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Editor's Note

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Editor's Note

Does history teach us lessons? Can we learn by looking backward, especially over the course of so many civilizations, in order to discern trends that help us predict the future, understand the meaning of life, or build a better world? It isn't an easy problem to tackle, for as the late Hans Morganthau wrote, "the intellectual difficulty that stands in the way of a theoretical inquiry into the meaning of history results from the ambiguity of the material with which we have to work."

It was my reading of Wilhelm Dilthey, particularly of his work *Pattern and Meaning in History: Thoughts on History and Society*, of the commentaries on Dilthey, and of the fights that erupted in European social thought around this topic that first led me to be interested in the question of whether there is, in fact, pattern and meaning in history.

Perhaps human beings want to think there is a purpose in our lives. Jacques Barzun has written that it is the "difference between history and biography (where acts can be deemed individual and responsible)" that "has led many minds to postulate a meaning in history, a meaning discoverable but obscured by the multiplicity and confusion of facts."

Of course, many thinkers, down through recorded time and in numerous societies, have opined on this subject. And frequently, when doing so, they have looked to use as their unit of historical measurement the rise and fall of civilizations.

To me, there are at least very popular methods people have adopted to look for patterns and meaning in history.

I.

The first and most likely of categories is what we can call the cyclical view of history. From ancient times onward, people have agreed: History repeats itself. Those who don't learn from the lessons of history are bound to repeat the errors of the past.

The Greeks and Romans saw history as moving in cycles, but perhaps the most famous early advocate of the cyclical theory of civilizations was the Arab philosopher Ibn Khaldun. Born in Tunis, now the capital of Tunisia, Ibn Khaldun lived from 1332 to 1406 A.D., generally in that swath of Muslim-controlled land running from Spain and North Africa. His great work was entitled *The Muqaddimah*, often translated as “An Introduction To History.”

To Ibn Khaldun, history teaches that civilizations rise and fall. When a society becomes a great civilization, its high point is followed by a period of decay. The causes of the decay are a mélange of psychological, sociological, political, and economic factors. Nevertheless, the decay leads to the civilization being overrun by barbarians. This new group solidifies its control over the conquered civilization and then absorbs many of its aspects, such as the arts, and assimilates into or appropriates these features. Eventually, the former barbarians are themselves conquered by a new set of barbarians, and the process repeats itself. History consists of flowering and decay, with predictable instances of turning points. According to Ibn Khaldun, empires tended to last not more than three generations, 120 years.

According to Arnold Toynbee, Ibn Khaldun’s “philosophy of history ... is undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any time or place.”

Giovanni Battista Vico, who lived in Italy a couple of hundred years later, from 1668 to 1744, developed, in *Principles and Origins of New Science about the Common Nature of Nations*, a recurring cycle (*ricorso*) of three ages: the divine, the heroic, and the human. Each age exhibits distinct political and social features and can be characterized by master tropes or figures of language. His idea was that civilization develops in a recurring cycle (*ricorso*) of three ages: the divine, the heroic, and the human. His writing influenced Georges Sorel, Bertrand Russell, Benedetto Croce, and many others. I interpret the

general idea of *ricorso* to be that great virtues, and heroic acts, run again and again, throughout history, in a cycle.

A third very influential writer who saw history as made up of predictable rises and falls of civilizations was Oswald Spengler. He lived in Germany from 1880 to 1936. In his seminal book *The Decline of the West*, he described Western Civilization as going through the familiar cyclical pattern of civilizations, with eight cultures as of significance in world history. His book was an inspiration for many Nazis, although he, himself, developed a considerable distaste for them.

However, the most famous of all writers who discerned a cyclical trend to history, I believe, would have to be the British historian, Arnold Toynbee. He lived from 1889 to 1975. His great work is entitled *A Study of History*, actually a twelve volume series of books on the rise and fall of civilizations. In a famous abridgement of this work we can see the main points of this cyclical theory of history by looking at the stated plan of the book: the genesis of civilizations, the growths of civilizations, the breakdowns of civilizations, the disintegration of civilizations, universal states, universal churches, heroic ages, contacts between civilizations in space and time, rhythms in the histories of civilizations, the prospects of the western civilization and the inspirations of historians.

