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Editor's Note

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Editor's Note

As avid readers surely know by now, the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations is a vibrant organization. Arising from a UNESCO conference in Austria, it has endured for over a half century, appearing in different forms and on a variety of continents. Among the many achievements of the ISCSC have been exciting and challenging discussions and debates, annual meetings, and a stream of publications, all on the nature of civilizations.

One method that we can use to gauge the persistence of the ISCSC's focus of concern is to read the annual Call for Papers and official statements by leaders. The Call for Papers are issued annually, these days, prior to the meetings and they tend to guide the next annual conference while helping to shape much of the intellectual pathway ahead for the discipline of comparative study of civilizations.

I begin here by going back to CCR's Issue #11 (1984), produced thirty years ago, dated 1985. It is a book entitled *Civilizations East and West* and was published as a memorial volume for Prof. Benjamin Nelson, a founder of the ISCSC and its president from the inception of the organization's American branch on December 29, 1971, to the spring of 1977. As noted by Vytautas Kavolis, Nelson took "a particular interest in involving comparative civilizational studies with all of the most vital intellectual developments and the most perplexing predicaments of the life of the time." Thus, one of his last public lectures was entitled "The New Science of Civilizational Analysis: Vico, Mauss, Weber and Today." As E.V. Walter wrote in his essay on Nelson,

In the 1970s, Nelson's scholarly interests converged in working out *civilization analysis*, a discipline that would seek the common ground of the humanities and the social sciences in studying symbolic designs of the largest scale as active forces in their social settings.

In the same issue, Dr. Kavolis, the subsequent ISCSC president, wrote an article entitled *Nelson's Legacy of Comparative Studies*. In it he quotes from Prof. Nelson embarking on this new direction:

Recently ... I have become curious about several questions related to my growing interest in the comparative study of civilizations and of intercivilizational relations. Does the concept "conscience" give us any clue as to some of the differences in the distinctive patterns of development in various parts of the world? What are the relations between the structures of conscience and the tumultuous sociocultural processes of the 20th century across the world? ... it is necessary to work one's way back through questions of this sort if we hope to work toward a basic foundation for sociology, history, and psychology and anthropology.

We are now obliged to do a massive amount of work to get anywhere near these questions.

Nelson said that “It is only as we see the civilizational complexes in the crucibles of intercultural process that we can perceive the distinctive thrusts and patternings of different civilizational and societal structures.” There were two promising approaches:

... describe ways of studying all sociocultural processes and issues within a distinctive *civilization-analytic* perspective which proves preferable on general intellectual grounds (comprehensiveness, depth, compactness) to existing horizons and approaches in history, anthropology, sociology. The comparative depth-historical study of process and pattern in *civilizational perspective* offers great advantages over current varieties of structuralism, structural functionalism, schematic Marxism, phenomenology, inductivist empiricism, and so on.

Nelson spoke of the “comparative historical differential sociology of sociocultural process and civilizational complexes” and of “a polyphonic depth history and sociology of cultural expression and experience.”

A decade later the association and its journal had changed a tad, retaining some of the original motivating orientation but also branching out. For example, in the issue of Spring, 1995, key articles were on the following topics:

- *Louis Dumont on the National Variants of the Modern Ideology: II* (by Leonidas Donskis)
- *The Ethnic Chameleon: Bakhtin and the Bai* (by Lucien Miller)
- *Dialogical Horizons: Latino Voice and U.S. Audiences – E Pluribus Plures* (by Ann McBride-Limaye)
- *Christianity and the Uniqueness of Japanese Religious Mentality* (by Don Sull Choi)
- *The Historical Study of Mental Images* (by Olavi K. Fält), and
- *On Civilizational Worldviews* (by David Richardson).

And there was a section called “Forum.” In this we find an article by Arthur Iberall entitled *A Characteristic 500-Year Process-Time in Cultural Civilizations*. Plus, there was *A Response to Iberall*, written by Robert Holton.

Prof. Iberall noted at the beginning of this article that he had been making “contributions, from the point of view of a social physics, to this social science community concerned with civilizations” for 16 years. He began to highlight the findings of his study of a 500 year time scale for culture-civilizational processes as follows:

1. Physics is concerned with the laws of movement and change in all material-energetic systems. Man as an organism and organized into Society is such a system.
2. All such physical study revolves around some form of the primitive triad of matter, space, and time. We elect space, time, and action (action: the energy-time product devoted to activities) as a form suited to both simple and complex physical systems.
3. Physics can deal both with the processes within systems at the level of individual units (i.e., 'atomisms'), or at the level of extensive field collectives of such units (i.e., 'fields'). Further, it can connect these two levels.
4. Throughout the entire universe, one finds a hierarchical (in the present instance meaning nested) ordering of atomism and field, from a so-called field vacuum of fluctuations, through so-called fundamental particles, through atoms-ions-molecules of our immediate experience, through matter-energy associations within galaxies (comprising gas clouds, dust clouds, stars, planets, planetesimals), through galaxies, up to and perhaps through our universe to other universes.
5. Of course, in examining the case of a social physics, we easily surmise that we are concerned with an extensive hierarchy and heterarchy of processes and forms.

