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FORUM

THE BREAKDOWNS OF AUTOMOBILES, CIVILIZATIONS, AND THINGS LIKE THAT

MATTHEW MELKO

Within a civilization, structures are normally breaking down at every systems level, in the sense that they fail to perform functions they once were designed to perform. But growth and development takes place through these breakdowns. Often the “broken down” structure is performing functions that can be perceived to be more basic or important than those that have been lost. Or else the breaking down opens the way for the development of new structures. Such breakdowns are a normal aspect of development, although we are then likely to perceive the phenomena as differentiation. Most breakdowns can be perceived simultaneously as terminations, origins, or reconstitution depending on whether you are focusing on the system that precedes or follows the breakdown, or the entire period. Occasionally the breakdown involves the supersystem itself—the civilization. But even this can be perceived as a termination, an origin, or a reconstitution within the same system. The reasons for breakdowns are mysterious. Neither exhaustion, environmental nor technological explanations are satisfactory. Comparative study reveals compelling counterinstances for any of these explanations.¹

The term “breakdown” was introduced into civilizational literature by Toynbee in the 1930’s (1934-61, Vol. IV). It seems like a homey, provincial choice for such an ecumenical man. It smacks of flat tires and raised bonnets. Cars broke down much more often in the thirties than they do today, and the British were and still are more inclined to maintain their own cars than Americans. I imagine that Toynbee changed a tire now and again, and may even have spent a number of Saturday mornings cleaning carburetors and replacing gaskets. (I wrote to Philip Toynbee to ask if, in fact, his father did spend Saturdays cleaning carburetors. His reply: “Never! He was hopelessly incompetent with his hands”.)

But there are differences in the way we describe the breakdown of a car, or any other mechanical system, and the way Toynbee used the term. In the first place, if a car broke down, it usually could be repaired and made operational again. And such breakdowns occurred often in the life of the machine. But Toynbee used the term to describe the beginning of an irreversible decline in civilization, a social system. Such a breakdown occurred only once.

Then, there is usually not much debate about the breakdown of a

mechanical system. As Bill Cosby says, when the garage man asks you what's the matter with your car, you say "it's broke" (Side 2). He will then explore whether it is likely to be a transmission or an electrical problem, but there would never be any discussion about whether the car really has broken down or whether it has entered an ethereal phase, the positive consequences of which will not be evident for some time. When a civilization breaks down, the manifestations are revealed over centuries. Toynbee himself was uncertain about the breakdown date of Western Civilization. It might have been the outbreak of the Thirty Years War or it might have been the Peace of Augsburg or it might not have occurred at all. We cannot tell yet (1934-61, Vol. IX).

And this raises the question of whether the process described as breakdown is, "what the Germans, in their terse and sparkling way, call the hypostatization of methodological categories. . . ." (G. M. Young, 1964). That is, making a reality out of a matter of convenience. Is a breakdown nothing more than the first episode in a story that ends in the termination of a social system?

If a comparison is made of a number of similar social systems, and the perception is that all of them have come to an end, and if Gibbon's method of beginning with the last high point of that system and following it to its demise is used, then in every case, "breakdown" will have occurred. Since every case will show that the system came to an end, the breakdown will appear to be irreversible.

On the other hand, if different authors tell the story of one such system, they are likely to find different breakdowns. Gibbon began with the Age of the Antonines; Toynbee several centuries earlier, with the Peloponnesian Wars.

And, what constitutes a system? To use a discarded definition of Downing Bowler's, a system is a relationship of entities (1981). An entity itself is a system, and the basic entity, I suppose, is energy. However a system is usually limited by a perceptual definition, so that when we discuss a mechanical system, like a car, the entities are the parts: hubcaps, reciprocating wenchers and things like that. The fact is ignored that these parts are made of alloys that are divisible into elements, which are in turn composed of molecules and atoms. A social system is composed of living creatures, their artifacts and environment. A human entity is the human being, and we ignore the fact that this entity is divisible into organs, cells and ultimately energy.

Civilizations are complex and interacting human systems composed of a large number of complex and interacting subsystems, each of which is changing.

