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Stephen Blaha. *The Rhythms of History: A Universal Theory of Civilization*

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Stephen Blaha. *The Rhythms of History: A Universal Theory of Civilization*. Auburn NH, Pingree-Hill, 2002 Revised ed. 2003, as *The Life Cycle of Civilizations*

In the past five years, three books have appeared that provide new overviews on the comparative study of civilizations. In 1999 there was the meticulous *Macro-History* of Lee Daniel Snyder, probably the longest and most thorough study since Toynbee. This was followed a year later by William McGaughey's quirky but involving *Five Epochs of Civilization*. And now we have Stephen Blaha's *The Rhythms of History*, published in 2002, and quickly revised in 2003, with additional notes and appendix, under the title *The Life Cycle of Civilizations*. [Page citations, in this review, are from both editions.]

Blaha superficially resembles Snyder in that he perceives sequences of civilizations, and finds their rhythms to be remarkably consistent. But where Snyder's study is written for civilizationists and historians, Blaha is attempting to make his book available for general readers, including college undergraduates.

He is unapologetically Toynbean, taking the three and a half beats of civilizational routs and rallies as his starting point. From this Blaha, a physicist, develops a series of mathematical formulas, generously illustrated by charts, which yield a series of civilizations each lasting approximately a millennium, the 400 year periods of Times of Troubles and Universal States being preceded by 134 years of growth, a phase Toynbee thought variable. This approach nets for Blaha, as it does for Snyder, a larger number of civilizations than Toynbee perceived.

Having honed his procedure, Blaha does not hesitate to tackle and chart the rhythms of intercivilizational encounters, barbarian and even extraterrestrial interventions, and, of course, future projections.

Whether or not undergraduates (or scholars for that matter) can manage the 139 mathematical formulas, they will probably find the book readable, the charts helpful and the conclusions clear. As for civilizationists, they may find the book, like McGaughey's, alternately refreshing and exasperating.

After adding his own genetic and climatic perspectives on the origins of civilizations, Blaha charts Toynbee's three and a half beats of routs and rallies as a fluctuating line extending over time from left to right, each high and low point successively less extreme until the line flattens out to a static phase of development of indeterminate length (figure 9 from his book). This includes a period before breakdown, the highest point of development, and the 800 year period that encompass-

es Time of Troubles and Universal State.

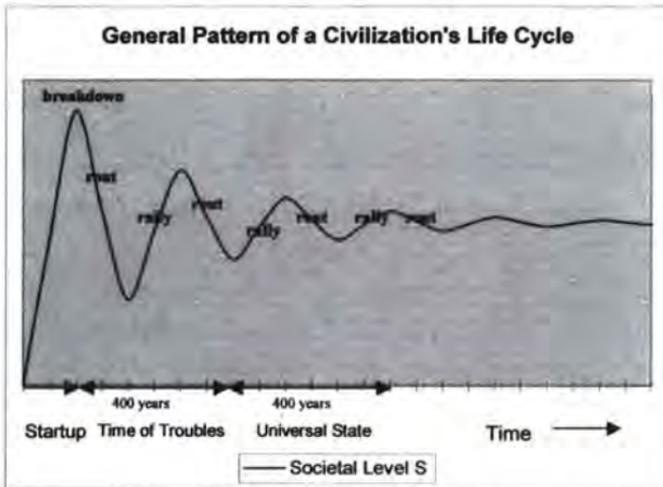


Figure 9. The typical pattern of the routs and rallies of a civilization. (Reprinted with permission from S. Blaha, *The Rhythms of History*, Pingree-Hill Publishing, Auburn, NH, 2002).

Physicist Blaha notes that the Toynbean curve resembles the well known (to physicists anyway) Newtonian equation $mC'' + rC' + sC = 0$, [57,48] the equation for the charmingly titled “damped harmonic oscillator.” From this, with a series of equations that reminded me of those enthusiastically and bafflingly scribbled on the blackboard by my high school algebra or trigonometry instructors, Blaha arrives at a Standard Societal S curve [69,58] that he proceeds to test against civilizational histories. Adding 134 years from start up to breakdown, a measure derived from the formulas, and also adding perhaps a century and a half for the final rout, the norm for a civilization would be a few decades over a millennium, or, since Blaha is more precise, 1068 years.

Next he tests his curve against civilizational histories, beginning with Hellenic (figure 14 from his book) which, though it does not follow the model curve exactly, approximates it and runs exactly 1068 years.

Beginning with standard Toynbean delineations—Minoan, Sumeric, Indic, Sinic, Egyptaic, Mayan and Andean—but like Toynbee and Snyder making further civilizational divisions when the static period following the final rout reconstitutes and again begins to develop, Blaha discerns four generations of civilizations totaling 33 in number [122,110].

