figure 1. Nemesis of Creativity

The three contributing elements of civilizational breakdown – revolution, social enormities and the third, which can be abbreviated as hubris – can of course operate simultaneously and interact to compound their effect, which is ultimately to trigger the secession of the majority from the dominant minority. Voegelin also adopts the term “hubris” in his diagnosis of both the expanding empires of the Axial Age (c. 800-200 BC) and what he called *gnostic ideologies*, which was a form of intellectual hubris⁸². Such ideologies, which in Voegelin’s estimation included not only communism but scientific positivism, capitalism and nationalism as well, emerged out of the hubristic belief of their adherents that the ultimate truth was knowable and could be realized in the here and now – what Voegelin also calls “intramundane eschatology”.

Toynbee viewed Europe in the first half of the 20th century as sliding ever nearer to this abyss of breakdown and the ‘times of troubles’ that generally followed it. He believed that several of the international crises in the 1930s boded ill for the future of Western civilization if they were not successfully confronted. The first challenge was posed by the belligerent behavior of Japan, which he felt was potentially a new ‘Punic War’ between Japan and the United States. The outcome, he divined, would result in the U.S. assuming the role of a modern-day Rome in command of all the Pacific nations, from which world-domination and the ‘Roman solution’ to international anarchy and war would inevitably follow⁸³. The rise of fascism in Spain but especially in Germany and Italy compounded the international crisis. These revisionist powers not only pressed for material redress of their grievances but also threatened to cause a spiritual breakdown through the revival of “an ancient form of paganism – the worship of the human community,” or what was above called idolatry and gnosticism⁸⁴.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 307-310.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 336-338.

⁸² Szakolczai, *op. cit.*; Voegelin, *op. cit.*, Chapter 4

⁸³ Arnold Toynbee, “The Next War – Europe or Asia?” in *Pacific Affairs* 7(1), 1934, pp. 3-14.

⁸⁴ Arnold Toynbee, “After Munich: The World Outlook,” in *International Affairs* 18(1), 1939, pp. 1-28, quote on p. 28; Arnold Toynbee, “Peaceful Change or War? The Next Stage in the International Crisis”, in *International Affairs* 15(1), 1936, pp. 26-56.

7.2. *Civilizational Schisms and Disintegration*

The cumulative result of a civilization succumbing to the three weaknesses just outlined is that, lacking a capacity for *élan vital*, it will fail to successfully respond to those challenges that confront it. The inability of the now dominant minority to “existentially represent”⁸⁵ the society and the resort to force to retain their power generates a violent reaction of resentment, hate and fear from the proletariat. For proletariat, he means “a social element or group which in some way is ‘in’ but not ‘of’ any given society at any given stage of [its] history”⁸⁶. The “mimetic allegiance” of the proletariat is withdrawn from the dominant minority and redirected to a new creative minority that emerges from within and leads them⁸⁷. The reciprocally hostile reactions of the factions undermine the structures and ordering codes of society and it begins to break apart. This happens in two dimensions simultaneously: in a vertical schism the diverse communities into which a civilization is articulated become enveloped by internecine warfare, while in a horizontal schism conflict and division erupts among the various strata or classes of the society⁸⁸.

This aspect of obstinate, mutual reciprocation of hostility supplies a clue to the mechanics of civilizational schism in the pioneering work of anthropologist Gregory Bateson on *schismogenesis*⁸⁹. Bateson defines schismogenesis as “a process of differentiation in the norms of individual behavior resulting from cumulative interaction between individuals”, as opposed to a dynamic equilibrium where processes of differentiation are balanced by countervailing processes towards integration⁹⁰. Two categories can further be discerned in the concept of schismogenesis. Complementary schismogenesis – equivalent to Toynbee’s horizontal schism – appears when two patterns of culturally appropriate behavior reinforce each other diametrically, tending towards a polarizing enhancement of the behavior, such as dominance and submission. Symmetrical schismogenesis – correlating to Toynbee’s vertical schism – on the other hand, emerges when two patterns of culturally appropriate behavior are of like kind and tend to generate competitive enhancement of the behavior, such as boasting⁹¹.

According to Bateson’s theory, schismogenesis will likely emerge and intensify in a series of stages⁹². In the first stage, the behaviors associated with either the complementary or symmetrical schismogenic patterns will seem to both parties to be a more or less satisfactory answer to a “difficult problem of relationship”. This recalls

⁸⁵ Voegelin, *op. cit.*, 33-34, 36-37, 50-51.

⁸⁶ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1946, pp. 377, 11 fn.1.

