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The Origins of Civilizations: Essay with Notes

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Introduction

Oswald Spengler wrote of civilizations having a soul that was born in an instant. The agonies of birth may vary, but it does often seem as though the civilization appears rather suddenly. If you think, as Spengler did, that Faustian Civilization appeared with the Gothic style, well, you might say it arose suddenly. Toward the end of the 12th century it was pretty widespread, whereas 50 years before it was nowhere. It may have been initiated by Abbe Sugere of St. Denis, who in 1140, in the process of rebuilding his Abbey, designed a section that featured columns of a stronger stone, thinner walls with large windows of stained glass, ribbed vaulting and a rose window (Boorstin, 2002: 247-253).

During a 1975 ISCSC meeting, Edmund Leites and I visited the Pittsburgh Carnegie Museum to see a huge room full of chronologically organized Chinese art. We could see at one end a form of art that looked pre-Columbian, and then Chinese art appeared, no transition between. I don’t know how long that took, but it looked sudden.

In retrospect, working back in time, the Gothic style appears to be the earliest example of the Faustian pattern that is characteristic of the West. Once the pattern appears, it seems to persist through many variants for a long time. That is difficult to see in your own civilization, if you are a Faustian comparing the Gothic to the Rococo, but easier to see in other civilizations.

As you compare these origins of pristine civilizations, those without predecessors, it becomes evident that qualities
of civilization appear as suddenly as the pattern. Political forms are called forth that had not been needed before, forms that are capable of governing larger masses of people. Usually there is some encompassing religion that supports the newly emerging governments. Population increases, cities appear, class systems evolve, and writing develops.

What is necessary? What are the sequences in which these components appear? To what extent are they imported and to what extent independently invented or discovered? To reassess these questions, it might be well to consider how some historians and civilizationists have responded to them.

Civilizationalist Responses

Before the emergence of civilization, however, there seems to have been a much longer period, perhaps several millennia, in which population increases while ecological changes and technological innovation made the development of civilizations possible (Lambert-Karlovsky 2000 xiii).

Agriculture. There seems to be widespread agreement that agriculture precedes civilization, but less on when agriculture appears and whether it relies on diffusion or independent invention. Usually agriculture has been perceived to involve heavy plows pulled by animals, replacing horticulture, which involves the scattering of seeds and weeding of gardens, a process surely invented by women (Lenski: 1970: 192-236). The plow, on the other hand, turns over soil to an extent that allows a group to occupy a territory for many generations, dispensing with the roving associated with hunting and gathering.

John Hord (2007) questions the centrality of the animal-pulled heavy plow. He argues that the need for such a plow
applied to the heavy soils of Europe, but that humans could pull plows in Mesopotamia and Mesoamerica.

**Surplus from Agriculture.** Eventually settlement may lead to the accumulation of surplus and the creation of a dominant landed class that develops political, religious and economic institutions in the process of ruling a much larger subordinate class. The larger organizational scope leads to a need for record keeping, usually leading to a system of writing. The new structure produces further surpluses that make possible building of larger structures, practical irrigation systems as well as ceremonial temples. Since the pattern is not evident in the agricultural pre-civilizational period, it is likely that the way in which relationships within the culture take place during the process of surplus creation accounts for the civilizational pattern that becomes apparent.

The sequence of events leading to civilization probably varied, but there seems to be agreement that agriculture precedes civilization by a few millennia. Most likely, as Stedman Noble argues, it is difficult to say when horticulture became agriculture. The knowledge that seeds produced plants led to the scattering of seeds millennia before the oxen-pulled traction plow appeared by the fourth millennium (2001). Then, with self-replenishing soil, the accumulation of surplus was possible, and groups of people could remain in one area.

