William McCaughey Five Epochs of Civilization: World History as Emerging in Five Civilizations

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William McCaughey

*Five Epochs of Civilization: World History as Emerging in Five Civilizations*

Minneapolis, Thistlerose, 2000

This is a goofy, exasperating, entertaining book.

If you can get into it, accept the author’s perspective as a working premise, adjust to some of his terminology as we adjust to Sorokin’s, forgive his chrono and civilocentrism as we hope others forgive ours, you may find it an enjoyable read.

To begin with, the title is appropriate, the subtitle and chapter titles misleading. McCaughey equates epochs and civilizations (45), arguing that “curiously” (xv) civilizations exist around the world in time periods, not over much longer periods regionally. It is absurd, he thinks, to assume that we live in the same civilization as did Charlemagne (30).

Since he does equate epochs and civilizations, however, we can use the term epoch here, for the book in structure more resembles Lee Daniel Snyder’s *Macro-History*, with civilizations nestled within long-term evolutionary epochs than, say, Carroll Quigley’s *Evolution of Civilizations* with recurring stages in regionally different civilizations.

McCaughey’s thesis is that there have been four major epochs in civilized history and we are now at the dawn of a fifth. These epochs begin at ever shorter interludes, the first in the fourth millennium BCE, the second in the middle of the first millennium BCE, the third in the middle of the second millennium CE, the last two at the end of the same millennium. Put another way, the time span between the first and second epoch is 2500 years, between the second and third 1900, between the third and fourth 500 and between the fourth and fifth 100. One does not entirely replace another, however, so that even the first persists in some areas of the world. Nor do the epochs begin everywhere at once, e.g. the first epoch begins in Mesopotamia, later in India and still later in China—a traditional civilizational view.

The epochs are linked to what McCaughey calls cultural technologies, in each case means of communication: writing, alphabetic writing, printing, electronic media and computers. The new communication form causes changed public perceptions, which lead to social changes, primarily in government in the first epoch, religion in the second, commerce in the third, entertainment in the fourth and presumably social interaction in the nascent fifth.
These changes are deep, however, involving major revolutions in worldview. The time frame shortens, perhaps, because earlier technological inventions reached smaller audiences, and it took them a greater amount of time to have impact. Printing disseminated faster, but it still took time to build up an audience while the electronic communications disseminated very quickly. Each time the new communication altered the collective perceptions of those who had access to it. The inventions appear to have been independently repeated in different civilizations (using the term in the traditional sense) called forth by the stage of development (40), though a time lapse of centuries in the first epoch becomes one of a few years in the fourth.

Speech was the principal means of communication in personal life, writing, until electronic communication, of communities (340). Societies (not civilizations) like China, that did not develop alphabetic writing, did not develop a reading public, and remained in Epoch I stage, with heavy control by government. The ease of learning an alphabetic script meant more readers and this coincided with the religious Axial age. Democracy succeeded in the West, and not Ancient Greece, because printing had produced an informed public. And Protestantism took hold following printing (346–359).

Cultural florescence—McGaughey prefers “quickening”—coincides with new technologies, but this occurs over periods of time in different civilizations (449–451) and given the Western emphasis after Epoch III, perhaps McGaughey considers that Epochs III–V haven’t yet had significant impact in other civilizations. On the other hand, perceptions of a wider world are symptoms of cultural quickening (452–461).

New technologies immediately bring about classic works of culture. The alphabet gave us Plato and Aristotle, printing Rabelais and Shakespeare, motion pictures plus sound gave us Gone With the Wind and the Wizard of Oz (437). If you find this amusing, you must still be hooked by the Third Epoch.

Not until rather late in the book, in discussing the use of history for prediction, does McGaughey develop his view that the crucial transitions brought on by the cultural technologies tend to be followed by a recurrent pattern. New cultural technologies bring new epochs. New epochs bring new institutions of power, new types of belief and models of personality. Over time the new values of the epoch change, and move toward the opposite. e.g. city states become empires in first epoch, then give way to religion dominating state in the next. That, in turn gives way to dominance of wealth and power, which collapsed in the 19th century.
and was replaced with desire for entertainment (425–427).

The descriptions of the first three epochs are fairly conventional, focusing respectively on political, religious and commercial histories. But political and religious events continue, of course, into the commercial period.

As he proceeds through the epochs, McGaughey’s spacial framework narrows, becoming almost entirely Western with the third epoch, and American with the last two. It appears that he is with David Landes and not Gunter Frank in his view that the commercial and industrial revolutions had Western origins, and he excuses focusing on America for the history of electronic development because of the difficulty in presenting a worldwide picture.