Next, this “social physics” approach of Dr. Iberall was analyzed by Robert Holton of the Flinders University of South Australia, a Corresponding Editor of the journal. He praised the ambitious and important argument of Iberall as a heroic attempt to maintain that the conceptual and theoretical repertoire of physics can be used to explain social processes, more specially the emergence and duration of civilizations. In so doing, he was going way beyond “Comte’s earlier attempt at social physics, drawing on the recent physics of complex systems.”

But he isolated what he thought were the major problems with Iberall’s paradigm:

He sets no limits as to the usefulness of the theories of physics. The author extrapolates from his success in explaining aspects of material culture (such as population density and the energy parameters affecting social action) to all aspects of human culture. There is a huge leap in faith here typical of theories that it is believed will in time explain everything.

The theoretical framework is biased to materialism and against the symbolic domain. To be convincing it would have to explain language and other symbolic systems, but comments on this are not forthcoming. I do not accept that because physics may explain aspects of material culture in a non-metaphorical manner, it can therefore explain all aspects of social organization.

Perhaps this is the language that Nelson would have used were he to comment on Iberall's approach. At any event, the focus on the organization had now changed from investigation within the social sciences to innovative argumentation as to the validity of other lines of theory seeking to explain divergences and similarities in civilizations.

As time passed, the topics sought for debate and discussion at the annual meeting perhaps led inevitably to a gradual distance developing, a departure from the initiating ideas of Nelson (broad social and historical science) and Kavolis (culture in historical context) through the suggestions of Iberall (social physics) to futures research and contemporary social problems.

Thus, in the Fall issue, 2007, a Call for Papers was included as an orange-colored flyer tucked in between pages 66 and 67. This Call for Papers gave as the topic of the forthcoming conference the following:

**Civilizations in the Americas and Around the World: Past, Present, and Future
Exploring Multiculturalism in Globalizing Civilizations**

Chairing the program committee for that conference was the well-known American physicist Stephen Blaha. Like Dr. Iberall before him, Dr. Blaha had spent years working on the intellectual connections binding physics, mathematics, computer science, and history together.

The first set of suggestions addressed "Civilization of the Americas." Sought were papers on such topics as the following: Collapse of Indo-American Civilizations, Interplay of Civilizations and Cultures in Canada and the United States, Huntington's Clash of Civilizations, Canadian Multiculturalism and the Culture of Nowhere, and Muslim Integration into the Americas and Europe.

The second set of suggestions was labeled "Asian, Islamic, African, and European Civilization Topics." It called for studies on the Efflorescence of Islam in the West, Religious Wars and Social Collapse, the "Decline" of Western Civilization, and Multicultural Feminism vs. Western Feminism, among other suggested areas for research and discussion.

Finally, the organization sought papers on "General Civilizational Topics." Among the most intriguing: "Sparks Flying" – Current Hot Topics; Workshop on Retarding/Reversing the Decline of Civilizations; Workshop on the Possibility of the Conscious Design of the Development of a Civilization; and the "Contributions of Civilizationalists – Toynbee, Wittfogel, Braudel, Needham, Landes, Diamond, McNeill, Frank, Victor Hanson, Barzun, Ortega y Gasset, and Vico."

Before the last conference commenced a welcome and introduction to comparative civilization was offered by Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman of California. She and her team selected as the topic for 2013's conference: How Will Rapid Global Changes Transform Civilizations?

As the conference began, she proposed in her future-oriented welcome what she envisioned as the road ahead for scholarship in the field. Many of these ideas for futures research would constitute a solid research agenda for the discipline, she indicated..

Dr. Farhat-Holzman outlined issues that lay ahead:

Our theme for this conference is a bold one for us because it involves prediction rather than historic analysis. As comparative historians, we are far more familiar with the past and present than the future. But the warning signs are already out there: that our world is being transformed by technological leaps of such daring that we must try to look for pitfalls and try to imagine remedies for the problems we see coming.

We are seeing changes in how we communicate, how we work, how we worship, threats to the continued existence of the nation state, and in our very numbers. We may be seeing a transformation from population explosion to population implosion, changes that can affect everything.