In Noble’s view, before such projects could occur, a surplus was needed to provide for the governing officials who did the organizing (1999). Perhaps the surplus was provided by horticulture or from trade, and controlled by some pre-civilized political form, such as the chiefdom discussed by Elman Service (1978). Or perhaps, as Coulborn argues, the source of the surplus was provided in situations in which the soil was self-replenishing (1958: 68-69), in which case,
heavy plowing would not be required or, as Hord argues, it would not be required anyway.

**Difficulties with Agriculture.** If civilization requires agriculture as a prerequisite, anthropologists have given some attention to why agriculture was not developed in places where conditions made it possible. Probably circumstances were more complicated and varied than just rivers replenishing soil. Even if the requisite knowledge of agriculture were present, its employment might depend on how attractive hunting and gathering was, and what the alternatives were (Jonathan Friedman, 1999; Diamond 1997: 93-94, 104-114).

And if conditions were favorable, horticulture would have preceded agriculture, perhaps by millennia, with women still in charge, little surplus accumulated, and rarely long-term residence. When agriculture did appear, with men sometimes taking over the plowing, other conditions still may have been absent, or climate or soil conditions may not have permitted agriculture to persist long enough for such conditions to emerge.

Or, in some cases, where comparison was possible, it may have been perceived that agriculture produced a product that was inferior to what was brought in by gatherers (Harlan 1965). Or, everything else in place, the possibility of agriculture may not have been realized. Not all things that are possible happen.

The development and spread of agriculture seems to fascinate us urban types. As we Americans travel across our vast plains, we wonder what they are doing out there, what is that big machine, what are they growing? All we recognize is corn.

**Trade and Promotional Networks.** “Promotional Networks” says Noble (who lived in that agricultural
paradise, Washington, D.C.) arise from unevenly distributed resources, mobility, willingness to trade, uncertain weather, and easily storable food in some areas. The Tigris-Euphrates region is one in which all eight founder crops grew. Crop production intensified and resulted in an accumulation of surplus food (2001: 79-80). The McNeills (father and son) think that tropical areas of Southeast Asia may have produced root and fruit gardens earlier than grain was raised in Mesopotamia, but these could not be stored, and without storage, there could be no surplus to support cities (2003: 34).

Noble notes that this network of crops expands eastward to Pakistan, presumably to the Indus, and west to Serbia and Sicily by 6000 BCE. He thinks it was live farmers who brought the crops. You cannot plant emmer wheat, the most important crop, simply from hearing about it. The wild variety is confined to the Fertile Crescent, so it would appear that it was domesticated there, then carried to the other areas. And since there is a single variety, it would appear to have been domesticated only once, which is true also of the other seven founder crops, except for barley, which may have been domesticated twice (2001: 79-83).

This spread, of course, would include the territories of Egyptian, Indus and Minoan civilizational developments. But even so, we would expect the regional differences would have an effect, that the style of crop raising would change over millennia and that these variations would be further affected by the appearance of distinct civilizational styles. Diffusion and innovation occur concurrently, and we are probably limited in our capacity to sort them out. But the controversy seems to have ubiquitous attraction, since we are still debating it currently over globalization.
Population Pressures. Although he grants that large scale projects produced population density in some areas, Noble thinks there is no need to posit population pressure as necessary to the development of agriculture, because in the seventh and sixth centuries, population was not large enough to cause food stress (2001: 79-80).

Fernando-Armesto appears to concur, suggesting that population increase may have occurred because of agricultural intensification, and that intensification could only occur in regions with abundant resources (2001: 176).

Roberts thinks that population would have increased because agriculture requires less space than hunting and gathering, and then settlement would further support increased population (1993: 24-51).

The McNeills add that staying in one place allows for closer spacing of children, unlike moving with hunters and gatherers, which permits only carrying one infant, while toddlers get hungry and lost. But this kind of population increase may have lured the hunters into the boring work of agriculture, even if hunting opportunities returned, because they could no longer move with their larger population (2003: 27-28).