Civilizations, which emerged no more than 6,000 years ago, are "philosophically contemporaneous members of a single species," according to Toynbee. Unlike Spengler, however, Toynbee argued that civilizations can respond creatively to threats and thus preserve themselves rather than be subject to inevitable defeat.

II.

There is a second popular view of the pattern of history, however; this is the argument that history is a straight line. Those who advocate this linear point of view see an inevitable end of history. Sometimes this end is good, sometimes bad. We might call this type of argument teleological.

The late Robert Nisbet, writing on the idea of progress, stated that:

The essence of the Western idea of progress can be simply stated: mankind has advanced in the past, is now advancing, and may be expected to continue advancing in the future.

But, Nisbet continues, what does “advance” mean?

Here matters necessarily become more complex. Its meanings have ranged from the most sublimely spiritual advance to the absolutely physical or material. In its most common form the idea of progress has referred, ever since the Greeks, to the advance of knowledge, more particularly the kind of practical knowledge contained in the arts and sciences.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the idea of progress crystallized as the linear movement of history. Many significant thinkers, from Adam Ferguson to Jean Jacques Rousseau, and from Count St-Simon and Auguste Comte to John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer, saw progress as the meaning of history.

One of my favorite philosophers is Jean de Condorcet. He believed that history was progressing through stages. In his book *Outline of a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, written just before the Revolution ended his life, Condorcet expressed his belief in human perfectibility and in the certain progress of history toward national and class equality. Of course, a belief in the rule of reason was part and parcel of the Enlightenment, and Condorcet believed that history was showing that life was getting better for all. He described nine stages of progress, with a tenth, still ahead, when man would know all joys of freedom, equality, justice, and humanitarianism.

According to Edward Gibbon, writing in the introduction to *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, “Every age of the world has increased, and still increases, the real wealth, the

happiness, the knowledge, and perhaps the virtue of the human race.”

Mill, so central to our way of thinking today, declared that:

The progressiveness of the human race is the foundation on which a method of philosophizing in the social science has been of late years erected, far superior to either of the two modes which had previously been prevalent, the chemical or experimental, and the geometrical modes.

In his essay, “On Liberty,” Mill differentiated between “stationary” and “progressive” societies. To him, the greatest possible freedom of the individual is the natural outcome of the laws of progress in society.

The German Johann Gottfried Herder wrote a book, *Outlines of a Philosophy of History of Man*, which described the continuing progressive evolution of mankind; history was driven by an immanent necessity, reaching for civilization. Herder predicted that mankind would go on developing our culture, institutions, government, learning, and, thus, our happiness. Immanuel Kant wrote a relatively unknown work entitled *Idea of a Universal History from a Cosmopolitical Point of View* based on the idea of progress. He said:

The history of the human race, viewed as a whole, may be regarded as the realization of a hidden plan of nature to bring about a political constitution, internally, and, for this purpose, also externally perfect, as the only state in which all the capacities implanted by her in mankind can be fully developed.

Since World War II, there has arisen the futurist movement and with it two major subgroups that see the pattern of history as a linear movement, a straight line. Thus, there are those who maintain that we are heading toward catastrophe. This looming catastrophe for civilization as we know it could be one of two types.

Some say we are going to destroy ourselves because of social reasons: it is inevitable that mankind will engage in a catastrophic war. We will blow ourselves up. Many have seen the advent of nuclear weaponry as changing forever the possibilities that history holds. Perhaps 9/11 and similar events are precursors of an inevitable bad end of history.

Still others, however, maintain we are going to pollute ourselves to death—bad water, bad air, and so forth—destroy the world ecologically and irreversibly.

In addition, among futurists we have a group known as the provisional catastrophists, those who see history moving in a straight line but capable of being changed, and the world being saved, if we quickly intervene to rectify the wrong actions mankind is taking.

III.

Then, there is a third group seeing meaningful patterns in history; these individuals see history as moving dialectically. No doubt, the most important thinker of this school was Hegel. For Hegel, to understand the movement of history we must look to the dialectic.

