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John Mears
Southern Methodist University

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METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CIVILIZATIONS

John Mears

Any discussion of comparative approaches to the study of civilizations should begin with the problem of taxonomy. Regardless of their methodologies, scholars must be able to classify and define this familiar but rather elusive historical phenomenon called "civilization" with sufficient precision to permit the identification of those shared attributes that can be productively compared. The task is complicated by the everyday meaning of the word, which has value-laden connotations often reflecting the ethnocentric judgement that certain kinds of societies enjoy superiority over others. Hence, the term "civilization" has proved difficult to define in ways that command consensus and clarify discussion. Despite the continuing centrality of civilizational analysis in virtually every basic textbook as well as countless impressive volumes of high scholarship, many experts continue to raise doubts about the value of this framework for the study of world history.

In an admirably self-critical retrospective essay on *The Rise of the West*, historian William H. McNeill has concluded that his book "is flawed simply because it assumes that discernibly separate civilizations were autonomous social entities whose interactions defined history on a global scale." He nonetheless has remained unwilling to abandon the history of separate civilizations and their interactions as long as trans-civilizational processes receive greater attention and the concept of civilization is more carefully delineated. While McNeill omitted a specific rationale for his continuing emphasis on civilizations, his candid reflections on his own scholarship have served to remind his colleagues that their investigations should begin with some preliminary definitions. Before attempting a meaningful comparison of civilizations, or what Arnold Toynbee termed "intelligible units of historical study,"² researchers must reach at least tentative agreement regarding the large structural features that characterize the objects of their inquiry. Given the challenges encountered in any attempt to be explicit, this article, while seeking to respond to McNeill's admonition, does not try to create a set model intended to serve as a perfect fit for every civilization. What it will seek instead is only a heuristic devise, which must be subject to reformulation as particular case studies are examined.

The most telling definitions for the purposes of comparative analysis associate civilization with a high degree of societal complexity--a complexity sustained by hierarchically structured organizational mechanisms and what Alfred North Whitehead called "a profound cosmological outlook, implicitly accepted, impressing its own type on the current springs of action."³ A complex

society is composed of numerous interrelated parts. Not only are there more parts to the whole in comparison to what we encounter in a simple hunting and gathering society or a society of pastoral nomads, but the parts display greater differentiation or specialization, and are more firmly integrated into the whole. Complexity invariably brings with it an enhanced scale of organization. With this notion of complexity in mind, anthropologist Charles L. Redman has defined a civilization as "a functionally interrelated system." For Redman, a civilization is a complicated network of intersystemic as well as intrasystemic relationships operating at numerous levels whose components typically originate and come together in urban centers. Considered from this perspective, a city functions like a junction within a broader civilizational network, serving as a center for the very institutions and organizational mechanisms that mark a society as a civilization. Since cities in Redman's sense exist only within the context of a civilization, cities and civilizations are closely intertwined.⁴ Based on Redman's orientation, a working definition might be restated in a slightly refined form: a civilization is a complex, open, and functionally interrelated social system which is characterized by high levels of human interaction, cultural creation, and institutional integration, which operates through hierarchically structured organizational mechanisms, and which is energized by a profound cosmological outlook. For some authorities, that profound cosmological outlook embedded in the cultural system of a complex society constitutes the very essence of a civilization.⁵

The extraordinary degree of interaction and interdependence that typifies the infrastructure of a civilization explains why a given civilized society can maintain its distinctive identity over immense geographical areas and for extended periods of time in the face of considerable local differences, yet undergo myriad alterations on a virtually continuous basis. Once thoroughly integrated patterns have emerged, a civilization achieves sufficient coherence in the relationships between its various facets that the possibilities for substantial modification begin to diminish. Hence, the identity of a civilization, can be maintained despite substantial changes throughout the successive phases of its existence. A. L. Kroeber could therefore discuss identity in terms of cultural "style," Henri Frankfort in terms of the "form" of a civilization. On the other hand, the diversity of human action and thought embraced by the complex network of relationships (external as well as internal) that makes up a civilization evokes recurring change. Even when the stimulus of external forces is minimal, a civilizational network accelerates the rate and scale of change through a concentration of creative potential and a surplus of resources which release human capacities for self-sustaining development. Alterations in one facet of the complicated system give rise to modifications in other components, thus producing changes not in particular parts of the system, but shifts throughout the entire configuration. The totality of these transformations is what Frankfort labeled the "dynamics" of a civilization.⁶ To grasp a civilization's history, attention must be focused on the inter-