These views all suggest that agriculture caused an increase in population but do not necessarily contradict the idea that increased population may have been a contributing factor in the origins of civilizations, at least in some situations. Coulborn thought there would be a population condensation if people were forced by desiccation to move to major riverbanks, but he is looking at the problem from a civilizational perspective, at least two millennia later. Both Toynbee and Coulborn believed that alluvial flooding provided a basis for more productive farming (Toynbee 1934: I, 301-321; Coulborn 1958: 69-71, 121-127).
In any event, there seems to be considerable agreement that the conversion from hunting and gathering to farming was not a rational decision. As Fernando-Armesto puts it:

Idleness and willfulness trump rationality. People rarely opt for long term decisions that involve current sacrifices of time and liberty. In any case, no one making rational decisions would have tolerated the systems on which the ancient alluvial civilizations relied (2001: 177).

**Short Time-frame of Emergence.** It is striking that pristine civilizations should appear over a relatively short period of time: Sumerian and Egyptian in the fourth Millennium BC, East Asian, South Asian and Classical in the third and American civilizations in the second. Living in a period of transition between one millennium and the next, we are aware that a millennium is a pretty long time, but still, compared to the history of Homo Sapiens, seven civilizations emerging within two millennia seems to be more than fortuitous if there had been none in the 100 or so preceding millennia.

Over-refinement of sequence is probably not useful here. Noble thinks civilization both made and was made by the consolidation process. Without some controlled intent, the process wouldn’t have been possible.

**A Jumble of Ideas.** There seems to be a jumble of ideas here, occurring interactively, that we try to order in the sequential structure that writing still imposes on us, despite the alternate possibilities opened up by the combination of electronic media and Faustian mentality. So, for those still addicted to reading, let’s try to separate them.
Challenge and Response. There is the Toynbeean idea of challenge and response, that situations in which civilizations were founded were difficult in one way or another. This idea is implicit in Coulborn’s view that population pressure in some river valleys may have led to need for new forms of organization, government, and cities.

Rivers and Trade. There is the idea that cities on rivers were natural centers of trade, which increased the accumulation of surplus.

Surplus. And there is the idea that surplus, accumulated first by storage, but supplemented by mining of elements present in some areas but not in others, provided materials and goods that could be traded.

And then, the controllers of the land that produced these resources became dominant, because they were the producers and traders, and ultimately the controllers of the rest of the population in their various areas.

Pattern of Culture. In addition, there is what Kroeber calls a pattern of culture, Hord—a formal knowledge system, Richardson—a worldview, Groves—mentalities—ways of doing that relate to ways of thinking, established at various locales and modified when they encounter other ways, until anthropologists, historians and civilizationists can discern something intangible that coheres, and enables them to perceive a civilization.

It does seem that there must have been a combination of factors, and that in different situations some may have played a more important role than others; further, some are ingenious conjectures that may never have occurred anywhere. It seems to me that insecurity concerning the future, not only from uncertain weather, would be a major factor and it may be too, as Jacobs (1969) often suggests, that they accumulated surpluses because they could, and then considered what to do
with their inventories. Noble suggests competition for status as a possible motivating factor in surplus food production. The final word from the McNeills, as of this writing: “No one knows (2003: 28).”

While an increase in population does not seem to have been necessary for the development of agriculture, it seems likely that agriculture and husbandry contributed to a substantial population increase. McNeill says somewhere that population density increased (in some areas?) by 20 times within a few centuries of the domestication of animals.

While he does not think population is a necessary factor in the formative stages of civilization, Noble also thinks clearly recognizable civilization began with the political massing of people, for instance building pyramids or organizing a workforce for metal casting in China, because then people had an awareness of themselves as something beyond villagers, which is what they would have been at Catal Huyuk, when they were called upon to help participate in a trade network (1999).

Massing of Population. Coulborn thought that the massing of people along river valleys caused them to make political reorganization and other adjustments necessary for the development of civilizations (1958: 67-68).

