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The Future of Civilization: A Systems Approach

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Abstract

Civilization is one of several stages of human evolution and forms a system of interaction. Its past dominance is now challenged by growth of three subsystems — state, economy, and science/technology. These three subsystems have matured through application of rational knowledge. The vertically integrated state now dominates society and demarcated territory. The horizontally integrated global economy and global science/technology society have become worldwide in scope. State domination is reinforced by autonomous global science and international capital. The remaining subsystem of Moral Knowledge occupies present non-material civilization and is characterized by organic knowledge and embracing the unprovable, which includes religion, art, morality, literature, and philosophy. Reflecting this bifurcation, two global political persuasions are emerging — Statism includes communists, socialists, and progressives; Civism (Civilizationists) embraces non-material humanism and regards the three rational autonomous systems as helpful tools but not ends in themselves.

Key words: System, U.S., China, state, civilization

Civilizations and States

“Civilization” is both a provocative and an evocative term to describe a great swath of mankind. With great insight and scholarship, Arnold Toynbee described its dynamics as social phenomena looking mostly backwards to what had passed before. A decade ago, Samuel Huntington analyzed civilizations as cultural units poised on the cusp of conflict. In the present paper, I argue that the age of coherent civilizations has passed and that their component subsystems have established autonomy from the birthing institutions. This development has been generated by purposive human action with roots in two knowledge-acquisition forms — organic and rational.

In his book, The Selfish Gene, (Dawkins, 2006) Richard Dawkins makes a point analogous to the common approach in the study of social and human phenomena. Writers on evolution approached the study of human evolution under the assumption that groups and species are the units of evolution. This is a complete error, he points out, because it is the individual gene which replicates itself and provides the map for the organism.
In our world of civilizations, societies, and other invented concepts, we wish to improve our understanding of human phenomena but often end in speculation without adequate identification of the mechanisms of change and stability. The future of civilization is too important not to explore its dynamic roots in individual thought and action, in its perpetual adaptation to the human and material environment.

The individual person is the fundamental unit of any group — from nuclear family to nation-state and civilization. This "human unit" is replicator and producer, destroyer and builder, originator and beneficiary or victim. We study civilization as the highest form of human construction, but as Lady Thatcher famously quipped about society’s non-existence, there is also no such "thing" as civilization — yet it is a crucial concept for understanding historical and contemporary phenomena. Starting from the individual as basic unit of society and civilization, in the same way that the selfish gene is the fundamental element in physical life, we can arrive at a different approach to larger entities. Figure 1 lists a few of the important terms and their meaning within this article.

Mankind constructed societies and civilizations as total systems to enhance survival and longevity. There have evolved at least four subsystems within civilizational systems. These are:

1. Government — this subsystem evolved from heads of families to tribal chieftains to kings and emperors to manage defense and overall coordination by using power, law, and economic tools.
2. Science and technology — by innovation, adaptation and accumulation of material knowledge, SciTech society emerged and often ignored tribal and national boundaries.

3. Trade and production — Currency, banking, trade and distribution enabled production and transfer of goods and services within a society/civilization.

4. Religion, human will and non-material consciousness — belief system, culture, literature, art and philosophy unified thought and orientations facilitating collective action among a large population. Figure 2 presents civilization as a total system, with four subsystems making it work.

![Civilization and its subsystems](image)

*Figure 2 - Civilization and its subsystems*

The governmental subsystem underwent vertical integration through planning, meritocracy, and rational administration, emerging as the sovereign nation-state by the nineteenth century, in command of economy and society. Occupying a demarcated and defended territory, worked and supported by citizens with allegiance to the nation, the state intervened in education, culture and a wide range of activities formerly social in scope. Alone among the other three subsystems, government (which later become the state) is non-globalist, characterized by jealous embrace of exclusive sovereignty. Sovereign governments, when transforming into states, have become powerful enough to dominate civilization and humanity’s legacy of society and civilization, taking them into forms yet unrealized. My working hypothesis is laid out in Figure 3.
Comparative Civilizations Review

Figure 3 – Hypothesis

The state is replacing civilization as the inclusive and collective source of identity and control of human existence. The modern sovereign territorial state is subordinating civilization to rational direction and regulation, aided by the flourishing of a global science and technology society (Global SciTech Society), underwritten by international capital and driven by the individual human propensity to seek maximum life security.

The science/technology subsystem evolved into the Global SciTech Society, creating and leveraging materialist rationality into common property of all, but controlled by a highly specialized elite. In theory, it has erased boundaries, though nation-states guard their security-relevant innovations from transfer to other powers. It can be regarded as a “society” in that it has prospered through cooperative interaction and knowledge sharing. State subsidies have also nourished it as positive input for strengthening state dominance within society.

