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The Presidential Addresses: Professor Lee Daniel Snyder (outgoing) and Professor Andrew Targowski (incoming), as delivered at the 2007 Annual Meeting of the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations.

CIVILIZATIONS AND THE FOURTH TURNING

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As I hope most of you know, I published my major work in 1999 on Macro-History, where I argued that all civilizations have a characteristic structure, a series of 300-400 year cycles. In turn, each cycle could be characterized by four stages, each stage taking 50 to 100 years: a Reform Stage, a Revolutionary Stage, a Consolidation Stage, and a Disintegration Stage.

I remember hearing a question, I believe it was in one of our annual conferences, about what actually was the mechanism that energizes the cycles and their stages? I really had no answer and believed that my theory was based on the empirical study of the historical record, but I thought it might have something to do with the change of generations. But I had not been able to substantiate this intuition because I could not see how one determined when a generation began, since people were obviously being born in every year. So I focused my analysis on the internal structure of the civilizational cycle and its sub-systems, and left the dynamic side for future scholarship.

Recently I have discovered an amazing book by William Strauss and Neil Howe, called *The Fourth Turning, What the Cycles of History Tell Us About America's Next Rendezvous with Destiny*. While its content is limited to American history from the early 17th to the 20th centuries, it presents a well developed and quite persuasive use of generational theory to reveal a set of six generational cycles in a repeating pattern of 103 to 81 years. This time span fits rather neatly into my civilizational stages and gives them a structure and rationale.

Within each cycle, there are characteristically four generations. The content of each obviously changes to fit the historical record. But the authors argue that there is a definite regularity in the sequence of issues that dominate each of these four generations in turn, a sequence which creates a dynamic movement within the cycle, as new generation of young adults replace their elders and respond to the consequences of their actions.

Two key developments stand out in each generational cycle, an “awakening” and a “crisis,” with a preceding transitional generation that sets the stage for each, or from the other side, shows the consequences of the preceding period. The authors thus anchor each generational cycle by identifying a particular historical “awakening” and a following “crisis,” which always comes two generations later. While all generations still living are affected, it is characteristic that the young adults set the pace.

Some awakenings and some crises, of course, will vary greatly in terms of their impact on society, some mild and some very obvious; historians are skilled in finding these historical “innovations.” In summary, the dynamic changes in historical cycles can be reduced to the changing character of succeeding generations, although in our view, these generational cycles are still part of larger historical cycles (and their stages) that provide their content and modify their changes.

Strauss and Howe have also provided another layer of interpretation by identifying each generation with a psychological archetype based on tradition. There are, of course, four types: the Hero, the Artist, the Prophet, and the Nomad. The Prophet type dominates during the Awakening generation, the Hero during the Crisis generation, the Artist comes before the Awakening, and the Nomad before the Crisis. While the preoccupation of each generation is shaped by its historical context, it is also shaped by a reaction against its preceding generation, with which it disagrees, of course, and with the type of nurture it received.

Heroes are nurtured by a “tightening,” stricter practice, and so rear their succeeding Artist generation with a “relaxing”, freer strategy. Artists, however, still feel that their nurture has been overprotective, so they raise their children with an underprotective strategy. The Prophet generation naturally reverts to a tightening practice, and the Nomads go even further back to the overprotective pattern for the upcoming new Hero generation. These shifts thus help explain why the generations are different, but in the four-fold pattern; and they give the generational theory a psychological foundation. Beyond that they provide a traditionally oriented archetypical sequence.

Strauss and Howe are very concerned about the predictive implications of this generational theory. They see the “Fourth Turning” (the Crisis period) as looming in the immediate future. They date the current Generational Cycle from 1946 to 2026. And since the last cycle ended with a great crisis, the Second World War, they fear that a similar cataclysmic crisis should be coming in the near future. They hope

their arguments will help America find ways of moderating that crisis. If we are warned in time, the crisis will still come, but its violence can be greatly reduced.

(If you are interested in this analysis of the next decade or so, I leave that to your personal reading of the book, since I am primarily interested in clarifying the nature of historical cycles. Any cyclical theory has some possibilities for predicting the future, but I think it is wise for historians not to get too involved with the future, knowing how unpredictable history usually is.)

I am of course hoping that this type of generational theory can be used to explain the dynamic character of all historical cycles, as mentioned above. Some obvious modifications would have to be made with the tightly constructed model just discussed. For instance, the Awakening generation would change when applied to the Reform Stage, the Revolutionary Stage, the Consolidation Stage, and the Disintegration Stage, reflecting the larger historical cycle but presumably retaining some of its generational characteristics.

Likewise with the Crisis generation, which should correlate with the transition from one stage to the next, should change, intensified in the Reform Stage, as reform turns to revolution, moderated in the Revolutionary Stage as radical change is transformed into compromise in the Consolidation Stage, and intensified again in the Disintegration Stage. This pattern would, of course, need to be substantiated by detailed historical analysis, but if it is, it would add considerable analytical power to this structural model.

It is possible, of course, that this generational cycle is so tied to American history that it would not apply to different Western regions like Europe, much less non-Western Civilizations. European nations are quite diverse in details, so that defining European generations embracing the whole region would be challenging, and even more so if Latin America is included as part of the Western Civilization. It would be possible that the characteristics of generations would have to become so vague that they would be useless. On the other hand, this Generational Theory has been abstracted from six quite different periods of American history, so broadening it to a wider region might work.

My work on Macro-History had confirmed my intuition that all civilizations have the same basic structure and historical pattern. Even these generalizations, however, have not been widely debated. They still need study and confirmation or non-confirmation to thus create a real science of history. This has not yet happened. I still hope it will

eventually be done, although the independence of various academic disciplines may make it impossible. As I argued last year, it is a special challenge to civilizationalists like us gathered in our Society to take up the cause.

This generational theory may be just the structure we need to break new ground, for it is less grandiose than civilizational theory. The details can be studied over an 80-100 year span. Analysis and comparison of generational sequences in different regions could be a major breakthrough for our discipline.