⁸⁷ Paradoxically, this nascent creative “vanguard”, following Borkenau’s analysis, would be brought to question the existing social order in the first place not by excessive rigidity on the part of the dominant minority, but by the weakening of the social “tissues” as a result of previous adjustments to social realities. Borkenau, *op. cit.*, p. 53; see fn. 40.

⁸⁸ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1946, p. 365.

⁸⁹ Gregory Bateson, *Naven*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958[1936]. Though unlikely, it is possible that Toynbee may have been familiar with the work of Bateson: in the chapter “Schism in the Body Social”, as in a discussion regarding the radiation of civilizations’ influence, he mentions the discovery in 1935 of previously unknown tribes in Papua New Guinea, where Bateson did his fieldwork.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 176-177. Symmetrical schismogenesis is sustained by mimetic rivalry, a “confrontation of doubles” (Girard, *op. cit.*, 2001, p. 22).

⁹² *Ibid.*, pp. 187-189.

Toynbee's concept of the *élan vital*, the vital surge of creativity needed to overcome the challenges confronting the civilization. According to Toynbee, however, the *élan* itself and the answers it supplies must themselves be *problematic* for growth to continue; within Bateson's framework, this problematic aspect would be rooted in the behaviors associated with the relations established.

As the schismogenic mechanism operates, the respective qualities of the behavior patterns will be increasingly emphasized and the groups and individuals within them will undergo distortion through over-specialization. This distortion introduces a degree of strain and unease into the relationship, which may only serve to further the drive towards specialization in an attempt to recover the previously satisfactory relationship. In Toynbee's framework, this distortion will lead to the perceived need for new adjustments under the initiative of the creative/dominant minority. By this point, however, the minority is no longer receptive to the proletariat and is in fact more likely to react negatively to any form of innovation, thereby producing social enormities. Following again Bateson, the increasing distortion will be accompanied by the effects of hostility and resentment, erosion of the intelligibility of emotional reactions between the groups, and mutual envy over the (correct) perception of the other's superiority regarding the behavioral quality they lack. Ultimately a point is reached where the reactions of the involved parties are no longer striving for the long lost satisfactory answer but have devolved to basic enmity and resentment. In Bateson's words, "In place of patterns of behavior which were perhaps originally adopted in an attempt to fit in with the other party, we now have patterns of behavior which are definitely a reaction against the other party"⁹³.

For Toynbee, so long as the civilization is sufficiently articulated enough to continue its exertions towards attaining the necessary solution, the *élan*, it remains in the breakdown phase. As he indicates, societies that break down are not by any causal laws predetermined to disintegrate: while failing to grow, they may avoid disintegration by becoming arrested in their development and enter a long period of petrification⁹⁴. Bateson corroborates this assertion, noting that schismogenesis is not a unidirectional process and therefore maladjustment may be maintained for extended periods or dynamic equilibrium may even be recovered⁹⁵. Once the final stage has been set, however, when one or more of the parties no longer actively seek to recover the situation, schism is imminent.

In Toynbee's own time Western civilization was staggered by two civilization-wide schismatic wars, from 1914-1918 and again in the years 1939-1945. These wars were vertical and symmetrical, being waged by the diversely articulated parochial states that had divided into two camps. For Toynbee, however, the essence of civilizational disintegration lies in the horizontal schism that he refers to as the "secession of the proletariats". The proletariat is distinguished into two categories: the internal, which shares the same geography of the dominant minority and are members of the society; and the external (barbarian), which is geographically situated outside of the society yet is "in" insofar as it is not merely incidentally associated with it, but is

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 189; Girard, *op. cit.*, 2001, p. 22.

⁹⁴ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1946, p. 360.

⁹⁵ Bateson, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

significantly interdependent upon it.

The result then is a tripartite schism creating three distinct classes in the dominant minority, the internal and the external proletariats. The dominant minority, while displaying a “certain uniformity of ethos”, is composed of a variety of types, ranging from the exploiting militarist to jurists, intellectuals and administrators. Despite the fact of breakdown, individuals in this class still retain a creative capacity – just not of a quality generative of an *élan* or conducive to self-articulation of a society. Evidence of the power of their continuing creativity is the construction of a universal state which is typical of this minority in the disintegration phase⁹⁶.

The internal proletariat is composed of three types – the displaced, disenfranchised and impoverished – and have two modes of secession available to them. Violent secession is undoubtedly the most common and is fueled by the resentment, hate and fear aroused by the coercion of the dominant minority. The resort to violence is also very often suicidal. Not only is the internal proletariat confined to the same geographical locality as the dominant minority, but they also lack all the resources of force apart from numbers. The alternative mode of secession is passive resistance, which Toynbee calls “gentleness”. This technique, which is a rare occurrence, has the advantage that it cannot be effectively attacked or countered⁹⁷. The creative act of this class is the establishment of a universal church.