One of Fernandez-Armesto’s basic ideas is that the urge to civilize is everywhere, but it is usually limited by insularity, temperature, soil drought or other factors (2001). If we look at the cases that fill his book, we find Toynbee’s arrested civilizations, experiencing many different situations and sequences in which origins take place, but growth is in one way or another limited. Both Fernandez-Armesto and Diamond (2005) suggest that in focusing on civilizations that have covered vast areas and had long histories, we
are missing not only origins, but also some very important civilizational achievements.

**Land.** Much has been made of land and family. Since civilizations are agrarian societies, of course land would be important. Control of land would relate to power. The hunter-gatherer usually does not possess land, though he may be concerned with controlling territory. As civilizations urbanize, land is still valuable, but it is bought and sold. So, although ownership of land is a common aspect of pristine civilizations, it is a given that it precedes civilization.

**Family.** Family, on the other hand, is important in primitive cultures. It continues to be important in civilized societies, with the additional factor of being related to the land. There is property to pass on. This, in turn, is gender related. The property—land and possessions—must be passed on to a male heir. Although women were probably the inventors of gardening as an aspect of gathering, when plowing was developed, men became the farmers, and settlement took place, the concept of property developed, and the role of women was diminished.

**Childbearing.** Their role in childbearing, however, increased in importance. If there needed to be a male heir to any substantial land holding, there needed to be at least eight children. Four of them (and often the first wife) would die. Two of the survivors might be women. Of the two male survivors, one might be incompetent. Eight children would be a minimum needed, and in an uncertain world, a few more would be prudent.

**Religion.** There is almost a consensus among civilizationists that religion plays a major role in the origin of civilizations. This is true of those such as Spengler and Coulborn, who regard religion as one factor to be fitted into the puzzle; Toynbee and Christopher Dawson, however,
regarded religion as the very foundation of civilization (*Nature*: 28-29). Religion, Noble thinks, was always there, but utilized as part of the political process. Coulborn finds it the one universal in his study of seven pristine origins (1958: 74). It seems to provide a unifying force, a common identity, a spiritual coagulant. On the other hand, important religions, such as Zoroastrianism and Buddhism, do not appear to have produced major civilizations. Bosworth (2003) points out that Confucianism and Hinduism emerge centuries after the founding of their respective civilizations. And mainstream civilizations such as Mesopotamian and Classical do not seem to be strongly dependent on a major religion for linkage.

**Literacy.** Bosworth thinks that writing is the DNA of civilization. It makes possible large-scale organization, record keeping, passing on complex knowledge, diversity of forms, and increased connectivity. Civilization, he thinks, cannot be passed on without it (2003).

But there are problems with this approach. Is large-scale organization a civilizational requirement? If not, advanced agricultural cultures can possess and pass on pretty complex knowledge (e.g. Achebe 1959). Hord concludes, based on the Greeks’ assessment of their own Mycenaean roots, that literacy is not necessary for civilization (1992: 116). Bagby notes a number of primitive cultures that possessed alphabets (1963: paperback edition :162). And then there is the difficulty of deciding what constitutes writing. It includes cuneiform and hieroglyphics. How about Andean knots? Or does real writing begin with the alphabet?

Once agriculture has been established (and even on its priority Jacobs demurs), it seems to me the sequence of traits—surplus, population increase, technological development, trade, class, government, religion, writing—can vary, and not all need to be present.
Kwang-shih Chang has argued that the Mesopotamian pattern, which perhaps extends west and east from Egyptian to Harappan, does not apply to East Asia or the Western hemisphere, where religion and politics were of crucial importance and changes in technology and trade secondary in civilizational emergence.

Also, in Chang's view, whereas control of environment was of central importance from the Nile to the Indus, continued closeness to nature was characteristic of the other civilizations (Chang 2000). In the book in which Chang's article appears (Lamberg-Karlovsky 2000) there follow a series of articles that suggest that the developmental sequences of crucial traits and characteristics vary considerably among the pristine civilizations.