play between form and dynamics, even though it is the persistence of a civilization's forms in the face of cumulative alterations that allows scholars to perceive it as a unified culture area, whose existence can be located at least approximately in time and space, whose limits and divisions can be described without always being guilty of reification, and whose distinguishing characteristics can be differentiated, with the help of comparative analysis, from the unique attributes of its constituent regions as well as from the dominant features of other complex societies.⁷

Any approach emphasizing the interrelational aspects of a complex social system and embracing very large space/time perspectives must be holistic in nature. From the assumption that the various components of a civilizational network are interrelated, that they are integrally connected to a larger whole, it follows that they cannot be examined in isolation, since they derive their meaning from their positions within the functioning system. Students of civilization must also give up the temptation to rely exclusively on chronological narratives that explain particular events in terms of unilinear causation. That does not mean that they should abandon the narrative process altogether. Narration, after all, is itself a mode of interpretation, and given the preoccupation of scholars with the fundamental problem of how and why deep societal changes occur over time, they will invariably be compelled to organize past events sequentially and within the context of coherently defined periods. But if they want to explain the long-term realities of civilizations, then they will have to construct explanatory models that integrate an understanding of structures (patterns of continuity over time) and processes (the change of structures through time) into a chronological narrative.

Historian James A. Henretta has proposed one method for accomplishing this demanding task. As a means of stating our problems, organizing our perceptions, and understanding our data, his method focuses on paradigmatic episodes, particular situations that are symptomatic of immense social forces or pervasive trends.⁸ He argues that such crucial episodes can be studied for their broad historical significance through the use of anthropologist Clifford Geertz's technique of "thick description"--the treatment of the cockfight in Bali, for example, as a point of entry that provides investigators access to the comprehension of an entire culture. Employing "thick description," they can treat the cockfight as a kind of text that embodies an historically transmitted pattern of meanings expressed in symbolic form.⁹ Lacking any coherent theory with which to explore the enormous subject of civilization, however, they will invariably find the comparative method indispensable. Only within a comparative framework will they be able to account for similarities and differences in analogous situations while explaining the causes and consequences of large impersonal trends. Only by looking at civilizations comparatively will they be able to grasp what is important from what is not. The comparative method can help them to discipline con-

jecture and delineate broader patterns amidst the myriad details they will invariably encounter.¹⁰

Before they can construct a comparative study of civilizations in an orderly fashion, however, researchers must still confront another thorny issue: the problem of periodization. As befits the scope of their subject, they might appropriately begin with a very long-term perspective, considering the last 5,000 years (ca. 3500 BPE-ca. 1950 PE) as a single coherent period in the adaptation of humankind to life on this planet. A few moments of reflection will remind them that this entire period was characterized by the development of what they call civilization and its spread throughout the globe in a variety of distinctive manifestations. At the outset, civilization was confined to a few small regions located in river valleys scattered throughout the eastern hemisphere. In our own times, societies typically labelled with the word "civilization" cover most of the habitable areas of the planet, the few remaining pastoral nomads and hunter-gatherers having been confined to the margins of human existence. This 5,000 years, what might be described as "the civilizational epoch," was bracketed by two great transmutations in the human condition: the origins of complex societies (ca. 8500-ca. 3500 BPE), and the global integration of human affairs, which began to accelerate after about the year 1000 PE and is apparently reaching a culmination at the close of the twentieth century. Both of these transmutations involved momentous technological innovations and a fundamental restructuring of social organization and values that affected virtually every facet of human life. Both were stimulated by and in turn sustained dramatic rises in global population. Both augmented the sources of energy available to human societies. By enabling human beings to enhance their resource bases in substantial ways, both constituted genuine economic revolutions.¹¹ They both brought to a culmination persistent patterns of interaction and lines of development in world history while simultaneously setting new trends in motion.