External proletariats are made possible during the growth period of civilizations. The brilliance of the growing civilization radiates outward from its center, its intensity diminishing the greater distance one is removed from that point. This creates a broad zone of waning civilizational impact in which there is no clearly distinguishable boundary. The creative genius of the civilization elicits the mimesis of societies and communities that fall outside of the civilization’s ken but within its range of impact, with a degree of mimesis in proportion to their proximity to the center. As with the internal proletariat, when the dominant minority becomes corrupted the mimetic affiliation is severed, in most cases violently. What was during growth a broad zone of gradation between the civilization and the external societies now becomes clearly demarcated by boundaries. In Toynbee’s rendition, to use the “appropriate Latin words, which bring out both the kinship and the contrast between the two types of contact, a *limen* or threshold, which was a zone, has been replaced by a *limes* or military frontier, which is a line that has length without breadth⁹⁸. The distinguishing feature of this proletariat is what Toynbee calls a “Heroic Age” but which he regards as ephemeral and inconsequential⁹⁹.

An archetypical example of civilizational schism would undoubtedly be the wars of the French Revolution. This conflict exploded as a result of the social enormities that had been spreading throughout *ancien régime* France, which erupted when the

⁹⁶ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1946, pp. 371-374.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 375-379. The foremost example of this kind of pacifism is, of course, Jesus; but other noteworthy examples are Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 407.

⁹⁹ Borkenau, *op. cit.*, is in strong disagreement with Toynbee on this issue. As part of a broader argument, Borkenau singles out the rise of the “I”-form of speech among the Scandinavian migrants as a crucial element of the emergence of the modern worldview.

proletariat seceded under the leadership of the new creative minority, the burgeoning middle class. The failure of the “enlightened” absolutist regime to adjust to the new social realities generated resentment and ultimately revolt. This revolution can be considered, however, a *total* schism because what began as a horizontal schism between estates and emerging classes spilled over the borders of its parochial state. The charisma of the movement, and of the personality of Napoleon, produced an uncontrollable *kinesis*¹⁰⁰ and the violence spread to the whole of Europe, instigating in addition a vertical schism.

8. - «Sociology is at a turning point in respect to the horizons it is obliged to confront and the perspectives and methods it is obliged to adopt in order to make sense of the perplexing and tumultuous sociocultural processes of our time... We are obliged to see that many of the most important phenomena of processes and productions of our time are occurring everywhere across the world and they are occurring most intensely in those levels and in those settings which have been least systematically studied by sociologists or anthropologists, I refer to the *societal level*, the *civilizational level* and the *intercivilizational settings and encounters*¹⁰¹».

Benjamin Nelson

In the beginning of *A Study of History* Toynbee asserted that civilizations were the most “intelligible units” of historical study, but in the course of his analysis of civilizational disintegration through the mechanism of schisms he recognized that this assertion must be qualified. “We cannot” he says, “understand this last phase of a civilization’s history without extending our mental range of vision beyond its bounds and taking account of the impact of external forces”¹⁰². This is because during the disintegration of a civilization in which the society breaks into the three components, each of those elements is divested of its allegiances and responsibilities and is thus at liberty to enter into new combinations – of culture, religion, ideas, etc. – with foreign derived influences¹⁰³.

The foregoing discussion of the previous sections, then, refers to *intracivilizational* relations. This is of direct relevance for the study of international relations insofar as it implies that the relations between states will be fundamentally different depending on whether the two states are from a shared civilization. If they share the same civilization they will then also share fundamental sociocultural characteristics that will make them intelligible to one another to a far greater degree than if they were communicating across civilizational frontiers. At the same time, however, intra-

¹⁰⁰ Arpad Szakolczai, “The Age of Empires as a First Global Age: Revisiting the Axial Age Thesis”, *Discussion paper prepared for the workshop on ‘Revisiting the Axial Age’*, European University Institute, 4 February 2003, p. 11.

¹⁰¹ Benjamin Nelson, “Civilizational Complexes and Intercivilizational Encounters”, in *Sociological Analysis* 34(2), 1973, pp. 79-80.

¹⁰² Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, abridgement of volumes VII-X, by D.C. Somervell, New York: Oxford University Press, 1957, p. 144.