Civilizations include national states; formal organizations that often are included but infrequently transcend the nation state; associations of individuals' perceiving common interest that transcend both states and organizations; stratifications that have no organization but elicit mutual recognition; regions that have geographical unity but may transcend all the other systems mentioned. Each of these complex social systems can be broken into primary groups. For example, Western civilization includes

formal organizations such as International Telephone and Telegraph that transcend both nation states and the civilization itself; the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations (ISCSC), whose members come from different formal organizations and states; members of the upper middle class, who would recognize one another and communicate easily at a luncheon in Tokyo or Addis Ababa; Eastern Europeans, who would recognize one another as sharing problems and outlooks that differed in some respects from those of Western Europeans. The Japanese or American businessman meeting at lunch or the Romanian guest of a Hungarian at the opera in Budapest form transitory primary groups.

Such systems are both real and perceived. ITT has officers, offices, a network of equipment. It is a reality as compared to a space age transportation system, extending from Mercury to Saturn, which would only exist in the imagination of science fiction enthusiasts or perhaps NASA long-range planners.

Western Civilization, on a scale of reality, is somewhere in between these two. It resembles a conceptual art piece by Douglas Huebler (1968) that involved 11 American municipalities on or near the 42nd parallel (Piece 11). The conceptual piece links cities that are really there, but only those who are aware of the piece would perceive the linkage. Similarly, an awareness of Western Civilization developed only in the Eighteenth Century. So while all these systems are composed of real entities, there is a considerable difference in perceptions of the relationships of the entities.

Within a civilization, systems that are commonly perceived break down, disintegrate and terminate. But even where we agree on the existence of the system, it is very difficult to decide on the point of termination of even a very small system. When major league baseball introduced the playoffs in 1969, someone remarked that he was not interested because who cared who won a series between the Washington Senators and the St. Louis Browns? The games were played, actually, between the Minnesota Twins and the Baltimore Orioles. But those teams had previously been in Washington and St. Louis. And surely we all perceived that they were no longer the same teams. What brought the old teams to an end? Moving them? Changing their names? Changing their owners?

To pick another example closer to our subject, is the ISCSC, which has held annual meetings in the United States, the same society that held quadrennial meetings in Europe in the 1960's? Or does this society simply have functions similar to that one, and is the name a symbol—rather like the name Orioles was a symbol of an older but different system that once existed in Baltimore?

In discussing this, we usually consider function, structure and continuity. The American version of the ISCSC has a function similar to that of the European. In structure it is still an academic society dedicated to the empirical approaches and exchanges of information and outlooks. The continuity is the problem. Does a pass from Othmar Anderle in

Europe to Roger Wescott in America constitute sufficient continuity? (The "pass" refers to a letter from Othmar Anderle, president of the European Society to Roger Wescott of Drew University. Anderle wrote that the European Society was short on resources and members, and suggested that maybe Americans would be better equipped to carry on. Wescott relayed the message to various Americans and an American "branch" was formed. The European Society never met again and eventually disbanded.) Or would it be more accurate to say that a group of Americans picked up a European idea and shaped it in their own way, as the Italian Renaissance sculptors reshaped Greek ideas?

Among civilizationists there is a fairly wide agreement on the identity of the civilizations. Most of them agree that there are separate Far Eastern, South Asian, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Classical, Western, Mexican and Andean Civilizations. They are less agreed about whether Mesopotamia should be broken into more civilizations and about the autonomy of Byzantium, Crete and Japan. But their agreement is sufficient so that Spengler, Toynbee, Kroeber, Coulborn, Quigley and others have been able to make meaningful comparisons.

Also, there is less agreement about termination of these macrosystems. Most civilizationists perceive one China, beginning with the Shang and carrying through to the reconstituted Maoist Empire. But Toynbee and Quigley perceive two Chinas, the earlier having terminated in the dark ages between the Han and T'ang Empires (Toynbee, 1946, Table V following p. 566). Most civilizationists also perceive two civilizations developing around the Mediterranean Sea; the earlier Classical terminating in the dark ages between the Roman and Carolinian Empires. But Rushton Coulborn used to wonder if the Chinese would see one West as we see one China? And sure enough, a Chinese visitor to the ISCS indicated that the West to him meant not only Europe and Classical civilizations, but Mesopotamia and Egypt as well (Melko 1974, 7).