The first of these two major watersheds, which provoked the breakthrough to civilization in the river valleys of the ancient Near East after 3500 BPE, itself embraced two great milestones: the shift to sedentary food production and the concomitant rise of cities. Together they accelerated the pace of change in societies whose enhanced scale and complexity evoked a greater range of behavior patterns from their members. Urban life, in particular, intensified the interaction between people. It generated new forms of integrating institutions that reflected hierarchical patterns of authority, social stratification, specialization of functions, and unequal distribution of wealth. Since the shift from hunting and gathering to sedentary food production and urban life occurred independently in widely separated places, a comparative analysis of various instances could tell specialists much about the form of civilization as it subsequently emerged in each respective area.¹²

Wherever the first great transmutation worked itself to completion, in

Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus River Valley, northern China, Mesoamerica, or Andean South America--it shattered the developmental ceilings that had limited the accomplishments of hunters and gatherers by providing human beings with the ability to enlarge their resource base in relationship to population levels. At the same time, it disrupted the relative equilibrium of the hunting-gathering context, making the last 5000 years a period of chronic instability and conflict.¹³ Until the Industrial Revolution, agriculturally based societies repeatedly ran up against higher but still impervious developmental ceilings that kept productivity comparatively low and prevented substantial technological breakthroughs. Only now are the limitations on human potential set by the first transmutation being transcended by the one presently overtaking humankind the world around.

More and More people living in the late twentieth century are coming to recognize their own age as a critical historical juncture which will ultimately displace the current context of human existence in ways that even the most farsighted of them have only begun to comprehend.¹⁴ Whatever the future may hold, the twentieth-century dividing line in human history appears to be marking the close of the extended epoch which can properly be associated with complex societies in the traditional sense. Particularly relevant for comparative study is a recognition that humankind has apparently reached the end of a prolonged experience with meaningfully autonomous civilizations, as virtually every aspect of ordinary life is being decisively altered by settings that are increasingly technological, industrial, urban--and global--in nature. When analyzed at the level of broad trends and large social structures, contemporary events seem to be producing an interdependent world civilization. Be that as it may, intellectual, scientific, governmental, and business elites are becoming truly international. Styles of high art and popular taste reflect worldwide similarities, as do the menacing problems presented by run-away population growth, environmental deterioration, resource exhaustion, and religious-ethnic conflict.

The conclusion seems inescapable that human beings are passing through yet another major watershed in human affairs, one that will ultimately make civilization as it has been considered here a thing of the past. In all probability, this second great transmutation will ultimately settle into a global system bearing the historic imprint of diverse regional cultures rather than a bland, all-encompassing uniformity. Humankind will surely remain connected to the heritage of the civilizational epoch as well as the more distant hunting and gathering adaptation even as its shared history deviates from previous realities. Such historical connections notwithstanding, the very fact twentieth-century Europe, to use just one example, has become ever more integrated into patterns of development that are global in scope means that it cannot be compared to other traditional forms of civilization in the same ways as, say, thirteenth-century Europe.

Comparing complex societies during the 5000 years that intervened between the two great transmutations in the human condition, researchers should

distinguish one traditional civilization from another, analyzing the characteristic style of each, establishing what each has contributed to the legacy of the past. But they should also explore the common denominators between the several great civilizations that have appeared over the last five millenia, recognizing that all of them were founded in one way or another on what anthropologist Eric Wolf has termed "the tributary mode of production."¹⁵ From ancient Sumer forward, complex societies rested on an agricultural base, with numerous food-producing peasants, dwelling in isolated villages and functioning at or near the subsistence level, subject to and exploited by small ruling elites usually congregated in urban centers. Hierarchy, specialization, and inequality were among the pervasive patterns shared by complex societies. As late as the year 1300, they all remained structurally very much alike. Only in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries did the importance of certain peculiar qualities of European civilization, such as the scope of private enterprise and rational manipulation of the environment emphasized by David Landes,¹⁶ become readily apparent, at least in retrospect--the very qualities which temporarily allowed Europe to outstrip its rivals as a center of intellectual ferment, political experimentation, economic growth, and technological innovation, and to become dominant in global affairs between 1500 and 1900.