¹⁰³ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1946, p. 420.

civilizational relations “include actors’ adaptations of older civilizational ideas and images to new purposes in changed historical settings. They also involve intracivilizational conflicts among groups over interpretations of the civilization’s key categories. [T]hey result in permanently structured tensions and polarities within civilizations and give rise repeatedly to movements opposing dominant institutionalized variants of the civilization”¹⁰⁴.

In studying *intercivilizational* encounters, Toynbee takes as his point of departure the contact of the modern Western civilization with each of its contemporaries. It is evident that the fundamental questions for Toynbee in his analysis are the responses to and consequences of each of the non-western civilizations’ experience of “westernization” or modernization. He takes this as an entry point for two reasons: first, because the advent of modernity in Europe quickly dispatched the primary limiting factor of encounters between civilizations theretofore – immense distances – with wide-reaching developments in technology and transport; and second, because the secularization of modern western societies immensely widened the gulf between the West and non-western civilizations as regards their “outlook”¹⁰⁵. He notes that “in this point the Hindu, the Islamic, and the Medieval Western Christian cultures were more in accord with each other than any of them were with the secular culture of the Modern West”.

The first civilizational analyst to programmatically consider intercivilizational encounters, Benjamin Nelson, created a typology of “structures of consciousness” that might better facilitate what Toynbee refers to vaguely as “outlook.” The first is the *sacro-magical* and is characterized by collective responsibility for wrongs, sacrifices, commemorations and other prescriptive etiquettes and rituals. Secondly, in *faith* structures individuals and groups are differentiated from the collectivity and the form of participation is existential, “manifested in practice, activities, imitations, exemplifications”¹⁰⁶. The “key to the faith-structures of consciousness is that individuals committed to faith feel themselves to be part of the truth, a manifestation of the divine in expression of the universal will or sovereign design. Existence in faith is truth”¹⁰⁷. *Rationalized* structures of consciousness, the third type, emerge “when the collective structures of representation have weakened and large segments of a population are not agreed as to the contents of the faith, the evidence of the faith and the implications of the structures of faith and action, belief and opinion”¹⁰⁸.

It must be stressed that the typology just outlined is not meant to imply homogeneity within civilizations. In all of the structures of consciousness, and particularly in the rationalized structures, there is latitude for variations and differentiation within the structures: “Those who wish to engage systematically in the comparative study

¹⁰⁴ Donald A. Nielsen, “Rationalization, Transformations of Consciousness and Intercivilizational Encounters,” in *International Sociology* 16(3), 2001, p. 411. See also S.N. Eisenstadt, (1984). “Heterodoxies and Dynamics of Civilizations”, in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 128(2), 1984, pp. 104-113; Johan Arnason, “Understanding Intercivilizational Encounters,” in *Thesis Eleven* 86, 2006, p. 50; Borkenau, *op. cit.*, p. 53; and Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1946, p. 241-243.

¹⁰⁵ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1957, p. 147, quote on p. 163.

¹⁰⁶ Nelson, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 93-94.

of civilizational complexes must always attend closely to the fundamental focus of differentiations *within as well as among* the structures of consciousness. Idiomatic mixes and balances of elements of all the respective structures above may be certain to appear on close inspection of the civilizational cover and the workings of large historically-embedded societies”¹⁰⁹. As was noted above, societies will draw upon and reactivate past traditions in addition to adopting and adapting the new forces with which they come into contact or invent.

9. - In his analysis, Toynbee distinguishes between two types of assimilation or imitation of modernity, that in which a modernizing program is launched from above and disseminated downwards and that which is initiated from below. In Russia, for example, Tsar Peter I orchestrated an ambitious project to modernize Russia at the turn of the 18th century and bring it into the fold of the European community of states as a ‘great power’. The great struggle in which this engaged the society was between the dictates of technological capabilities and the “determination of Russian souls to preserve their spiritual independence”¹¹⁰. While the regime of Peter I was continued in tsarist Russia for centuries, its failure to permeate to all strata of the society was demonstrated, in Toynbee’s view, by the sudden victory in 1917 of communism under the Bolsheviks, which reasserted “a long-suppressed insistence on the uniqueness of Russia’s destiny...”¹¹¹. In the framework of Nelson’s structures of consciousness, however, the Bolshevik revolution might better be seen as the peculiar re-elaboration of modern, rationalized structure of consciousness within the context of an inherited tradition of strong sacro-magical and faith structures.