**Continuing Patterns.** This combination of traits found at the dawn of a civilization tends to persist within a pattern over many centuries, and the pattern tends to act as a filter, modifying incoming material and ideas so that they are somewhat consistent, the degree of consistency reflected in the nature of the pattern and the degree of integration prevailing at any given time.

Why does a pattern acquire the characteristics it has? There could be geographical factors, although four of the first five civilizations had their origins in river valleys, and it is hard to see why these should have produced the differences they did.

Kroeber says somewhere that patterns form as they do for one reason or another. On a smaller scale, Diamond gives the example of the Qwerty typewriter keyboard, which is not the most efficient, but the one that became prominent because it slowed typing and prevented jamming of individual keys. It continues on the computer today, although jamming is no longer a problem. (If you were not aware of this, look at your
keyboard: the "QWERTY" label is right there.) Spengler's idea of the soul of a culture also seems appropriate. The pattern of a civilization is what it is for the same reason any soul is what it is.

Civilizational Personality? But not quite. Like any metaphor, the personality-character analogy has its limits. When the trading posts are established in Uruk, and the villagers take what they like from the traders and leave the rest, and then use what they have received for purposes not quite anticipated by the traders, they are already influencing the traders as they are being influenced. The villagers are, in that sense, the genetic components of the emerging culture.

Collectively, over a millennium, this produces the culture pattern as, in a sense, the genes produce the materials for a personality that then is to be modified by the culture into which the individual is born. It is fruitless, therefore, to try to decide which came first, the economic transactions or the pattern.

Necessary Functions. Now let's reconsider the necessary functions that must be performed to enable a civilization to develop within a coherent structure. These functions may be performed by different institutions—religion essential in some, urban centers or government in others. If coherence is facilitated by situation or pattern, development may therefore become a greater challenge.

The culture pattern filters choices, making some more probable than others, even though these may seem less rational to outside observers. Some functions we perceive as necessary may not be so perceived by the members of the civilization we are observing—or they are performed but never perceived by us.
Conclusions

Returning to the three questions raised at the beginning of this article, first: what is necessary for the origin of a civilization? We can list aspects that usually occur, but if you include the arrested civilization, we are scarcely able to name one that has not been occasionally lacking. This is the case even if we attempt to name the functions that must be performed.

Second, then, it follows that there is no consistent sequence; the patterns of civilizations are just too varied, and what seems to us as obviously essential may never even have occurred to inhabitants of another civilization.

As to the question of the extent to which aspects of development are independently invented or imported, some civilizations may have been so isolated that for a long time they developed independently, although they are usually arrested by that isolation; but most have imported a great deal, although altering what they import to be consistent with their general patterns.

Let a hundred flowers grow.

Notes

Gothic Origins

Interestingly, Abbe Sugere was neither an architect nor classically trained, hence freer to pursue his own design. Nevertheless his ideas, including the pointed arch, had immediate and wide appeal.

Human Evolution

Kahler (1961: 4) thinks that if there is a common human quality, it must have had an evolution. Unless there is a continuous whole, there is no such thing as human history. Blaha (2002b: 22-40) with four decades more anthropological
research at his disposal, thinks the last such evolutionary change, probably genetic, came about 40,000 years ago with the emergence of the first creative minority, which would be close to the first appearance of the Cro-Magnons. But the rate of innovation was slowed for 30 millennia or so by the most recent ice age. Noble (2000) also thinks the qualities of Cro-Magnon are underrated in explanations of civilizational origins.

*When Does Farming Become Agriculture?*

Are seeds tossed into wet ground really farming? Humans have long known how to spread seeds, eliminate weeds, and burn off reeds (Noble 2001: 79). It may be farming, but it usually is not perceived as agriculture. Lenski (1970: 192-201) calls it horticulture, which was probably developed by women, the gatherers, who sowed (not planted) the seeds nearer to their current home base.