There are three parts of the dialectic, according to Hegel's hypothesis: the thesis, the antithesis, and the synthesis. First is a statement of something, Hegel's thesis.

To take from an example given in Bertrand Russell's *A History of Western Philosophy*, "Reality is an uncle." But since this statement implies the existence of a nephew, we now have to argue that "reality is a nephew." This is the antithesis.

But then we see that the whole, in all its complexity, is composed of an uncle and a nephew. This is the synthesis. But, as Russell says, "this synthesis is still unsatisfactory, because a man can be an uncle only if he has a brother or sister who is a parent of the nephew." Hence we have to enlarge our statement, and the old synthesis now becomes itself a thesis,

which of course generates its own antithesis, and soon a new synthesis, and so forth.

Historically, each later stage of the dialectic contains all the earlier stages. It is impossible to get to the truth without going through all the steps of the dialectic. This is history.

World history culminates in a perfect state with those Hegel calls "world historic individuals" bending the arc as the idea of progress moves us closer to the goal. Hegel said that reason motivates or moves through the world and has consequently governed its historical development. It moves via the dialectic and is based on the progress of the "idea"—the object of history is freedom, the recognition of the universal will.

Most significant of all those who argue that history is moving dialectically toward a goal would have to be the communists. To them, the end will be what Lenin called the withering away of the state. Karl Marx famously maintained that history is a succession of social orders. To him, no social order ever disappears before all the productive forces, for which there is room in it, have been developed; and the new higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society.

The social orders have included the Asiatic, the ancient, the feudal, and the modern bourgeois methods of production, what Marx described as "so many epochs in the progress of the economic formation of society." Ending the "prehistoric stage of human society" was the bourgeois era and, in *The German Ideology* and other works, communism foresees a final, permanent golden existence on earth with no class oppressing any other and true freedom abounding.

IV.

Yet another group of recent scholars have pointed to geology and natural occurrences as possibly implying since the very beginning the end of history.

One major recent example: Writing in *Catastrophe: A Quest for the Origins of the Modern World*, David Keys observed that climate change can portend enormous change in human history. “Volcanic activity is merely one of the triggers that can change climate and wield such power.” He listed, in addition to volcanic eruption and earthquakes (which have caused great damage in the past), global warming (due to increased atmospheric pollution), sunspot activity, meteor or comet impacts, periodic small changes in the shape of the Earth’s orbit, and minor changes in the Earth’s axis of rotation; all are possible causes of a future dramatic change.

Should scholars such as Keys prove to be advancing scientifically valid arguments, does this mean that we are moving ineluctably toward the end of human history, of life on this planet? If so, has the meaning of history all along been to mimic the life of man—*i.e.*, moving toward a terminal point? In the case of humanity, doesn’t nature portend catastrophe, with mankind unable to prevent it—and with no outs available within the foreseeable future?

V.

What if there is no pattern or meaning to history? Some have written that history cannot be foreseen and that the patterns we think we see are possible only in retrospection and then based strictly on our personal interactions with others. And to others, history simply has no pattern, no meaning, and no lessons for us at all. Prof. Karl Löwith wrote in his book, *Meaning in History*, that “Historical processes ... do not bear the least evidence of a comprehensive and ultimate meaning. History as such has no outcome.”

Another such thinker was Stanford Lyman, my late dissertation supervisor. He co-wrote a book with Marvin Scott called *Sociology of the Absurd*. Building on the theories of Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre and others, he maintained that the world makes no ontological sense but is socially constructed and reconstructed to make sense.

depending on space, time, and character. Our view of history and its civilizations becomes a matter of classification.

Thus, there can be few "social laws." As an example, Dr. Lyman took the well known "race relations cycle" and decimated its predictive value.

Further, as opposed to Condorcet's views, it is not even clear to some writers that progress has occurred at all. My friend, Dr. Alan Pearce, has pointed out that George Bernard Shaw in his notes on *Caesar and Cleopatra* argued forcefully against the claim that there was any evidence of progress in human relations since ancient days.

