



4-1-2009

Editor's Note

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Recommended Citation

Drew, Joseph (2009) "Editor's Note," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 60 : No. 60 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol60/iss60/3>

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Editor's Note

At a time when the American people have created a new hero for themselves, and invested many hopes in the great man's ability to improve our situation dramatically, to redeem us from our former folly, one naturally is led to think of the concept of heroes and recall the heroic ages of the past.

In this issue we feature a wonderful paper by Prof. Ricardo Duchesne of Canada. While setting out to show the role of Indo-Europeans in much of the world's prehistory, he argues, in part, that the Greeks, although they famously meditated upon the social importance of democracy and equality and passed this value to us as a central pillar of Western civilization, in fact themselves had heroic antecedents. They saw and honored heroism, which they depicted as arising from Mycenaean times and culture, depicted in the deeds of Achilles and the other great Homeric figures.

Professor Duchesne traces the heroic values the Greeks honored back beyond the fighters at Troy to prehistory, to the Indo-Europeans. Perhaps, while presented by the Iliad within the context of Homeric times or set by other Greek literature within even earlier, mythological times, the real heroes, the real bearers of *arête*, achievement and virtue, for the Greeks were actual, earlier real-life figures, men and women who roamed from east to west along ancient trails of Euro-Asia. If so, then individual heroism was carried to the Western world first by the Indo-Europeans. Possibly—probably—it was they who lay the basis for Greek culture, and, ironically, eventually for its exaltation of equality, a status that rises like a lotus from the basis of aristocracy. The concept of equality that we have today is, of course, while derived from the Greeks, quite different from that proposed by Aristotle in

his notion of “polity proper,” for there was no real equality covering all the people who lived in Athens.

Amongst the first guides that came to my mind as I thought about the arrival of our new age of hope and heroes were such 18th and 19th century social thinkers as the French writer Georges Sorel, author of the great work *Reflections on Violence*; the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico; and the pan-European Jewish genius, Roberto Michels.

The engineer Sorel challenged our usual ways of thinking, often in shocking fashion, but in the process he made us think about the values of our civilization and about the roles of the individual and society in an era of conformity. For example, he claimed that Socrates—perhaps the greatest intellectual hero of all time—was actually guilty as charged. Why? The great Greek was “an agent of dissolution in a society that still respected the heroic ideas of a simpler age,” as Prof. H. Stuart Hughes summarized it. Sorel wrote that movements toward greatness are always an effort, while on the other hand, movements toward decadence are always natural. “Our nature is invincibly borne toward what the philosophers of history consider as bad, whether it be barbarism or whether it be decadence.” It is thus no surprise that wreaths were laid on Sorel’s grave by both fascist and communist officials.

It was the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico who put forward the concept of “*ricorso*” when describing heroes. By “*ricorso*” Vico meant a re-running of the great virtues of the past; he maintained that a renewal of history comes about through the restoration of archaic and heroic values.

The great originator of the “Iron Law of Oligarchy,” Roberto Michels, wrote in “The Sociological Character of Political Parties” that those who admired Vico’s philosophy of history “the kernel of which consists in the cyclical theory of *corsi e ricorsi*—would not at all doubt the thesis that

the present is merely a contradictory parenthesis between the past and the future, with the result that the future often possesses a greater affinity with the past than it does with the present.”

Michels observed, however, that epochs of history do not lend themselves to photographic reproduction. “In the process, something has been altered, some one has moved, as regards congruity of situation and agreement of will. This is why parties of the past should not imagine themselves able to re-establish the *tempora acta* as they were.”

One of the reasons I have always been drawn to the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations is that since reading these men and such writers as Wilhelm Dilthey, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and, of course, Max Weber, it has been a puzzle to solve: are there patterns of history? Does history offer a meaning to the world? Are there trends that we can discern? My dissertation advisor, the late Stanford Lyman, rejected the whole idea. History is absurd, he wrote, echoing in social theory the ideas of the literary and philosophical luminaries Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. One simply cannot find guidance in history by pressing it to discover eternal verities, as the sociological school of functionalism does, by forcing it onto “a teleological Procrustean bed.”