Agriculture can be said to begin with traction plowing, use of the mould board plow, tossing dirt to one side, pulled by an animal, first donkey, than oxen. I used to imagine the first ploughman trying to explain to his wife that he was going to turn over all the soil of the lovely green land outside their dwelling. But probably the process was more gradual, as implements for scratching the soil were refined and gradually transformed into plows. And the men, no doubt, were reluctant to give up their hunting to take time to help their wives with the heavy work, as they still are, with gardening,

*Evolutionary Reversions*

The spread of agriculture has its regressions, and hunting and gathering can reappear. Or perhaps its reappearance is not a regression. Jonathan Friedman suggests (1999) that
agriculture can be a sign that trade routes have broken down and that people must acquire by the more difficult means of farming what previously they had acquired by trade. A study of wild grain collected in Turkey (Harlan, 1965) showed that in the twentieth century it was far more nutritious than domestic grain grown in the same area. The pre-civilized people of the area may not have known about nutrition, but they may have had the perception that health and length of life were better when wild grains were consumed. Even in the nineteenth century CE Tocqueville shows vividly why an American Indian, faced with a choice between farming and increasing hardship in forests from which settlers have chased game by their noisy proximity, returns to hunting after trying farming (1945: 348-350).

**Land Binding Before Horticulture**

Fagan thinks people living in Syria, gatherers not farmers, were bound to the land by reliance on acorns and wild grasses as early as the twelfth century BCE. Their mobility had been compromised by centuries of population growth when the gathering had been localized and consistently good (2004: 85-88).

**The Suppression of Women**

There seems to be agreement that women had a more important role in horticultural societies, especially if they were matrilineal, and that men became truly dominant in agricultural societies. Greater freedom and opportunity for women in industrial societies suggests that economy was an important factor here. But religion, dimorphism, biological differences and other factors also played a role (Sanderson 1991: 331-356; Farhat-Holzman 2002: 105-124). The subject of civilizational differences has not been
explored here. Whatever the differences, once the convention was established, whether diffused or, more probably, independently developed for similar reasons, it was then preserved through various combinations of folklore and education.

*The Caretakers of Baby Animals*

Farhat-Holzman adds to the preceding note:

(T)he herding aspect of agriculture is not mentioned enough. Herding... began with women being the caretakers of baby animals and eventually flocks became an issue of ownership. Women soon became property—as much as the animal flocks were—and they too were important as breeders of children—particularly male children who could protect the tribe.

*Agriculture and Population*

Roberts in 1993 was still holding to population pressure causing people to extend living space by clearing and planting. Husbandry was developing from 9000 BCE; first control and breeding of the animals, then skinning, shearing and milking, later riding and poultry. Agriculture and husbandry together, Roberts thinks, made possible population growth because far fewer acres were needed to support a family. A food surplus means long term settlement, which also facilitated population growth. Villages could appear, with specialists not engaged in farming. But it is still a long time before social organization is discerned. He implies that long-term settlement would be necessary to produce more varying cultures as they adapted to different environments. Distinctions of role would have multiplied. Some may have gotten more leisure, though those engaged in food production may have had less. Social distinctions would increase (1993:}
This is one plausible sequence, but even so, it is probably not a sequence that would hold for every pristine civilization.

The time frames matter here. Roberts is writing about 9000 BCE as the period of origin for farming and husbandry, leaving aside the question of agriculture. He agrees with Noble on 6000 as the millennium of expansion of these practices. But civilization does not appear for two or three more millennia and then on riverbanks or, in one case, on an island. On the riverbanks there could have been population pressure, desiccation as Coulborn suggests, or not, just as there is population pressure on the coasts of the United States, a big, relatively empty, country.