Nineteenth century international commerce, driven by industrialization, made states stronger and transformed empires into trading blocs. Banks lubricated business expansion while implicitly promising endless growth — an illusion that collapsed with two world wars and an intervening depression. Currency questions, postwar rebuilding, the gold standard, and other issues have driven horizontal integration on a global scale with the American dollar as reserve currency. The digital revolution has further accelerated the importance of international capital and loosening from state controls.

The last subsystem of civilization consists of things that cannot be proven — especially religion which has been vital in the formation and maintenance of all civilizations. It consists of innovations of the mind, expressed in images, visions, sounds (music and language) and belief in a transcendent afterlife. It is the subsystem based on non-materialism and exists chiefly in the minds and expressions of individuals. The non-material knowledge subsystem cannot be planned or prognosticated by rational extrapolation. It is knowledge gained through organic means and provides transcendent meaning for individuals within a civilization. It has both global and national extent, and unlike Global SciTech Society, directly affects practically every individual directly, though unequally. It is the most human subsystem of the four and flourishes with imagination, vision, and tragedy.
Three subsystems become autonomous

These four subsystems comprised past civilizations and are now becoming autonomous systems in contrast to their integrated relationships within historical civilizations. The modern sovereign nation-state dominates in the disposition of capital and seeks ever more power over society. The Global SciTech Society claims or seeks supreme knowledge of climate, energy, medicine, and the universe. Collective knowledge of the material world is claimed and celebrated as answering the needs of humanity, mostly at the expense of the organic knowledge acquired in traditional civilizations. International capital has expressed its independence from subsystem status to become an autonomous system answering only to economic laws. Like the modern state and Global SciTech Society, its foundation in rational planning, calculation of costs and benefits and a presumption that organic knowledge is obsolete combine to detach it from traditional civilization.

Figure 5 suggests how human social evolution has occurred. The four subsystems of the civilization system evolved unequally, with growing convergence of the autonomous state, economy, and SciTech Society to form the most powerful combine in history, abandoning the one humane and organic subsystem. How has this happened? First we must recognize that the success of a civilization is in its ability to prolong the lives of its members. The Will-to-Live is fundamental to humans. Arrangements of action (institutions) which fail to serve this instinct will not be preserved.
In humanity’s journey, the family, tribes, societies and states have accompanied population and technology growth with great continuity and expansion of numbers.

Life demands material inputs, which consist of food, water, shelter, and defense against predators. Territory, as a region of land and water, is vital in providing these inputs. Society is essentially cooperative and hierarchical, with a division of labor, which becomes more complex as membership and innovation expand. Its concerns are largely materialist, with members interacting under a code of ethics based on reciprocity. Governments began as tribal councils, evolved into kingships with standing armies and in modern times, became highly authoritarian or relatively democratic. Together these three elements of territory, society and government comprise the state.

These three subsystems are characterized as serving the material needs of human life, postponing individual death in the process. Human existence is primarily physical, and it is no surprise that the subsystems devoted to maximizing material accessibility have expanded beyond the boundaries of civilization. If this mundane form of existence was adequate, a non-material subsystem would be superfluous. Organic knowledge has been the source of mankind’s slow evolution into civilization but is largely instinctive and responsive to specific circumstances. The subsystem of civilization that is non-material and organic, which we often relegate as "humanities," is that which makes us human, gives life meaning and reconciles the sensate with the transcendent. It is the subsystem where morality holds sway because it promises accountability for actions, if not in this life, then in an afterlife, and is therefore more effective than social ethics.
Generations of people have lived under non-material persuasions and viewed life as more than labor and animal existence.

![Evolution of action structures](image)

**Figure 6 - Evolution of action structures**

Civilization is one stage of human evolution — not physiological but organizational. Its progress was preceded by four separate stages:

1. The family, consisting of father, mother and children, is the original building block of human organization. Based on sexual and age division of labor, it is hierarchical and rooted in the biology of reproduction and life maintenance. Bloodline connected families into clans which created narratives of a common ancestor and interlinked within a common territory. Tribes emerged and established rudimentary government and maintained exclusivity of membership.

2. With demographic increase and urbanization tribal affiliation lost its solidarity and a functioning society emerged. Government became more intrusive, trade and production more specialized, and “rule by rules” expanded. Released from tribal compulsion, individuals interacted through ethics based on reciprocity. The integration of social subsystem within an emerging civilization first served life security at a material level, and later there evolved a common religious overlay.
3. Secular society saw development of markets and inputs of production as members labored to acquire life necessities. Specialized government organs imposed taxes, corvee and laws. Government also raised fulltime armies and used religion as a means of integrating diverse populations. As a society acquired an overlay of civilization, adaptation to the environment within its claimed territory became more sophisticated and productive, occasionally flourishing until resources were exhausted or it was conquered by a stronger power.

4. Until the mid-twentieth century, an advanced civilization could be described as a coherent system. As with its component subsystems, a civilization undergoes evolution and change, accelerated in the recent past. Rationalization, globalization of transport, communication, science, and technology have expedited integration of the three material subsystems and delivered autonomy, if not independence from the sourcing civilization.

