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BOOK REVIEWS

CONVERGING STAGES OF CIVILIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Oron Kumar Ghosh. *The Convergence of Civilizations*. Calcutta: Minerva Associates (Publications) Pvt. Ltd., 1988. 398 pp. 250 Rupees.

This book is an effort to outline a taxonomy of the stages of development of all civilizations in world history. It does not yet reach that goal, primarily, one may suspect, because it tries to do in one volume what should have been done in ten, with copious footnotes. The ten volumes might then have been abridged into one such as this, but the extremely thorough study is probably necessary before any single-volume abridgement could be successful.

The author was seventy years old at the time of completion of the manuscript, and from his discussions has obviously done a great deal of reading over a very large spectrum of historical and philosophical subjects. Every reader will find some insights, references and comments with which he was previously unacquainted—this reviewer certainly did—and the book is probably worth examining on that basis alone. One must suspect, however, that the author did not go back to the individual subjects discussed in order to familiarize himself with recent research, nor did he consult again the detailed studies of individual civilizations in order to make sure of his memories of specific dates and events. An example of dated research is found in the first of his proposed ten stages, in which hunting-and-gathering bands are described:

Primitive humans without fire and tools led the most miserable lives among all animals. Always in terror, living on roots, berries, and insects, without any natural means of self-defence, who would have predicted that one day these frightened creatures would make the world tremble with their achievements? [page 9]

This viewpoint has been obsolete at least since Lee and de Vore published their seminal *Man the Hunter* in 1968, in which it was noted among many other things that gatherers can live quite comfortably on roots, berries, and insects. One must also doubt whether *Homo sapiens* was ever without fire and tools; it is quite possible (though arguable) that these artifacts made the species long before the species made the artifacts. There are also frequent errors of fact, for example the statement [page 57] that “the Tatars poured in [to China], in spite of the Great Wall, and brought an end to the Han dynasty (220 A.D.)” In fact the Han was overthrown by a rebellious general after 35 years of internal dissension, and the barbarian invasions of China began only in 304, with the disintegration (though not yet overthrow) of the Western Chin dynasty.

The proposed taxonomy of stages of development is as follows, with characteristic milieus and emphases for each drawn from various tables:

1. Food-gatherers and primitive hunters (Lower Paleolithic, Austra-

lian aboriginal) (characterized by equality, pacifism, communism; typical social organisation: families)

2. Advanced hunters (Aurignacian, Paleoindian, Jomon, Tassili, etc.) (characterized by emphasis on animals, masculinity, organized violence; typical social organisation: gentes (septs, clans))

3. Mother-centered agricultural societies (used as a synonym of "neolithic") (emphasis on agriculture, fertility, femininity; peasant villages)

4. Early technologists (early metallurgical; Copper and Bronze Ages) (emphasis on venturesomeness, rule of thumb, innovations, monopoly of knowledge; guilds)

5. Warrior nomads and pirates (Indo-Europeans, Semites, Hsiung-nu, and later examples through the present Wahhabis) (emphasis on war, organisation, mobility, honour, lavishness; tribes)

6. River valley civilizations (Egypt 3000 BC-700 AD, Mesopotamia to 1800 BC, Indus, China to 1100 BC) (supremacy of priests, communal surplus production, pacifism, water-control, water deities, metaphysical obsessions; city-states and communes)

7. Religio-hierarchic agriculturists (Spartan/rural Greece, Assyria, Rome, Byzantium, Hindu India, China 1100 BC-220 AD, Japan 552-1392, etc.) (peasant exploitation, hierarchy, war, religion; dynastic state)

8. Religio-mercantile or religio-bourgeois (Minoan Crete, Bronze Age Europe, West Europe 700-1500 AD, Kievan hegemony, Levant 2600 BC-BC/AD, Babylonia 1800 BC-637 AD, Buddhist India, China AD 220-1948, Japan 1392-1603, etc.) (work ethic, trade, reason, simplified religion, cosmopolitanism, aestheticism; nation states)

9. Secular mercantile (bourgeois) (Athens 1200-200 BC, Europe 1500-1900, North America 1700-1900, Japan 1603-1868) (reason, self-interest, elitism, nationalism, colonialism, exchange of goods and ideas, humanism; also nation states)

10. Scientific Democratic (current) (scientific attitude, democracy, feminism, progress, unilinearity of social development, internationalism; international organisations). It is the spread of this stage of social evolution which is proposed to mark the convergence of civilizations.

Some problems can be seen with this on first inspection: For example, Egypt, though showing traces of an original arrangement into city-states (in the presence of specific city-gods), was for almost the entire period at issue the prototype of the dynastic empire. China from AD 220 to the Tang dynasty was anything but mercantile; at the end of the Han dynasty, coinage was effectively replaced by strips of silk and other commodities as the medium of exchange, and a full-scale monetary system was not re-introduced until 731. During the period 220-731 China looks much more like a candidate for stage 5, warrior nomads and pirates, than for any emphasis on commerce. The suggestion that Bronze Age society was organised into guilds seems unique to Ghosh, or may reflect an English translation of an Indian word with other meanings; it is

based on the hypothesis that metallurgy and similar techniques were closely guarded secrets, but no more than a small percentage of the population of the Bronze Age could have been professional smiths and other technologists.

Such problems as this suggest the most probable major obstacle in the hypothesis behind the work. It will be noted above that mercantile societies (Athens, Buddhist India) co-existed with "religio-hierarchic" ones (Sparta, Hindu India), and were eventually absorbed by them. Ghosh also notes that the full potential of Japanese commercialism was never developed because of roadblocks put in its way by the surviving "religio-mercantile" feudal ethic of Muromachi and Sengoku Japan, and the assignment of the ancient Levant and Babylonia to a "religio-mercantile" status not achieved by later societies in the same areas also implies reversions. Ghosh nevertheless insists overall on a linear periodization, with one kind of society followed by another in the listed order (with some skipping of stages due to local circumstances, and with specific "regressions" occasionally noted). From the data he presents, it would seem more likely that both reversion to earlier stages and co-existence of separate stages at the same time in the same society occur rather often. We Westerners are mesmerized by boundaries, in both space and time. Ghosh seems to have caught this Western idea, applying it to a set of situations in which eastern ideas of fluctuation would seem better placed. Possibly the old Indian concept of the wheel would be well applied here: The wheel moves forward overall (as mankind's level of development most certainly has since the beginning of history), but the path traced by an object on the rim of the wheel is a set of epicycles that moves forward only on average, not at every moment. This is also implied in that his various stages are already proposed to intersect each other occasionally, but he proposes no "transitional periods" (that old chestnut!) between the stages. If one stage grows inside another, replacing it sometimes, being suppressed at other times, this picture of epicycles and reversions would be the one presented.

In general, the book is provocative, both in its general thesis and in many individual statements, though, as noted above, because of historical errors it must be used with some care. It does need much more research into individual situations, comparing for example not just Athens and Sparta but as many as possible of the Hellenic city-states. His concluding thesis that "man is basically a *stageal*, and not a *national*, animal" cannot yet be said to be established. The book would, however, be useful for civilizationists favoring the linear development of civilization and/or wanting to study the methods of other civilizationists, and is worth skimming for ideas by all of us interested in accumulating information from all over history. The reviewer recommends it for libraries on this basis.

(The author is a member of this Society. For other members wishing to correspond with him on this subject, his address is: Oron Kumar Ghosh, CD6 Sector 1, Salt Lake, Calcutta 700064, India.)

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