If we disagree about the termination of the civilization itself, we are likely to have different perceptions of major changes in the subsystems. So the Renaissance can be seen as a modern fluorescence or the waning of the Middle Ages. What Robert Redfield saw as the transformation of primitive man into something else, Coulborn saw as the origins of civilized societies (1953, 1959). What David Singer and Melvin Small see as origins of war, I would see as the termination of peace (1972, 1973). Every transformation that leaves a system changed involves the origin of something and the termination of something. Every such transformation can be studied as termination, an origin, or a transformation. You can see the French Revolution as the termination of the Ancien Regime, or as the beginning of modern government with elected legislatures and social welfare programs, or as a logical breaking point between two semesters of Modern European History.

Breakdown, then, is usually the first stage of a transition from one civilizational phase to another. It is usually perceived retroactively, after the new phase has come into being. If change does not involve political

phase, continuity of the system is usually perceived. And if continuity is perceived, breakdown is not perceived.

The World Wars, for instance, marked the end of the Victorian World. Looking back for the causes of the World Wars, some politically oriented writers have focused on the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente, with their effect on reducing the dynamic interplay of the State System. It is almost as if those 40 years of dramatic industrial growth following the Franco-Prussian War existed only as a preparation for events to come. But a period of growth, such as the beginnings of Modern Europe, the period of modern monarchs like Henry VII, Louis XI and Ferdinand of Aragon, is viewed as a positive consolidation with which we can begin our story. Only a Huizinga, who values the Middle Ages (1924), will be inclined to look behind this development for a termination, and ultimately a breakdown of another system.

Looking at breakdown this way would seem to give us many more cases to work with. Civilization breakdown would involve the beginnings of any major change involving the entire civilization. It does not matter whether some of us think the fall of the Han marks the end of a civilization or only a major change within the same civilization. It would seem that all could agree that a major civilizational change has taken place, and that the breakdown or first indication of the change, is likely to be found much earlier than the collapse itself.

It would seem so, but such agreement is unusual. The outlook of the twentieth century is objective. We have learned from the anthropologists to look at each situation for its own value and from the social historians to look not only at the political structure, but also at the society. Under these circumstances, at any systems level, what appeared to be change may be stability, what appeared to be collapse may have been constructive, what appeared to be progress may have been exploitation.

Thus the Spanish invasion of Peru, which appeared to mean the termination of a civilization, may have been nothing more than the importation of an alien government, a change that improved political structure somewhat without greatly affecting the quality of life. And, looking with Robert Wesson's eyes at Imperial Order and State Systems (1967), the magnificent heroes of the great empires may have been exploiters who built themselves monuments and deprived many of freedom and creativity, and even worse (from our viewpoint) deprived us of many of the rich materials of the Sumerian, Ch'ien Ch'iu or Mochica periods, whose breakdowns we are thereby impeded from studying. Breakdown becomes a loaded term; is it the breakdown of the social body that is being considered or of the social disease with which it has been encumbered?

And if that is not bad enough, we also find that when we finally decide what has terminated, and traceback to the breakdown of that, it will turn out that what we thought had broken down is with us still. Thus the bicycle and the horse are replaced by the automobile, but if we study bicycles and horses we find that there are

more bicycles and horses today than there ever were before, or that Darwin was himself a Lamarckian, or that astrologists are flourishing, or that cottage industry is alive and well.

A. L. Kroeber (1944) used the term "Reconstitution" to mean the process by which breakdown and disintegration are accompanied by reintegration and development. It is an ongoing process. Occasionally scholars back off and look at it, note the first breakdown, select their data, and depending on their childhood training or the idiosyncracies of their graduate supervisor, focus on the "decline and fall" of the system that preceded, or the "origin and rise" of the system that followed, or the "crisis and restoration" within the same system. If decline is the focus, then the cause is frequently perceived to be exhaustion, environment or technology.

As these findings flow into the scholarly mainstream, sooner or later some revisionist will show that the society was not exhausted but vital, that the environment was supportive rather than destructive, that the technological changes were the consequences and not the cause, that the envisioned decline was really a rise, the origin really a termination or that the crisis was really normality. And everyone will have been right.