In contrast to the Russian experience, in the Greek Orthodox civilization¹¹² the movement towards modernization was initiated not by the ruling class but by private – largely non-Muslim – individuals. There the religious and commercial elites as well as foreigners began introducing western costume, customs, and ideas which undermined and counteracted the Ottoman Porte’s policy of “Ottomanization” throughout the empire. While the Phanariot Greeks attempted to capture the movement and channel it towards their aim of capturing the Ottoman Empire and transforming it into a Greek one, the western ideology of nationalism in the wake of the French Revolution seized the imaginations of the Balkan peoples before it could be carried out¹¹³.

In the Islamic civilization – composed of two strains in Toynbee’s analysis, the Arabic and the Iranic – three circumstances conditioned the approach to the “Western Question.” When they were confronted with the forces of modernity, the Muslim

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹¹⁰ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1957, p. 152.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 153, 187-188; Arnold Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1931b, p. 815.

¹¹² Toynbee’s discussion of the Ottoman Empire is throughout his *Study of History* problematic. Despite the fact that it was overwhelmingly Islamic and composed of non-European peoples, he asserts that the empire is the “universal state” of the Orthodox Christian civilization, rather than a Muslim civilization or a wholly new Ottoman civilization. This creates problems not only of historical explanation but also of theoretical coherence.

¹¹³ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1957, pp. 153-159.

peoples were still politically independent, boasted a great military tradition, and were more or less oblivious to the reality of their actual military decadence. When the verity of the latter condition was humiliatingly driven home in the last quarter of the 18th century in a conflict with Russia, the Ottoman Porte began a tentative modernization of the military. In this they fell prey to the “illusion that, in adopting elements from an alien culture, it was possible to pick and choose”¹¹⁴. This attempt at piecemeal modernization simply exacerbated the disrupting effects within the civilization by creating internal dissonance and disparities. These faults created in the Ottoman Empire by western influences erupted into widespread revolutions and revolts when the empire entered into its mortal crisis of the First World War¹¹⁵.

These two cases in the Balkans and the Middle East illustrate the challenge posed by the introduction of foreign ideal and material culture: it is not merely a matter of direct transfer and acceptance. Rather, the novel elements being introduced are seized upon by various strata and groups within the receiving society who then interpret and modify them in divergent and sometimes contradictory directions. This of course refers back to Toynbee’s analysis of differentiation within civilizations and the schismatic tendencies that arise when innovation is introduced.

The difficulties of exporting foreign culture, ideas and institutions are further compounded by the misplaced assumption of their universality. This is a failing not only of the modern Western civilization in its active promotion and diffusion of institutions beyond the parameters of their conditions of emergence, but also of the receiving civilizations which attempt to install them without qualifications.

The western subjugation of the Hindu civilization presents for Toynbee a situation similar to that of the Orthodox Christians of the Ottoman Empire. Whereas the Russian and Muslim civilizations had encountered modernity through indirect transmission and for the most part willingly, the Hindu civilization was first ruled by alien empire-builders, the Mughals. Unlike the Orthodox Christians of the Balkans, however, the modernizing forces originated at the top of the social hierarchy and were transmitted downwards. Another striking difference is that the diffusion of western sociocultural models was not, as in other instances, an indirect process but occurred under the direct rule of a western power when Britain began its conquest of the subcontinent in the 18th century¹¹⁶. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the stark contrast in the religiosity of the Hindus as opposed to their secular western rulers generated a spiritual tension within the civilization, which Toynbee argues was most evident in the inherent contradictions of Mahatma Gandhi’s movement for independence in the mid-20th century¹¹⁷.

For civilizational analyst Johan Arnason, in contrast to Toynbee, the Indian encounter with Western civilization was unique “in the sense that no other civilization

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

¹¹⁵ Arnold Toynbee, “A Problem of Arabian Statesmanship,” in *Journal of the Royal Institute of International Affairs* 8(4), 1929, pp. 367-375.

¹¹⁶ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1957, p. 160. Another exception is certainly the Spanish rule over the Incas, Mayans and Aztecs, the discussion of which is barely touched upon in the abridged volumes.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 166; Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1931b, p. 816.

of comparable originality and complexity had a similarly prolonged experience of direct European domination”¹¹⁸. The result of this peculiar figuration, he argues, is that there developed in India a variant of modernity in which the Indian civilizational contribution was as crucial as the Western. There is a further difference in that the processes of modernization in India were carried out over an extended period of time, in conjunction with the West’s own modernization, and under the tutelage of a stable and powerful empire. In contrast, the modernization of the Balkans and Middle East was *ad hoc*, without overarching guidance and began only after western modernization was far advanced.