Now if we count the generations of Progressive elderly gentlemen since, say, Plato, and add together the successive enormous improvements to which each of them has testified, it will strike us at once as an unaccountable fact that the world, instead of having been improved in 67 generations out all recognition, presents, on the whole, a rather less dignified appearance in Ibsen's *Enemy of the People* than in Plato's *Republic*. And in truth, the period of time covered by history is far too short to allow of any perceptible progress in the popular sense of Evolution of the Human Species.

The notion that there has been any such Progress since Caesar's time (less than 20 centuries) is too absurd for discussion. All the savagery, barbarism, dark ages and the rest of it of which we have any record as existing in the past, exists at the present moment.

VI.

Of course, there is a sixth possibility. Faith provides an answer to what history teaches us. This is probably the most popular approach of all.

Here we would include such great thinkers as St. Augustine, Aquinas, and The Buddha, plus many others. These are the

religiously-oriented men and women of faith who maintain that the pattern of history can be discerned by following their particular theology. For a number of religions, the point of history is to lead to a goal of heaven on earth.

As we all know, throughout the last two millennia, numerous religious Christians have maintained stoutly that Jesus Christ is coming again. His arrival will usher in a culmination of history, the final days, and the accession of believers to heavenly paradise.

St. Augustine wrote *The City of God*, often called the first full-blown philosophy of world history. To him, the earlier attacks by Church fathers on the cyclical theories of the Greeks and Romans were much too broad; he thought that while God might be sovereign and intervene in human affairs, our human intelligence could not cognize or discover what these intentions of God are. Nonetheless, he agreed that there was a direction to human history which presupposed a providential order. Augustine famously wrote:

The education of the human race, represented by the people of God, has advanced, like that of an individual, through certain epochs, or, as it were, ages, so that it might gradually rise from earthly to heavenly things, and from the visible to the invisible.

Many Christian theological texts have been written on this subject. Reinhold Niebuhr, for example, agreed in his book *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, to the general idea that there is a providential role in history. The meaning of history, according to Niebuhr, was finally dependent on God, God's power, God's righteousness, and above all, God's mercy. In other words, to Niebuhr, history had a meaning, and God's reality and purposes, God's sovereignty, are the sole grounds for that meaning.

Finally, the great Catholic theologian Teilhard de Chardin saw progress and human betterment ever nearing, in spite of the dreariness of the 20th century.

Other religions find additional patterns and meanings to history. To note but four: *Mahāyāna* Buddhism has its famous maps of future and past history, generally measured in *kalpas*; in addition, the *Mahābhārata* of Hinduism posits the end of the world once these *kalpas* are over. Third, many Muslim clerics anticipate the return of the *Mahdi* or Guided One; by what we call occultation, to the Shi'ites and other believers in Islam a missing imam will be coming back and making things right, installing justice on earth. Finally, to the members of the Baha'i faith, he has already returned in the person of Bahá'u'lláh.

VII.

So, we can have at least six possibilities for a pattern of history: history can be cyclical; linear (positive or negative); dialectical; physically doomed, moving toward its inevitable end; absurd and non-existent, with no meaning that can be found by scholars; or quite meaningful when based on the tenets of a particular faith. And, arising from these six, it can be maintained that there is yet a seventh—a combination of some aspects of the other typologies.

Generally, students and others I speak to agree with each of the patterns as they are laid out; "I agree with that" followed by "And I agree with that one, too." Perhaps they are all valid aspects of reality.

VIII.

In sum, there are thus several major methods for attempting to discern the broad pattern and meaning of history. I think that it is obvious that the lessons or conclusions civilizationalists and others draw from history depend on the method we choose for analyzing them and the assumptions we bring to the task. Max Weber was right.

To quote George Bernard Shaw, again "We learn from history that we learn nothing from history."

But, in opposition, George Santayana said that “Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”

So, the next time someone announces that we are living just like the dissolute ancient Romans did before the fall of their empire, remember: unless we accept the cyclical theory of civilizations, it is merely one person’s speculation.

Joseph Drew
September, 2009

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