A breakdown, then, is a set of events, processes, interactions, outlooks that are followed by other processes that are perceived by the observer to lead to the termination of a social system. The processes are real in that they would be perceived by a great number of the participants themselves, at least in part.

Civilizations are large, complex, durable social systems. Since they last a very long time and they are so immense, there is likely to be less agreement about their definition than there is about such systems as states and formal organizations.

There is likely to be less agreement still about the terminations of civilizations. What appears to be the termination of the entire civilization to some will be perceived as a crucial transition by others.

But even where such differences exist, there would be some agreement that such crucial transitions can be traced back to a set of precipitating events. Again, however, there will be disagreement about which were "really" the precipitation events, although observers will usually agree that such events took place. These precipitating events of the transition (Brinton, 1938, *Report* 1960) are identical with the breakdown of whatever situation preceded the transition.

Civilizations themselves are perceptions. They are perceptions that have been shared by a considerable number of people, because they have been forcefully presented by Spengler and Toynbee, who happened to be good writers, and because they provide a frame of reference for creating and solving some interesting problems. They satisfy our desire to unify and order, and they explain disparate phenomena in the same sense that the primeval atom theory explains the disparities of the universe. The perception of civilizations is not widespread in the world. Even within the ISCS, members and participants, like Sorokin (1957)

and Voegelin (1956-1974), Iberall (1976) and McKnight (1975), have suggested that other models would explain more or create more interesting problems.

But civilizations are examples of systems about which there is a reasonable amount of agreement on existence and even boundaries by a number of people. About their breakdowns, however, there is likely to be less agreement, because there will be different perceptions about what is necessary to explain the termination of the system or the phase in question. A discussion is likely to reduce disagreement. If Toynbee is now talking to Gibbon, a mawkish but happy thought, Gibbon would probably say that of course the Peloponnesian Wars had something to do with the shaping of the character of the Greeks and influenced the Romans, but it was not necessary for the problem he wished to examine. There is no rightness or wrongness about breakdowns, it simply depends on the objectives of the user. And when we review anyone's work, we usually criticize him against the standards themselves.

Nor does this preclude isomorphic comparisons. Where the individual sets his standards, and these are accepted for working purposes, he can find the intellectual, political, economic and military beginnings of similar terminal phases, whether these phases mark the end of a civilization, or the end of a feudal phase of civilization. After certain sets of circumstances occur, major systems changes tend to follow, until the system returns to an equilibrium that may or may not be distinctly different from what it had been before. If the system is a civilization, then certain sets of circumstances may be perceived as a breakdown.

But clearly, breakdowns are reversible. They have been perceived as irreversible because the pioneers who studied them began with termination and worked back to breakdown. Since they always found a single, initial set of precipitating events, and these, naturally, always led to termination, breakdowns appeared to be unique and irreversible. But if the kinds of breakdowns found had been a concatenation of outlook and economics, and if a random sample of such concatenations was taken, (a casual methodological statement, but an immense undertaking), the finding would be that all such concatenations were not followed by termination of the system as the original comparative study.

Returning to the point with which we opened, which satisfied a neo-Spenglerian's drive for closure, Toynbee's concept of breakdown differed from mechanical breakdowns in that the civilizational breakdown occurred only once and was irreversible. Ironically, the conclusion drawn here would suggest that in one sense the concept of breakdown is more like the breakdown in an automobile. Civilizations have many phases, and each comes to an end, therefore civilizations have many breakdowns.

So, as the case with automobiles in the 30's, the breakdowns occur often in the life of the system, but usually they get fixed (by internal healing or equilibrating processes, however, rather than by external manipulation). Rarely, if ever, do you have to junk a civilization. They break down often, but usually they reconstitute themselves.

So, civilizations are shared perceptions of real processes. Breakdowns are the beginnings of terminal phases of these processes, though perceptions of these vary and depend on the contexts of the observer. In any event, breakdowns can be perceived often at the civilizational level, they are not irreversible, they usually lead to a resolution of some sort, a reconstitution within what is generally perceived to be the same system.

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