According to Toynbee, the experience of the East Asian encounter with the western modernizing influence was novel because the Chinese and Japanese societies had had only negligible awareness of Europe before the maritime explorers ventured into their realms in the early 17th century. The result was that the initial contacts were notable for their utter failure to produce any sort of effects within the two civilizations¹¹⁹. Both civilizations successfully ejected the foreign intruders and isolated their societies from the dynamic forces that modern forms of thought and activity entailed, reasserting the primacy of their internal traditions and practices.

The second surge of modernization movements were, however, more successful. In Japan the westerners forced their way in with gunboats in 1853, supplanting through intimidation the isolationist regime to generate conditions more conducive to modernization¹²⁰. In China, on the other hand, the western influences seeped into the society and gradually the pressure on the ruling elites of the empire destabilized the regime. After a succession of failed or short-lived rebellions, the modernization of Chinese civilization was in 1948 fully effected – not by the western European strain of modernity, paradoxically, but via communism as interpreted by Mao Tse-Tung¹²¹. These were both, in Toynbee’s analysis, movements imposed from below and were motivated by the desire of the disenfranchised “middle classes” to reap the obvious benefits of western technology and science.

10. - The consideration of Toynbee just mentioned, the “middle class”, is for him the key to understanding the success or failure of westernizing attempts. Given that in Western civilization modernity emerged precisely when the *bourgeoisie* was capable of asserting its predominance, “It follows that, during the currency of the Modern Age of Western history, the ability of aliens to become Westernized depended on their capacity for entering into the middle-class Western way of life”¹²². Following this postulate, Toynbee states that the illustrations of westernization from below – Greek Orthodox, Chinese and Japanese – reveal a pre-existing middle-class element in which modernizing forces took root. In those instances where modernization was

¹¹⁸ Arnason, *op. cit.*, 2006, p. 43.

¹¹⁹ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1957, pp. 179-180; Arnason, *op. cit.*, 2006, p. 47; Nelson, *op. cit.*, p. 88-89.

¹²⁰ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1957, pp. 181-182.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 182; Arnason, *op. cit.*, 2006, pp. 48-49.

¹²² Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1957, p. 185. This claim is also implicit in Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1961.

imposed from above, there developed in place of a genuine middle class merely an *intelligentsia*, which by its nature is segregated from society¹²³.

In a more general approach, Arnason outlines four qualities of intercivilizational encounters that either implicitly or explicitly complement Toynbee's analysis. First, they are asymmetric in that neither initiatives nor effects are equally distributed. Second, they often, but not always, exhibit high levels of violence and destruction. Third, they are also productive in "giving rise to new socio-cultural patterns and opening up new historical horizons, and there is no obvious pattern of direct or indirect relations between the productive and destructive aspects". Finally, they are reflexive, stimulating both self-reflexion and "reflexive confrontation with otherness". Further, encounters are "not only the all too tangible collisions... there are also the hermeneutical dissonances, the mutually obstructive logics of divergent cultural frameworks – or cultural ontologies..."¹²⁴.

In an early formulation of contacts between contemporaneous civilizations, Toynbee distinguishes two phases. In the first, "the passive civilizations, with which the active civilization collides, are turned upside down and thrown into a furore of revolution". This results from the disruption of traditional ordering codes as new political, economic and cultural orders are interjected into the societies. In the second phase, "The invaded civilizations make a counter-offensive... by imposing their religion, of all things, on the invaders"¹²⁵.

By the time he wrote the portion of the *Study* dealing with intercivilizational encounters he had extended this scheme to encompass a wider typology of responses and consequences. Still retaining the dichotomy of assailant and victim (or, agent and reagent), he creates two categories of response. In the first, the assaulted civilization responds to the foreign intrusion with force. The second category, the pacifistic response, is further divided into three subcategories: first, the cultural response functions by converting the foreigners to the cultural codes and practices of the society which they have invaded, which is common when the victim civilization is more highly developed than the aggressor (e.g. the Scandinavian *Völkwanderung*); second, there is the option of physical or psychological isolation from the intruding civilization, such as in the case of Japan or diasporas; the final eventuality, and for Toynbee by far the most significant, is the spiritual response¹²⁶.

The higher, or world, religions are for Toynbee the singularly most important product of intercivilizational encounters. Toynbee argues that the species of society in which emerge higher religions is of a different order than are civilizations, and thus their proper study must be not the "intelligible unit" of the single civilization but must encompass those fields in which two or more civilizations encounter one another. In essence the study of world religions must focus on the marginal or liminal geographies between civilizations. This gives such regions the double character of being both distant from the strict authority of the civilizational centers while

¹²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 185-186; Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1946, p. 394.

¹²⁴ Arnason, *op. cit.*, 2006, pp. 44-45.