Yet, I think Prof. Lyman would agree that there are trends that can be examined in history, and certainly, to me, anyway, the advent of President Obama and the *ricorso* of heroism in the eyes of the public is a good thing. We have heroes to honor and imitate, and I want to note here several recent works that bring to mind thoughts of people, heroes, whom we should admire.

In 1966 and 1967 I worked in Cincinnati and Denver at the brand-new Education Commission of the States (set

up by the National Governors Association pursuant to ideas of Dr. James B. Conant of Harvard) alongside Dr. Henry Cone. Dr. Cone had been named Superintendent of Schools in Anderson, South Carolina, in 1965. There he initiated a co-ed high school and created a “freedom of choice” plan for this Deep South community.

Some of his valiant efforts are described in a recent book by a former attorney for the board, Jack McIntosh, entitled *Integrating Schools—District Five, Anderson, South Carolina: 1964 through 1970*. According to the book:

Let it be said that Anderson County has reason to be proud of the things which took place and of the community leaders who made it happen with such dignity, both from the white and black communities.

For the school year 1965-1966 the School Board, under the leadership of its Superintendent Dr. Henry Cone, put into place a policy of freedom of choice and, in so doing, took a giant step toward complying with the Brown decision and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and away from the “separate but equal” policy which remained in practice.

Yet a school trustee, William Mack Burris, writes in the book of the strong feelings engendered by school integration. He observes simply, “The white population did not want to integrate the races and was satisfied with the status quo ... it fell to the lot of a few individuals to make the decisions and to set in motion the mechanism by which integration was achieved. The superintendents and board members of that time, probably fewer than fifteen people at the core, made the hard choices that were required. Their plan, with some adjustments, has stood the test of time.”

It is today almost impossible to recall the *ethos* of those days. As I remember, Dr. Cone made the “mistake”

of using the title of "Mr." while addressing an African American Member of the Board at a public meeting. For that transgression, he lost the job of Superintendent instantly. That is how he came to be a staff member of the Education Commission of the States.

The wonderful step forward our nation has made this past year has only been possible because of the acts of such heroes as Dr. Cone. They should be honored by us all.

Then, there are heroes who undertook unusual and brave acts that were unknown when they did so. One such group consisted of several Jewish families, living in Ukraine in 1942. As the Nazis intensified their murder of the Jewish population, these hardy and intelligent survivors found a method of survival that was truly extraordinary. Their efforts are described in a new book entitled *The Secrets of Priest's Grotto: A Holocaust Survival Story*. Written by Peter Lane Taylor with Christos Nicola, the book has been promoted during the last year by ISCS member and leader Dr. Midori Yamanouchi. As Vice President for Academic Affairs at Lackawanna College, she personally bought many copies to give away to friends, plus sponsored a lecture and book-signing.

In the Western Ukraine, south of Kiev, just north of Moldova, there is a sinkhole, with no sign of cover for miles, save for a low stand of hardwoods. The sinkhole covers one of the longest horizontal labyrinths in the world: 340 miles of contiguous passage, including the second longest cave in the world. One cave is called the Priest's Grotto, 77 miles long, the ninth-longest cave in the world. Between 1943 and 1944, three Jewish families survived by living in two different caves, running supply lines to the surface. As the book notes, they faced "every possible risk factor—extreme weather, isolation, starvation, persecution"—yet thirty-eight

people, with no equipment, untrained, including elderly women and young children, survived for long months “in such a hostile environment during history’s darkest era.”

According to the book, Esther Stermer, once of Korolowska, Ukraine, “is truly the hero of Priest’s Grotto.” She wrote:

The world had turned animal—or worse. Every day conditions became worse. Death stalked each step... But we were not surrendering to this fate. Our family in particular would not let the Germans have their way easily. We had vigor, ingenuity, and determination to survive. Above all our family would stand together.... But where could we go? Clearly, there was no place for us on earth.