In work and the home, our civilizations have moved from the majority in farming and home industries to manufacturing and ultimately to communications technologies and service industries. The invention of robotics has implications for all sorts of human endeavors, both for good and for ill. One concern already seen is the lack of jobs for working class people resulting in the demise of marriage and stable family life.

The Nation State, which has changed human governance from authoritarian and imperial to participatory, is facing alternate systems of regional governance that will change how we identify our civilizations. Could there be in the future an enlarged United States that includes Canada and Mexico? Or could we break up into geographically comparable regions that could become new nation states? China and Russia face the same problems.

Will space travel affect how human beings think and worship? How will the new brain sciences affect health, crime and punishment, genetics, and once again, religion? What new energy resource will replace everything from human labor, the horse, steam, electricity, and hydro-carbons and how will those changes affect nation states and world economies?

As a separate issue, we are also examining the great dispersions of people around the world, diasporas both voluntary and involuntary. How are strangers in a strange land surviving? Where do they do well and where do they do ill?

We are merely touching the surface of these contemplations at this conference, but it will be an exciting start. I would like to see this process continue into our next conferences, and would really like to hear from more medical doctors, lawyers, and other professionals---even astronomers---who would jump in to explore the future of civilization in the face of such scientific leaps into the unknown.

Welcome to you all, and we hope that you have a stimulating conference and that you make many new friends on this journey.

Now, in the year 2014, the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations has a new president: Dr. David Rosner of New York. A philosopher, he led a team which has prepared the Call for Papers for the forthcoming June conference to be held at Monmouth University in West Long Branch, New Jersey. The selected topic: Can Collective Wisdom Save Civilization?

He began his Call for Papers as follows:

Jonathan Lear, in his book *Radical Hope* (2006), wrote:

“We live in an age of deep and profound angst that the world itself, as we know it, is vulnerable and could break down...We are confronted with global warming, nuclear conflagration, weapons of mass destruction...and even the demise of civilization itself...events around the world – terrorist attacks, violent social upheavals...have left us with an uncanny sense of menace. We seem to be aware of a shared vulnerability that we cannot name.” (p. 7)

What is the way out of this deep sense of contemporary crisis? What exactly is “wisdom” and how can wisdom be promoted on a global level to deal with a number of serious crises now facing the future of civilization? What have been some different definitions of wisdom? This is an ancient topic, but how can it be specifically applied today? What, if anything, can be done to solve these problems collectively?

Some applications may be (but are not limited to) the following questions:

- What exactly is human nature and how is this relevant to civilizational futures?
- What are some possible solutions to overpopulation and the related problems of over-industrialization, resource-depletion and environmental degradation?
- What are some possible solutions to the problem of inequality, economic and otherwise?
- Why do a few have so much while so many have so little? Do rich nations have any responsibilities to the poor ones?
- Is capitalism really working today? What did the “occupy” movements signify?
- Why are many Western economies currently floundering? How have technological advances (especially increasing automation) contributed to the current jobs crisis?
- Does material accumulation really bring happiness? Why/why not?
- Is humankind naturally prone to conflict or cooperation? How are organizations like the United Nations faring with regard to international responses to regional problems?
- What is a Utopia? Dystopia? How are these terms relevant today?
- What roles do utopias and dystopias play for the future of society?
- Have our leaders run out of inspiration? Is fear now the main rhetoric?
- In the 20th century, humanity saw the rise of several grand ideologies: communism, fascism, liberalism, etc. We also saw the dismantling of many of the institutions built on these grand visions. Have today’s leaders given up on grand visions?
- Is narrow self-interest and small scaled-down retraction now the trend? If so, what are the implications of this? Is this ‘realpolitik’ or just the politics of disillusionment?

And of course, papers concerning all questions relevant to civilizational studies are also welcome! These could include:

- Studies of great civilizationalists, e.g., Spengler, Toynbee, Sorokin, Quigley, etc.
- Analyses of particular civilizations and/or comparative studies of civilizations.
- Decline and progress of civilizations.

More than a half century has passed since this society commenced its studies. How may we measure the changes in this discipline? As I have tried to show, one way is through such indicia as these Calls for Papers and suggested themes, all intended to guide scholarly research.

Is there a uniting golden thread of continuity in these writings, these broad aims and goals? When we look at the half century of work, do we find there a sense of coherence and direction, a visible trend or trends, pattern and meaning, advancement? Perhaps.

But if we inquire as to the value of the body of scholarship that the men and women who have analyzed and written on comparative civilizations over the period since 1961 have produced, and if we ask whether there is a future bursting with opportunities for research in comparative civilizations, the response to both queries must be clear, positive and unequivocal: Yes, without a doubt.

See you at Monmouth University this summer!

Joseph Drew
Editor-in-Chief