¹²⁵ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1931a, p. 483.

¹²⁶ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1957, pp. 214-218.

also situating them at the crossroads where multiple agents from diverse civilizations must pass¹²⁷.

- 11.** - «On this occasion [European overseas expansion] the conflict becomes acute that ever since has infested political relations between Western powers and non-Western civilizations, that is, the conflict between an idea of mankind that assumes Western Christian man as the model of humanity and the empirical fact that the majority of civilizations do not conform to the model¹²⁸».

Eric Voegelin

One of the most notorious and criticized aspects of Toynbee's work and personality was his penchant for 'prophecy', or speculation, regarding the future and direction of Western civilization and world order. His thinking in this field was built around two principal components. On the one hand, the western model of modernity was, as he saw it, permeating the whole globe and making the world more homogeneous: "Instead of saying that the civilization of the whole world has been coalescing into a single unity, one might say with equal accuracy that the European civilization has expanded until now, to-day, the whole world lies at its feet"¹²⁹. On the other, the inherent problematic character of modernity threatened to engulf the world in further global conflicts and thus destroy Western civilization.

Toynbee perceived that "in the 'post-War' period the principal tendency in international affairs has been the tendency of all human affairs to become international"¹³⁰. In the economic sphere, he noted that since the Industrial Revolution the world had become increasingly integrated and interdependent as a result of western market penetration of all corners of the globe. In the cultural and political spheres, however, the nations of the world had remained parochial and resistant to any form of coalescing or unification. Toynbee saw this situation as an unsustainable contradiction which threatened the stability of world affairs. He asserted that "thorough-going internationalism is the only alternative to the breakdown of modern civilization"¹³¹.

The root of the danger was, for Toynbee, the 'territorial superstition' intimately bound up with state sovereignty. So long as the world was composed of sovereign states, the international realm would be characterized by anarchy and they would always look out for their own interests above all, and thus war was always a viable option as a tool for revising their status¹³².

And to-day [man's] international morality lags so far behind his municipal morality that those of us who believe ourselves to represent the vanguard of civilization have not yet reached, in our relations with our fellow human beings across the fron-

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 144-145, 215-216, 218; Szakolczai, *op. cit.*, 2003.

¹²⁸ Eric Voegelin, "Religion and the Rise of Modernity," in *History of Political Ideas V*, edited by J.L. Wisser. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998, p. 115.

¹²⁹ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1931b, p. 817.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 803.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 806; See also Toynbee 1934, 1936, 1939, 1947, 1948.

¹³² Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1936; see also Thompson, *op. cit.*

tiers, that point which, in municipal morality, has long since been attained even in the most backward of the communities that still survive.¹³³

This, Toynbee suggests, leaves open only two options for modern civilization: either the world would be united as the culmination of successive world wars, in which one superpower would subdue all the others, or modern states could re-elaborate their political ideals in order to formulate a viable system for facilitating peaceful change in world politics.¹³⁴

Toynbee's assumption of the homogeneity of modernity – he speaks of modern *civilization*, in the singular – is open to doubt, however. Voegelin agrees with Toynbee that there is what he calls a *global ecumene* – “the growth of a tightly textured field of power in which disturbances at any point may have global repercussions” – in the sense of economic interdependence and technological diffusion¹³⁵. And while he would agree that the revolutionary forces of modernity originated in Western civilization, in their diffusion to other civilizations and societies they are transformed and reinterpreted. In his characterization of modernity, the orthodox spiritual and political planes of society lose their formative force “and gnostic movements arise as rivals for the rank of representative humanity... [T]he association of empire and spirit has again become tentative and experimental”¹³⁶.

Following Max Weber and Voegelin, sociologist S.N. Eisenstadt provides a compelling argument for a conception of *multiple modernities*. In the same vein as Voegelin, he asserts that modernity emerges “only as the legitimacy of the postulated cosmos ceases to be taken for granted and beyond reproach”¹³⁷. In the interpretation of these social theorists, modernity is characterized by a distinct “ontological vision” which is accompanied by heightened awareness of the possibilities for human agency, openness and uncertainty.

Despite the “development of universal, worldwide institutional and symbolic frameworks and systems” of the original project of modernity, the empirical research demonstrates that the economic, political and familial arenas “exhibit relatively autonomous dimensions that come together in different ways in different societies and in different periods of their development”¹³⁸. Thus, while the original western model serves as a “crucial starting and continual reference” point for modernizing developments around the world, the relative autonomy between the variety of civilizational/cultural premises and the “basic institutional constellations” of modernity allow for a considerable degree of latitude and deviation from the western cultural model of modernity. The result is the development over time of several distinctly modern civilizations, sharing a degree of congruence in modern characteris-

¹³³ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1936, p. 27.