Desiccation and Cities

Fagan seems to agree with Coulborn about desiccation as a factor in consolidating populations, but notes that a four century worldwide dry period in the sixth millennium caused greater competition for water along the rivers, scattered villagers to move to larger ones, and led to war among the newly created cities (2004: 107-108, 134-137). These conditions, however, were apparently not sufficient to produce what we perceive to be civilizations, perhaps because other factors were still lacking.

Irrigation Without Rivers

Mayan irrigation systems were created without rivers. They developed over a period of time, as rain water was preserved in catch basins, then released to fields (Fagan 2004: 232-35). This again suggests that there may be a number of factors that support the development of civilizations, but all do not have to be present in each civilization.
Agriculture and Nutrition

Health may not have been improved by agriculture and civilization. There may have been a decline in civilized diets as a result of concentration on a narrower range of food (Harlan, 1965). Data from primitive bone structure and from contemporary hunting and gathering societies indicate that caloric intake of primitive humans compared favorably with those of civilized countries up until the nineteenth century, and with the Third World today. Civilizing societies led to exploitation of peasants by elites. Hunting and gathering societies probably experienced fewer infectious and degenerative diseases, circulatory ailments, alimentary cancers, diabetes, and appendicitis, owing to higher fiber diets.

Life expectancy was comparable as was infant mortality. In terms of life, the urban poor suffer more stress than hunters and gatherers. The progress of the 19th and 20th centuries may be fragile (cf. McNeill 1976: 9-17). Civilizations do support more people than primitive societies could, and they do provide for investment which, if shared, would yield a higher living standard than would be possible in primitive societies (Cohen 1989: 132-142). Malnutrition, Slicher Van Bath thinks, has been a greater cause of civilizational problems than starvation (1963: 84). It seems probable, therefore, that the population-land relationship can be long attenuated and that, in itself, a rapid change is not likely to have dramatic short-term effects.

Why Farming?

If the world were sparsely populated, and hunters spent fewer hours per day getting food than farmers while enjoying a more nutritious diet, why should hunters become farmers?
Jack Harlan, the wild wheat harvester mentioned in the "Evolutionary Reversions" note above, puts the question this way:


John Hord suggests that if the decision to farm seems irrational, it may not be the farmers who made it but the collectors of surplus who "had every incentive to see that there was surplus to collect (2007)." So both government with taxation and religion with tithing put pressure on the peasants to continue to farm, even if otherwise they could have provided for their needs by hunting and gathering.

The McNeills (2003: 26-27) speculate that when they encountered rich landscapes, roving communities settled down for awhile, useful plant seeds were scattered near the settlements—women providing most of the labor and most of the food—it was then easier to raise and keep track of children, and they prevailed on the men to stay longer. This made possible the raising of domestic animals and more children, which increased population, which made wild food supplies scarcer. Once men hitched the animals to plows, the rest was history; Or rather, the beginning of history. "Perhaps." The McNeills cheerfully conclude. "No one knows."

"No One Knows"

A reviewer thinks this is too often presented as a conclusion, particularly on origins. But there are, perhaps, too many ingenious hypotheses developed on scanty evidence
that are followed by a cumulative Talmud of commentaries until they become a dogma on which reputations depend. The McNeills’ cautionary “perhaps” after a lifetime of study by W. H. McNeill, and a probable familiarity with more recent studies by J. R., is worth keeping in mind.

Why Not?
But returning to the question of why farming, Chase-Dunn and Hall observe that the joys of hunting compared to the drudgery of farming always trump the advantages of child care when a choice exists. Among their examples: when the Polynesians discovered New Zealand, they abandoned farming and returned to hunting in a huge utopia of available game (1997: 207).