The history of the fourth epoch, the epoch of entertainment, is certainly entertaining. It is fun to read about the sequences of development, and the entertainers of radio and television we remember, and there is some evidence in support of its importance. It certainly can be shown to be an era of productivity and waste: gambling, drugs, mercantile holidays.

If leadership tends to be consistent with communication technology, Ronald Reagan would be effective in the age of entertainment. The media certainly had an important impact on race relations, with the integration of baseball and television presentations (e.g. black actors in the television version of Amos and Andy) and playing a crucial role in the civil rights movement, which certainly had its dramatic aspects (296–304). And if the amount of money spent on gambling each year exceeds the amount spent on housing and automobiles, that is certainly significant (325).

Epoch V is, of course, speculative. It includes some interesting possibilities. McGaughey anticipates a reduction in value and therefore cost of higher education with the replacement of classroom by computerized teaching, a short term feminization of college as women still obtain social prestige while men head directly into computer related work, depending on computer memory to provide them with what college once provided. In another generation women will follow and the decline of college prestige will have an egalitarian effect on working knowledge and salaries.

McGaughey also predicts the fall of entertainment and sports salaries as niche computer advertising replaces mass television mass advertising (474–488). These ideas do relate to earlier theories about long term relations between epochs, but they are too complicated and perhaps unconvincing to explain in a paragraph. Other predictions and
concerns are more orthodox, but it is interesting, some might say admirable, that globalization, except with reference to the world labor market in Epoch III (267), is not discussed in the book.

Still, is it just an Epoch III perspective, to wonder if entertainment is not something that has always been desired, but is not, and never was, central for most people? And is it adequate to present only the history of American entertainment, even ignoring films from the rest of the world in favor of Hollywood? And this in the name of coherence?

In view of his perception of the importance of change in technologies, you have to wonder why McEachern wrote a book. Why not communicate through the net? Very possibly he has, but also wishes to reach the declining number of Epoch III Luddites, those whom Roger Wescott has designated “arm chair anthropologists.”

On the other hand, it is not a very sequential book. McEachern thinks printing creates well-linked, logical sequences, but his book seems like it is written for an electronic audience, not sequential but episodic. Oh, there are sequential chapters of the histories of the first four epochs, along with a history of cultural technologies. But the histories overlap, the relation between technology and society is deferred, the book has a post-modern feel about it, and from McEachern’s perspective, post-modern writing would be consistent with his fourth epoch. In retrospect, the deferral of the chapter on the relationship between cultural technologies and social change probably adds to the surrealistic feel of the book, and those still Epoch III oriented might prefer to have a look at that chapter before reading the epochal histories.

Obviously, civilizationalists may find some aspects of such a book problematic (a great relativist word, whether Faustian or Epochfourian). The declaring of two epochs in the same century does seem a bit chronocentric. If the trend continues we shall have yearly, monthly, daily and finally hourly epochs that can be transmitted only by computer, and civilization will end in an epochal implosion—a refreshingly original forecast not explicitly presented by McEachern.

On Epoch IV, the Entertainment Era, where McEachern (by Epoch III standards) would need to provide well-linked, logical, and empirical support, he tends to be entertaining, his support often anecdotal (361–366). When he argues that the Lynd’s Middletown studies showed that radio cut into the amount of reading done by the people of Muncie, he is unaware that a 1970’s study by Theodore Caplow and associates showed that despite 28 hours of television per week, Middletowners by every conceivable measure had far more access to reading materials—
libraries, book stores, newspapers and magazines—and did far more reading than they had in the Twenties and Thirties. McGaughey is not to be faulted for not having been familiar with this particular piece of evidence, but he doesn’t seem to have considered using any other.

Again, do communication innovations correlate with political and social revolutions? Here McGaughey behaves like a true civilizationist, finding the revolution to fit the innovation and dismissing all others as secondary.

Then, it appears that if an epoch begins with a technological impact on culture, it ends with a cultural impact on technology. Public perception goes through phases of its own, not unlike those perceived by our classical civilizationists, and ends in a cultural revolution that seems to produce the next technology. This also has an echo of Kavolis (not cited), who saw philosophers and artists anticipating the next crisis. Did population expansion produce writing? The invasion of the Sea Peoples the alphabet? The Renaissance printing?

Epoch III readers may find the references curious: no Snyder, Wescott, Wilkinson, Hord, not even McNeill. No world systems analysts, but included are the Variety History of Show Business & Virtual Reality and the Exploration of Cyberspace. From an Epoch IV perspective, this may be quite reasonable.

In retrospect, this review seems to have been a translation of McGaughey’s Epoch V book for readers still immured in Epoch III, the era of printing.

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