That point concerning the shape of European history suggests that for purposes of comparative analysis, humankind's 5,000-year experience with civilization should be broken down into sub-periods, whose chronological limits will be determined in large measure by alterations in the nature and intensity of cross-cultural interaction, and whose interior cohesiveness will be dictated by significant differences in the forms and dynamics of civilizations which scholars desiring to make significant comparisons should take into account. Whatever schemas investigators finally devise, their notions of periodization must surely distinguish the earliest complex societies of the eastern hemisphere from the enhanced ancient civilizations governed by powerful imperial states, the great classical civilizations with their more successful adaptations to societal complexity, and the immense zones of culture that appeared in the centuries immediately preceding the genuinely global epoch of world history inaugurated by European exploration and discovery.¹⁷ Any definition of periods will have to encompass the separate historical experience of peoples in the western hemisphere, where prior to 1500 human groups operating within a different set of circumstances moved toward societal complexity more gradually, and where the civilizations of the Maya, the Aztecs, and the Incas belatedly reached levels of complexity that the ruling elites of Eurasian civilizations had learned to manage by the first millenium BPE, but that Amerindian ruling elites were still struggling to control.¹⁸

Finally, how might researchers new to the field approach comparative studies in light of the methodological considerations raised here? In designing a project, whether for teaching or for research, they should keep in mind the vari-

ables which are critical to the functioning of a civilizational network, including ecological contexts, demographic patterns, core cultural assumptions and religious beliefs, technology, organizational structures, and social stratification; and they should remember the importance of delineating the interrelationships between these variables in successive periods. Whatever the specific objects of their investigation, they will benefit by working as much as possible with analytical categories that push them to the heart of any civilizational system. To cite a single example, "the city" is indisputably such a concept, when properly defined.¹⁹ As centers of political administration, economic activity, and cultural achievement, cities affect the entire structure of a civilization and reveal its distinguishing characteristics.

Pursuing a comparative study of cities which takes into account their systemic context, scholars position themselves to answer Fernand Braudel's question about why some cities were "like steam-engines while others were like clocks," and more pointedly why change was "a striking feature of the destiny of Western towns....Comparative history compels us to look for the reasons for these differences," he asserted, "and to attempt to establish a dynamic 'model' of the turbulent urban evolution of the West."²⁰ If, in their search for explanations, specialists were to initiate a comparative study of European and Chinese cities in, let us say, the early modern period, they would soon find themselves learning much about the functioning of both civilizations.²¹

The value of Charles Redman's definition of civilization as a "functionally interrelated system" exhibiting a high degree of societal complexity is revealed in a somewhat different fashion when investigators seek to identify the environmental circumstances shared by all or nearly all of the settings that produced pristine civilizations. Here they will find Redman's definition particularly helpful to their search if they draw upon the anthropologist's concept of human ecology, which attempts to provide a comprehensive perspective encompassing the relationships between human beings and their total environment, a term meant to embrace sociocultural as well as biophysical contexts, all viewed as facets of a complicated interaction sphere.²² The potential range of the approach suggested by Redman's definition is also well illustrated by Joseph A. Tainter's study of societal collapse--what historians conventionally call the problem of "decline and fall." Tainter compares nearly two dozen case studies ranging over several millennia, examining in each instance the rise and fall of complexity "as a monitor of the phenomenon termed civilization," a monitor that he argues "is at once measurable and specifiable, and so less subject to the biases and value judgements of other approaches."²³

But comparative study, however oriented, provides a powerful tool with which to explain the similarities and differences between civilizations. It is an indispensable aid in our unending search for causes. It enlarges our awareness of the entire spectrum of human experience and deepens our comprehension of

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broad patterns and interrelationships of global development. It helps us reflect upon the problems and dilemmas of the contemporary world from an enlarged perspective rather than in terms of our immediate interests and needs alone. Without being tempted by the social scientist's interest in prediction and social control or succumbing to the urge to make unique events fit rigid theories and general laws, we can utilize the comparative study of civilizations to forge new syntheses of disparate materials, and construct analytical frameworks within which old facts, time-worn concepts, and familiar areas of learning will acquire fresh meaning and relevance. We can then have some confidence that our various disciplines have been turned from fascinating antiquarian exercises into what Agnes Heller, thinking about the discipline of history, has termed "the past of the present,"²⁴ exactly what I imagine the fundamental task of the comparative study of civilizations to be.