The Urban-Tribal Combination
Another speculation from the McNeills, this one brief, seems less convincing. They suggest that the Greek polis combined the advantages of urban “wealth and power with the freedom, equality, and cohesion of tribal society (2003: 76-78).” While my knowledge of tribal society is even scantier than it is of civilizations, and while I have some impression that there has been some democracy within tribal societies from the writings of peace advocates and novelists like Achebe (1959), I have stronger feelings that the opposite is true from several anthropologists attending a conference on peace research at Charleston in 1990 and from a novel of Farah’s (2003). (Achebe was writing about imperfect tribal democracy among the Ibo in Nigeria, Farah about tribal chaos among the clans of Mogadishu, Somalia.) It is possible that there was democracy among the Achaeans, but it doesn’t seem likely.
**Good but Not Too Good**

Blaha lists the following conditions as frequently found preceding the development of early civilizations: Good weather, water, hunting and fishing; fertile fields; sufficient population growth and density; a generally peace-loving and economically-oriented population producing a growth of wealth from generation to generation (2007:74). But from Harlan and others we learn that if the hunting and fishing are too good, there is little incentive for agriculture, and from Toynbee, if everything is favorable, where is the challenge?

**Focusing on Long-Lived Civilizations**

And thereby missing both diversity of origins and some remarkable achievements. Melko, in his emphasis (2001b) and ISCSC sessions on “Mainstream” civilizations, is doing precisely that.

**The Origin of Patterns**

For years I have cited Kroeber, as I do in this article, as writing that they form “for one reason or another.” When I finally got around to checking Kroeber’s Configurations, all I could find was that he writes that we do not know why patterns originate as they do (1944: 762). Possibly I later summarized that as “for one reason or another,” and eventually came to think that is what he wrote. At this point I realize that I am taking the trouble to make a note about this rather than correct the statement in the main text as if I still believe that this is what he should have said. Is the crime of false attribution not the inverse of the crime of plagiarism?

**The Rate of Transformation**

John Hord reports from Mitchell Rothman’s book on Uruk (2001: 21-84) that there were villages by 3800 in the Mesopotamian area, extending from current day Jordan to
the Persian Gulf. But there is no evidence of long distance trade or warfare. In the next millennium towns developed, and by 2800, in the south, Sumerian civilization had come into existence, with warfare among the city states and long distance trade with cities to the north and presumably with Harappan civilization (2007).

So the emergence of what may be the first civilization was hardly instantaneous, but may have taken as long as the life of Western Civilization so far, at least by Spengler’s measurement.

*Traders Versus Villagers*

Mitchell Rothman sees articles by Algaze, focusing on traders spreading civilization to villagers in Mesopotamia, and Wright focusing on the response of the villagers, as conflicting views on the spread of civilization (2001). But taken together, the articles can be perceived as showing how civilizational patterns come into existence.

*The Gradualist View*

Not all civilizationists think that civilizations appeared within a comparatively short period or that the distinctions between primitive and civilized societies are (well, comparatively) clear. Fernandez-Armesto explicitly and Diamond implicitly think that the “urge to civilize” exists in most cultures but is generally limited by environment or situation.

*Prehistoric Civilizations?*

Blaha posits that civilizational cycles may have preceded history in Anatolia, Egypt, the Far East and Mesoamerica (2002b: 223-236, 2007). Unh-uh. Don’t want to go there.
Citing Noble

Stedman Noble did not retain copies of his papers after giving them, and I do not have copies of two cited; further, these are not readily obtainable and not in the ISCSC archives. Thus I am citing him from whatever I think my notes, always inadequate, cause me to think (or wish) he said.

Remembering Noble

In his presentation at the 2004 meeting, Stedman Noble made fun of himself, at 76, about losing his memory and repeating himself. He also spoke seriously about seeing his task clearly on the question of diffusion in early civilizational history.

Regrettably, he died in early 2005 before he had the chance to complete that work. He leaves no book, only a few articles and memorable (10:30 p.m.) telephone comments that are sprinkled throughout this chapter. His wonderful, clear, humorous, original papers will be missed as much as his capacity to become furious over the views of other scholars on arcane questions of ancient world history (See Drew, 2006).

References
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