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# Paul Kennedy. *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*

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*THE ECONOMIC SIDE OF CIVILIZATIONAL ANALYSIS*

Paul Kennedy. *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. New York: Random House, 1987.

In a lecture delivered at Williams College in 1988, historian William McNeill, a member of the ISCSA, discussed the enormous commercial success that was once enjoyed by Arnold Toynbee's monumental work, *A Study of History*. Professor McNeill remarked in passing that the only similar sort of book that has since had a comparable impact is Paul Kennedy's recent volume *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. Of course, as we all know, the chief reason for Kennedy's success is his final section analyzing the decline of American world power, a topic that is much on the minds of U.S. politicians, policymakers, and economic elites these days. Still, it's rather astounding that this dense, erudite, sophisticated, cosmopolitan academic tome should have achieved front-counter status at Waldenbooks and B. Dalton stores. Its position in the broader American public today seems roughly comparable to that held by Spengler's *Decline of the West* in post-Wilhelmine Germany. You hear casual echoes of Paul Kennedy's ideas in such venues as articles in *The Atlantic Monthly*, "Talk of the Town" pieces in *The New Yorker*, or talks on TV by economist Lester Thurow.

For our own purposes, as civilizationists, Kennedy's book comes as a major contribution. It examines a succession of world empires with surehandedness and mastery, and as such is a model for macrohistorical exposition. My own specific objective, however, is to focus on a specific aspect of Kennedy's book, namely, his attention throughout to economic developments, to the ways in which key economic factors link up with political, military, and cultural processes. This I consider a major breakthrough. If I recall correctly, the works of Spengler, Toynbee, and Sorokin do not contain a great deal in the way of economic analysis. For all the knowledge and wisdom found in their writings, they remain the products of a nineteenth century humanism that had not yet assimilated the central role of economic causation in history. Their works are, as it were, "pre-Marxist" in their orientation, though, in the case of Toynbee, not necessarily anti-Marxist.

So much is Paul Kennedy aware of this Marxian intellectual presence in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* that he dedicates a few good chunks of his preface in explaining and justifying the use of economic analysis in the chapters that are to follow. As he says on page xvi, "It sounds crudely mercantilistic to express it this way, but wealth is usually needed to underpin military power, and military power is usually needed to acquire and protect wealth." He restates the same notion a few pages later, saying "the historical record shows that there is a very clear connection in the long run between an individual Great Power's economic rise and fall and its growth and decline as an important military power (or world empire)." And just to make sure that he will not be accused of, say, "vulgar

Marxism," Kennedy goes on to insist that "one can make these generalizations . . . without falling into the trap of crude economic determinism. . . . What does seem incontestable, however, is that in a long-drawn out Great Power (and usually coalition) war, victory has repeatedly gone to the side with the more flourishing productive base—or, as the Spanish captains used to say, to him who has the last escudo."

It is not only its sophisticated brand of economic determinism, however, that gives Kennedy's book a subtly Marxian thrust. Karl Marx's own broader reflections on the interplay between free choice and historical focus in his *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* are clearly evoked when Kennedy remarks, "This does not deny that men make their own history, but they do make it within a historical circumstance which can restrict (as well as open up) possibilities." In another qualifying disclaimer of Paul Kennedy's, we might note an observation closely akin to Louis Althusser's ideas of "uneven development" in the productive and social forces in a given society: "This does not mean . . . that a nation's relative economic and military power will rise and fall in parallel. . . . There is a noticeable "lag-time" between the trajectory of a state's relative economic strength and the trajectory of its military-territorial influence."

In his first full chapter, Kennedy accounts for what he calls the "European miracle" of economic development in the Renaissance and after: "the basic fact was that there existed no uniform authority in Europe which could effectively halt this or that commercial development: no central government whose changes in priorities could cause the rise and fall of a particular industry; no systematic and universal plundering of businessmen and entrepreneurs by tax gatherers." Kennedy here is writing about the rise of the bourgeoisie, although I cannot recall having seen that particular word in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. And yet that is precisely what Kennedy is describing: class-based prosperity, the emergence of industrial and entrepreneurial classes which operate relatively free of governmental control, what we sometimes designate as economic liberalism.

Elsewhere in that same chapter, Kennedy lists the impressive technical advances made in sixteenth century Europe in areas such as navigation, agriculture, metallurgy, astronomy, medicine, physics, and engineering. He frankly admits that they are "spinoffs from . . . the scramble for overseas trade," with the additional caveat that "the eventual benefits transcend their inglorious origins." Kennedy's trenchant observations bring to my mind a certain epigram that should serve as a central concept, a governing notion in all civilizational analysis. The epigram is by the German Marxist literary critic Walter Benjamin, who noted that "Every product of civilization is also a product of barbarism."

Or, to put it less succinctly, the best artifacts of any great civilization have some ultimate basis in such things as power, control, exploitation, violence, plunder, and war. Civilization is not only a matter of ethos or of

spirit, but a question of who has the power, and how that power is used. For instance: the spectacular University of California at Berkeley, an alma mater of mine and a place dear to my heart, located in the only U.S. city that is named after an idealist philosopher, stands on grounds that once belonged to Mexico, and before that to Spain, and before that to the Native American peoples. On its payroll there have been Nobel Prize winning poets like Czeslaw Milosz, avant-garde black novelists like Ishmael Reed, and a veritable army of scientists who are designing the most sophisticated and baroque weapons ever imagined by (mostly) men.

Finally, a few remarks about Kennedy's book as itself the produce of a civilization. National origins play an important role here. Paul Kennedy is an expatriate Englishman who teaches history at Yale University. In an interview with the *New York Times Magazine* a year and a half ago, he noted how, as a child of post-Second World War Great Britain, he grew up with decline and hence knows the phenomenon first hand. Reared in the decaying British Empire, he was well-enough positioned to have known imperial hegemony both at its height and as a fading memory, and therefore to see the process as universal and inexorable. I should like to submit that *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* is a book that could not have been written by an American in our time, and for two reasons. First, there is Kennedy's use of Marxist analysis, albeit without Marxist terms. Generally speaking, Marxist kinds of ideas are regarded with suspicion on these shores. Even among American intellectuals it is by and large a minority discourse. In Britain and the Continent, by contrast, such discourse has become sufficiently widespread as to be respectable, and even boasts internationally renowned scholars and artists. The very fact that Paul Kennedy, in the preface to a book aimed at U.S. audiences, felt called upon to defend his use of economic determinism is already symptomatic of the touchiness and unease that the Marxist method can give rise to in this American arena.

Second there is the matter of how one perceives American world hegemony. The United States, though in decline, still enjoys wealth and power such that most of its denizens—including its intellectuals—can look upon such power as essentially benign and altruistic, can think of it as a force for the larger global good. On the other hand the tiny minority of U.S. thinkers—mostly leftists—who question the bases of U.S. power are not in a position to deal with America as just another empire whose time has come and is going. For them, American hegemony is a matter for live debate and not an academic topic. Both the staunch defenders and the radical critics see American power as exceptional, as a special case. It takes someone from an island that ruled the seas only fifty years ago to see U.S. power, as it were, coolly and objectively, as but an instance of an oft-told tale, as simply one more chapter in the ongoing and multi-layered history of civilization.

Gene H. Bell-Villada