Southern Methodist University

END NOTES

¹ William H. McNeill, "The Rise of the West after Twenty-Five Years," *JOURNAL OF WORLD HISTORY*, Vol. I, No. I (Spring 1990), pp. 8-10.

² See D. C. Somervell's abridgement of Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History* (2 vols.; New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1946-57), Vol. I, Part I.

³ A. N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (Cambridge University Press, 1933), pp. 13-14.

⁴ For these points I have relied on Charles L. Redman, *The Rise of Civilization* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1978), Chap. 7 and especially pp. 215-20.

⁵ This view is presented in Joseph A. Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 40-41.

⁶ A concise summary of these concepts is provided by Henri Frankfort, *The Birth of Civilization in the Near East* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1956), pp. 2-3.

⁷McNeill, pp. 19-21. For a human geographer's vision of Europe as a constantly changing cultural area with imprecise frontiers that have ebbed and flowed over the centuries, see Terry G. Jordan, *The European Cultural Area* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), Chap. I.

⁸James A. Henretta, "Social History as Lived and Written," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 84, No. 5 (December 1979), pp. 1319-22.

⁹A good introduction to the theories of Clifford Geertz can be found in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

¹⁰A wide-ranging example of the comparative method applied to world history can be found in E. L. Jones, *The European Miracle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Richard P. McCormick, "The Comparative Method: Its Application to American History," *Mid-America: An Historical Quarterly*, Vol. LVI (1974), pp. 231-47 offers a ready reference to basic literature on the comparative method. Also helpful for the writing of this paper have been William H. Sewell, Jr., "Marc Bloch and the Logic of Comparative History," *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History*, Vol. VI, No. 2 (1967), pp. 208-18; E. E. Evans-Pritchard, "The Comparative Method in Social Anthropology," *The Position of Women in Primitive Societies and Other Essays in Social Anthropology* (New York: The Free Press, 1965), pp. 13-36; and Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 33-40.

¹¹This is the interpretation emphasized by Douglass North, *Structure and Change in Economic History* (New York: Norton, 1981), Chaps. 7-8.

¹²As an illustration of the possibilities here, see the unpublished manuscript by John A. Mears entitled "Ecology as a Factor in the Rise of Early Civilizations," which was presented at the annual meeting of the World History Association in Aspen, Colorado, October 9-12, 1994.

¹³William H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1977), pp. 60-68; as well as *The Global Condition: Conquerors, Catastrophes, and Community* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), Part II.

¹⁴A classic discussion of this perspective is contained in Kenneth E. Boulding, *The Meaning of the Twentieth Century: The Great Transition* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965).

¹⁵ Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 79-83.

¹⁶ David Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 15-39.

¹⁷ See the unpublished manuscript by Jerry H. Bentley entitled "Cultural Interaction and Periodization in World History," delivered at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, Chicago, Illinois, December 27-30, 1992.

¹⁸ Brian M. Fagan, *People of the Earth: An Introduction to World Prehistory* (Fifth Edition; Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1986), Part VI.

¹⁹ Consider the definition of Arnold Toynbee, *Cities of Destiny* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973), pp. 13-14.

²⁰ Fernand Braudel, *The Structure of Everyday Life: Vol. I of Civilization and Capitalism 15th-18th Century* (3 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1979-1984), p. 510.

²¹ A Provocative starting-point for a consideration of Chinese cities is Etienne Balazs, *Chinese Civilization and Bureaucracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), pp. 23, 44, 66, 78.

²² A basic introduction to this concept is contained in Bernard G. Campbell, *Human Ecology: The Story of Our Place in Nature from Prehistory to the Present* (New York: Aldine Publishing Company, 1985). World historians would also benefit from the discussion in William T. Sanders and Barbara J. Price, *Mesoamerica: The Evolution of a Civilization* (New York: Random House, 1968), Parts One and Three.

²³ Tainter, p. 41.

²⁴ Quoted in Ferenc Feher, *The French Revolution and the Birth of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 4.