On October 12, 1942, eighteen Jews fled to a well-known tourist cave, Verteba. They had no weapons, no long-term supplies, and no source of water. A son snuck above ground for supplies.

Every trip (he) made outside was an odyssey more hazardous than anything the Greeks ever dreamt of in their nightmares... Those who have been spared our tribulations can hardly imagine how much courage, ingenuity, strength, and determination his daily activities called for.

They descended deeper into the cave, fearing that tourists might find them. They went where no humans had ever been before, sealing themselves in a low, sickle-shaped room more than 3,000 feet from daylight. Nonetheless, somehow the Gestapo found them—while the mother argued with the Germans, most escaped yet deeper into the cave. Eight were taken alive but several escaped on a march back to town; two disappeared forever into the Germans’ grasp. Soon the

remaining survivors surfaced and, taking the advice of a Ukrainian friend, they entered yet another cave: the Priest's Grotto.

According to the authors, "Beyond this point in the Stermers' story—after more than 205 days underground—there's nothing in the breadth of human experience to recreate what the survivors endured in Popowa Yama (the Priest's Grotto)." But the survivors had hope. "We told each other that God had Himself created this grotto for us, so that we might live to see the redemptive day of Hitler's downfall." On April 12, 1944, they surfaced, seeing the sunshine for the first time in 344 days.

For years daylight had frightened us. It was only nights and in the dark that we had felt secure. For years we had hidden in bunkers, caves and other dark places, and had been afraid to be seen in God's world. Now we were all able to walk in the middle of the day outdoors... Salvation had come.

Let us honor such heroes, and thank Dr. Yamanouchi for bringing them to public notice so energetically.

Finally, I want to mention that we have heroes within this organization, not least of which, of course, is our current president, Dr. Andrew Targowski, who himself faced the bullets of the Nazis and, later, a murder attempt by the Communists. And we have in this organization another hero, polite, thoughtful, incisive thinker: Prof. Palmer Talbutt. His new book, *Circumstantial and Philosophical Dynamics*, is a quite impressive treatise.

The book begins with dedications to Pitirim Sorokin, John Herman Randall Jr., and Vytautas Kavolis. As to the former American-Lithuanian president of the ISCSC, Dr. Kavolis, his dedication is "to Vytautas Kavolis whose

call for polylogue to cope with conflicts of ethnicities and civilizations entails a viable perspectivism, and is the only hopeful remedy for cacophonous multiculturalism.”

In short, cultural, and therefore philosophical, dynamics must be open-ended and maximize effective exchanges across boundaries. Under conditions where Great Traditions diffuse and converge at a great rate, Sorokin, Randall, and Kavolis are jointly relevant.

The book consists of three parts: the first discusses context and background. The second presents a classificatory system for the basics in philosophy. Of this, Dr. Talbutt writes:

As to the macrosystem’s scope, it ideally should reach beyond Western limits. Early in the twentieth century, Spengler, Sorokin, and Toynbee agreed in rejecting Eurocentrism; at century’s end Jacques Barzun wrote of our cultural “decadence” and John Lukacs of the “end of an age.” So polylectic, starting as intracivilizational, has to dabble cross-civilizationally.

The final part of the book discusses the relationship between changing circumstances and philosophy. As Dr. Talbutt says, “That interaction is obviously proceeding at such a mad rate as to yield not only confusion but heightened animosities, the generic cover for which has been ‘post-modernism.’”

It is a book to be read.

So, I believe that we do have many heroes if only we take time to see them, to recount their deeds. The *ricorso* is arriving, a new day dawning. Opportunity, progress, and constructive engagement with other societies and cultures may all be coming again, possibly as hallmarks of this new day. Is it not fitting for our organization, the International

Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations, to herald this potential resurgence of our values by honoring heroes of all civilizations, including scholars within our midst? Surely, if any perspective contains within the possibilities of success for a better world, it is one which recognizes the achievements of all.

Lloyd George thought that the task was “to make Britain a fit country for heroes to live in.” But we have our heroes. Now, let's make this world a fit place for heroes to live in.

Joseph Drew