¹³⁴ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 1931b, p. 806; also Toynbee 1934, 1936, 1939, 1947, 1948.

¹³⁵ Eric Voegelin, “World-Empire and the Unity of Mankind,” in *International Affairs* 38(2), 1962, pp. 179-180.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

¹³⁷ S.N. Eisenstadt, “The Civilizational Dimension of Modernity: Modernity as a Distinct Civilization,” in *International Sociology* 16(3), 2001, p. 322.

¹³⁸ S.N. Eisenstadt, “Multiple Modernities in an Age of Globalization”, in *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 24(2), 1999, pp. 284-285.

tics while diverging significantly in “ideological and institutional dynamics”¹³⁹.

Recognizing that multiple modernities can be elaborated between different societies and civilizations, it follows that modernity within our own western civilization can also be reinterpreted, reconstructed and transformed from within. If, as Eisenstadt notes, the diversity of modernities is “closely connected – perhaps paradoxically – with the development of new multiple common reference points and networks – with a globalization of cultural networks and channels of communication”, then globalization has not only widened the possibilities for non-western interpretations, but also for possibilities within western modern societies¹⁴⁰. The processes of globalization and the major shifts in social structure that followed the shift from industrial to service/information societies have sufficiently undermined the hegemonic authority of the classical definition of modernity as westerners themselves conceived it.

If the conflation of westernization and modernization is misconceived – and it is hard to deny that this is so – then modernity must be conceptualized and analyzed within a broader framework of civilizations that goes back to the Axial Age breakthrough. Accepting that modernity is a “global projection of a problematic that remains open to conflicting interpretations in its initial Western context and lends itself to more or less original alternative ones in the broader non-Western area”, it is vital for the proper understanding of conflict and world politics to study both the *intercivilizational* and *intracivilizational* relations that are formative of such processes so central to International Relations¹⁴¹.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 286. This analysis by Eisenstadt is somewhat ambiguous; at times he refers to the “original” western modernity as a starting and reference point for other developments of modernity, then in other works and passages within the same work he suggests that there were in fact multiple sources of modernity which were rooted in the Axial Age civilizations. This dilemma, however, is not irreconcilable: it is possible to conceive of both as having happened. See Bjørn Thomassen, “Anthropology, multiple modernities and the axial age debate”, forthcoming in *Anthropological Theory*.

¹⁴⁰ Eisenstadt, *op. cit.*, 1999, p. 294.

¹⁴¹ Arnason, *op. cit.*, 2006, p. 51.

Abstract

Le civiltà e lo studio della politica internazionale: leggere Arnold Toynbee oggi

La fine della Guerra Fredda e i paradigmi analitici delle relazioni internazionali che l'hanno accompagnata, hanno portato dall'inizio degli anni Novanta alla ricerca di nuovi impianti teorici in grado di spiegare e concettualizzare la politica internazionale.

Alcuni di questi hanno cercato di inglobare la storia della *longue durée* e di reintrodurre approcci di tipo sociale e culturale su larga scala.

Tra di essi, in prima fila si è collocata la tesi dello "scontro di Civiltà", proposta da Samuel P. Huntington. Tuttavia i dibattiti nati sulla scia del lavoro di Huntington hanno prodotto modesti sviluppi teorici nel quadro delle teorie delle civiltà, o per meglio dire delle "analisi sulle civiltà". La tesi di fondo di Huntington è che le "civiltà" rappresentano unità spazio-temporali, mentre essa presta poca attenzione alle civiltà come *processo*.

Tuttavia, è sorprendente come il riemergere della "civiltà" come concetto centrale abbia prodotto, nell'ambito delle teorie delle relazioni internazionali, pochi studi sulla tradizione delle "analisi sulle civiltà" all'interno della disciplina.

Di fronte a questa situazione, questo articolo si propone semplicemente di riesaminare il dibattito sulle civiltà rivisitando il lavoro di Arnold J. Toynbee. Toynbee è stato probabilmente il primo studioso ad impegnarsi in un'analisi di *longue durée* delle civiltà applicata allo studio delle relazioni internazionali. L'articolo si propone di chiarire la teoria delle dinamiche delle civiltà di Toynbee, sviluppata soprattutto nel suo lavoro: *A Study of History*, e di dimostrare che, nonostante limiti evidenti, essa ha sviluppato un quadro concettuale e teorico utile per gli studi contemporanei sulla politica internazionale.