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Masaki Miyake. Civilization and Time

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Bridging Civilizations While Tempus Fugit

Time is fundamental in physics, biology, and human civilization. *Homo sapiens* are the only time-binding animals and as such, our understanding of ourselves and the world is defined by how we conceptualize and implement time. Time’s concept varies among people and we begin with understanding their use of time value. Time leads us towards space, speed, movement, mobility and mediated technology such as the telephone and the Internet. These attributes lead us towards the time-binding cultures with interest in time, exemplified by history, continuity, permanence, contraction, and space-binding cultures, which are more static and traditional. As cultures become more time-binding they become less space-binding (“distance is dead”) and vice versa (Carey 1992).

Masaki Miyake has undertaken a noble task: to analyze the role of time in civilization in a comprehensive manner. First he looks at how historians treat concepts of time in Europe and Asia; he then analyzes the time concept as a problem for civilization theory and history. Consequently the author applies time as the factor of progress under forms of modernization and westernization taking place in Japan and Russia, later generalizing this issue as the idea of progress in the West and the non-Western world. The book also addresses the concepts of time in historical consciousness in Europe and Asia. The scope of the issues is tremendous, despite the fact that the book consists only of 80 pages. The brevity and clarity of the topics discussed and issues presented are two of the book’s largest assets.

At the beginning, we learned that according to McTaggart, “time does not exist,” which is rejected by the author, who leads us through circular (Greek and Roman) and linear (Christian) time concepts, hinting only about oscillating time (between day and night) in some primitive cultures. Eventually the author offers eight kinds of various concepts of time, which are de facto derivatives of these two major concepts. On the other hand, the author states that with the exception of Newtonian time, all seven kinds are related to their historic events, and they are not value-neutral and a-religious. The early Japanese writers perceived time as a will of Final Law (lasting ten thousand years) and had a concept of worsening time, which has roots in Buddhist doctrines.
of continuous decline. Finally, Miyake admits that early Japanese writers perceived time as circular, which means that everything occurs again and again. Not surprisingly, Nietzsche, Toynbee and Spengler liked that concept of time too, according to the book’s author.

Miyake has observed that a concept of the time repetitiveness penetrates Toynbee’s theory of civilization under the form of “renaissances,” in which the next cycle (“time”-driven) brings some improvements to civilization. The author notes that Yamamoto perceives time as a way, which leads to the development of peripheral civilizations (ex. from the Chinese to Japanese Civilization or from the Byzantine to Russian Civilization). Furthermore, the author shares with us that the Japanese during the Meiji period (1868-1912) perceived the West as a machine civilization and the East as a source of morality, superior to a machine. A discussion of whether this characterization remains valid may be an interesting one. Anyhow, a concept of a peripheral versus major civilization analyzed by Miyake is helpful in understanding dynamic interactions in time among civilizations.

Very intriguing is a discussion on the periodization of the Japanese Civilization by Ueyama Shunpei, who at the beginning of this civilization perceives three stages of the Japanese society: natural, agricultural, and industrial. The first two stages create a so-called First Civilization and the last one is just the Second Civilization with a system of constitutional monarchy. That is acceptable, but later, Ueyama states that Japanese Civilization is a peripheral one to Chinese Civilization, in the same way the Western Civilization is a peripheral civilization of the Greek-Roman Civilization.

What this means is that the Western Civilization is the Second Civilization, following the Mesopotamian Civilization as the First Civilization. Surprisingly, Ueyama criticizes Toynbee and Spengler for not classifying sequentially their concept of a civilization. He also thinks that the Japanese Civilization is a peripheral one of the Western Civilization. Fortunately, Miyake disagrees with this judgment, because it is “not appropriate.” The whole issue is very important, but the periodization of a civilization’s development and decline cannot be based on subjective divisions. For example, if the Japanese Civilization has two “civilizations,” so far, what will be the Third, Fourth, and so forth civilization? It would be very helpful if the author, after reminding us some contributions by others, could provide his clear criteria of periodizations, even limited to “his” civilization.