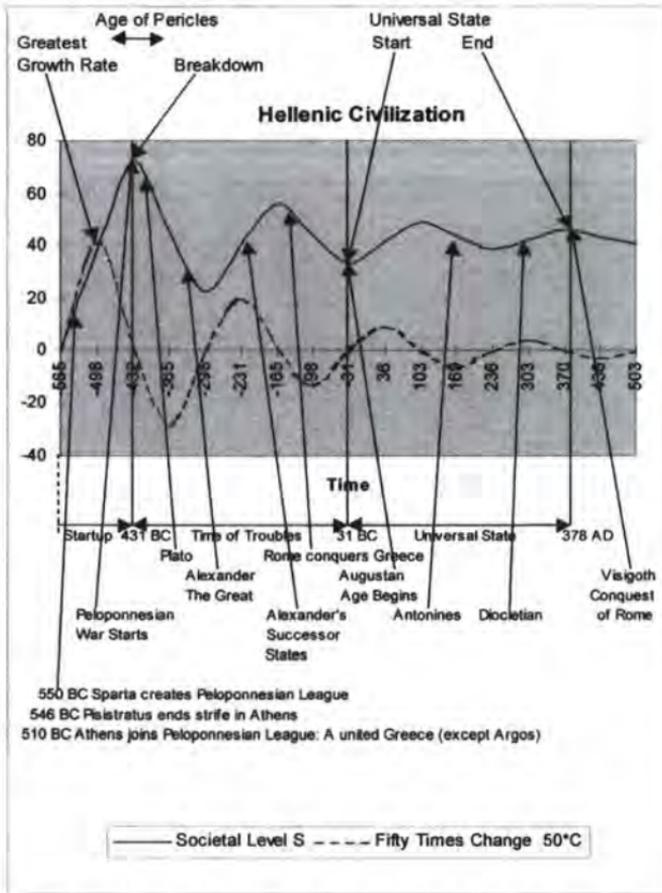


Figure 14. Comparison of Hellenic civilization with the general theory of civilization. The plotted societal level is $S_{\text{Hellenic}}(t)$. (Reprinted with permission from S. Blaha, *The Rhythms of History*, Pingree-Hill Publishing, Auburn, NH, 2002).

In explaining the regularity of periodicity, Blaha focuses particularly on a recurrent 267 year period between peaks and valleys of the cycles, a regularity that does “not depend on the environment, barbarians, religions or any other obvious environmental factor or combination of factors.” He attributes the regularity to the nature of human beings. If there is a 267 year cycle, there are 134 years in a rally or a rout, which comes to four generations of 33.5 years each. He notes that Toynbee and others have suggested four generations are necessary to bring about change. And the strain of growth brings that phase to an end, whereupon it takes four more generations to stem the rout. In each direction, parents transmit knowledge and ignorance to their children,

but this eventually peters out, and a change in social situation becomes likely [130-131,117].

Beyond what might be called normal civilizational development, Blaha tackles such intracivilizational phenomena as arrested civilizations [79-80,67-69] and barbarians [166-171,145-149], intercivilizational [172-181,150-157] and even extraterrestrial [182-202,158-174] encounters, and—I was going to write future possibilities, but it is much more certain than that—future probabilities.

An arrested civilization is pretty much Toynbee with a graph, a civilization like the Polynesian going through a growth phase and then meeting an environmental challenge so severe that it levels off to a long term petrified state, indicated by a horizontal line not too different from death on a heart monitor.

Barbarian encounters may involve an external conquest, such as those of the Mongols, which would be treated as an intercivilizational encounter, or the gradual Toynbean transformation from “admiring allies” to conquerors. The latter is charted as a rising barbarian curve finally surpassing the level of a declining civilizational curve at the end of a rout. Blaha agrees with Toynbee that such an ending is the result of civilizational decline, not barbarian growth.

The consequences of civilizational interaction depend on phase, with the earlier phased civilization drawing more from the later phased civilization, and both leveling when the earlier phased civilization reaches its final rout. The Toynbean idea of arrested civilization does not appear to be dealt with explicitly, the American civilizations perceived as continuing through the Spanish conquests and the Hittite cut off but not explained.

Extraterrestrial civilizations are considered as probably existing, necessary for long term survival and most likely superior to earthly civilizations since they would be more likely to reach us, in response to our signals, than we them. In that case the interaction would raise the earthly civilizations to a higher level.

Future projections [138-149] indicate a rise of Chinese, Indian, Islamic and Orthodox civilizations by 2050, but a peaceful world maintained by the continuing dominance of the West; but by 2100, all five civilizations will be in a time of troubles, which “cannot be a happy portent.”

Despite the possible difficulty of the mathematical formulas, the book probably could be used for undergraduates, the charts explaining what the formulas may obscure. Civilizationists with a Kroeberian bent

may question the rigidly durationalist aspects of the book, particularly the historical choices made to designate breakdowns and the parameters of empire, but as with Toynbee and Snyder, that does not prevent the book from providing interesting and sometimes remarkable perspectives. An appendix [245-264,211-225] providing 104 propositions makes a useful checklist for any civilizationist who wants to review his (or her) own beliefs and perhaps proposed answers to questions not previously considered.

—Matthew Melko