The idea of progress limited to modernization versus
Westernization is very popular nowadays in some countries like China and Malaysia, but the author reminds us that this controversy has taken place long ago (19th century) in Russia and Japan. In Japan and other non-Western countries modernization was identical with westernization, however Sakuma Shozan perceived the gap between Western and Chinese learning, where Western learning is not involved in investigation of the principles of morality in contrast to Chinese learning. Needless to say, Pope John-Paul II expressed the same opinion 100+ years later, when he warned against “confidence in such “progress,” which automatically offers better life conditions and even enhancement of humans....only those improvements have chances for lasting, which come out from the moral renewal of man.”

We can even like Fukuzawa Yukichi’s century-old definition of civilization – “civilization comforts man physically and elevates him spiritually...Civilization advances the well-being and dignity of man, since man acquires these benefits through knowledge and virtue. Civilization can be defined as that which advances man's knowledge and virtue.” In his opinion “morals had remained almost unchanged throughout history, but intellect had shown marked growth and progress.” These are excellent thoughts, very important for our “Knowledge Society,” emerging in the 21st century, which looks mostly for artificial intelligence in profit-driven robotics and neglects moral values of natural intelligence. After many quotes of the Japanese and Russian philosophers and historians, the author is close to conveying to us his hidden message that “The West cannot westernize itself” and separation of Western technology from Western spiritual civilization is very difficult. Perhaps he is right!

Miyake also writes about concepts of time in historical consciousness in Europe and Asia. He offers the dichotomy of time, namely chronological time of the historical process and actual time (“eotemporal”), applied by the physicists and mathematicians as \( t \). He eventually is preoccupied with the time-driven idea of progress, which according to him is characterized by the Christian linear time, going upwards towards the eternal betterment. He thinks that humans think this way. To prove his judgment, the author quotes opinions of many Japanese and Chinese philosophers, whose work is perhaps unknown to the scientists from other civilizations.

These opinions emphasize the difference in seeing progress in pessimistic and optimistic terms. This is interesting for us from the Western Civilization, where we perceive “progress” mostly in optimistic terms,
trying even to eliminate time by such slogans as "competing in time," "time war," "elimination of immediacy," "the end of the job," "death of distance," "instant delivery," and so forth. But looking at the consequences of these slogans, one can observe "jobless economy," "budget deficit," "foreign trade deficit," "creative accounting," "corporate crime," "overcrowded prisons," and so forth, which are de facto pessimistic outcomes of Western progress. It is interesting to notice that a concept of progress was or still is a political tool in Japan to break with the influence of the Chinese Civilization's pessimistic Confucianism by promoting "optimistic" Western Civilization. The author did touch to a certain degree a similar issue concerning Russia, which is de facto at the crossroads since Peter the Great, who wanted to modernize and Westernize Russia, and the Communists, who wanted to construct a new anti-Western civilization, as well as President Putin in the 21st century, who wants "computers" but not the western type of democracy. It means that Russia still debates the issue of "Westernization versus Russification," an issue still not resolved.

By the end of his book, the author promises to compare the idea of progress in the West and the non-Western world, saying at the beginning that Western intellectuals concentrate only on the study of Western intellectual history, which implies that we are "narrow-minded;" perhaps we are. This part of the book looks as a repetition of other chapters, lacking a summary done under a form of clear criteria and attributes provided in a table.

Masaki Miyake is an accomplished historian of European history, who published 20 books and many scientific papers at many international conferences, so his book on Civilization and Time looks like a recapitulation of his knowledge on this topic with signs of wisdom of a mature thinker. He has also done a very good job bringing to us time-oriented ideas of the Oriental philosophers and historians, who otherwise without the author's help, could be unknown for us from other civilizations. The topic of civilization and time is a very crucial one, just sketched by the author. It seems that further investigation should provide more model-oriented comparative studies, based on graphics and clear criteria, supported by historic cases and data.

Also, it seems to me that tempus fugit!

Andrew Targowski