Figures 7-11 summarize pre-civilization social development.
Stage Two
Families formed clans, then tribes – based on lineage.

Figure 8 - Lineage groups

Stage Three: Society characteristics

- Components: individuals, families, teams, clans, tribes
- Bonding – rituals, culture, myth, division of labor
- Material basis – exploitation of territorial resources, labor, trade, innovation
- Secular – organized religion not essential.
- Norms – customary rules, utilitarian ethics
- Status – part ascribed, part achieved.
- Management – acephalous; organic

Figure 9 -- Stage Three: Social evolution
Civilization is said to begin with the written word. Its appearance supplements the face-to-face interactions of a society and enables larger populations to accumulate knowledge, live longer, be more productive and build a common identity. Figure 12 describes the process of adding a superior layer over society.
As government takes on more powers and responsibilities it transforms into a recognizable state and does not abandon or dissolve the sources of its sovereignty. Power is accumulated and expanded, particularly with war when mobilization of an entire population is not only possible but necessary. A state discovers new resources and innovations that aided its victory and is loath to surrender them in peace. The most rational state has the best chance of winning a conflict.
In the present age, as traditional civilization fades, the state flexes new muscles and encounters other states with similar ambitions, leading to war. The religious element and humanism of former civilization fades as the material subsystems expand. Some conflict is mitigated with the horizontal integrative thrusts of the international economy and the Global SciTech Society.
Individual Will – the source of action and change

Using a systems approach to analyze civilization and its evolution does not mean that a system or subsystem is self-generating. The fundamental source of a human system is individuals thinking and acting to create living spaces from which they can develop and acquire life necessities. The motivation of the individual is found in the Will of the living organism to maintain life of body and mortal soul. We can identify six separate Wills:

1. **Will-to-Live** — The primary source of all wills, mostly conscious and universal in the mortal soul and present in unconscious form in other living things. It has driven productive and acquisition of life inputs for eons.

2. **Will-to-Freedom** — Consciousness of life’s precariousness directs individuals to search for means and tools to relieve their subordination to raw necessity. The first freedom is freedom from nature’s iron law of early death.

3. **Will-to-Power** — This is distributed unequally among mankind and has its source in paternal families, expressed in tribal hierarchy and refined in monarchy. Control of governments and the process of state building would hardly be possible without men of strong power drive.

4. **Will-to-Comply** — A few men are leaders, and most men and women are followers. Conformity as a passive attitude is never enough to establish an organization, so there must be positive compliance. A soldier is only effective if he complies with orders in a positive fashion.

5. **Will-to-Transcend** — Men rise above animal existence because of search and belief in a higher meaning of life. In tribal settings, a shaman calls upon unseen spirits to heal or comfort. Sophisticated religions describe an afterlife where sins and merits of the present life determine eternal existence. Belief in a second existence creates a morality based on accountability — in distinction to social ethics which is circumscribed by the present sensate life.

6. **Will-to-Redirect** — Humans make choices and can change their circumstances, location or environment. This may involve risk and awareness of profit and loss. This will has been most evident in history of states, which developed out of civilizational governments experiencing reform, usurpation, rebellion, and civil wars as motors of change and redirection.

To summarize, human will has been at the base of systemic change — changes that added to the memory reservoir and were processed into the rationality of cause and effect. As the three material subsystems accumulated lessons and maxims for change, they no longer depended upon organic knowledge which was often defective and subject to unverifiable belief and speculation.
The invention of numbers and mathematics fed into government statistics, economic transactions and scientific calculations, leaving organic knowledge with concepts and visions but few verifiable statements or facts on the natural world — a world that includes physical existence.

**Two Examples of Civilization Change: China and America**

Ancient Chinese civilization has been replaced by three material systems — state, Global SciTech Society and a combination of internal and international capital. Fig 16 illustrates how these changes have occurred since the early twentieth century.

![Vertical integration of modern China: Society, civilization and state](image)

*Figure 16 – Making modern China*

Obstacles to modernization have included both the efficacy and inertia of the old civilization, fragmentation into relatively self-reliant regions and provinces and interference by industrial states, notably Japan. Communist conquest in 1949 completed the unification began by the Guomindang under Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek).
Led by Mao Zedong the Communists established a new society with antipathy towards folk and organized religion, simplified the ideographic writing system, confiscated farmland while destroying the landlord class, made art and literature subordinate to politics, and set off a famine which killed more than 40 million Chinese. After Mao’s death (1976) a series of reforms redirected a more orderly state under control of a single party — the Chinese Communist Party. “Rule of man” was replaced by “rule of law.” International capital was invited to invest in joint enterprises and technology transfer was expedited. Through foreign investment, espionage and sending students abroad, China has been able to become a very active member of the Global SciTech Society.

In a reversal of Maoist attacks on the old civilization, temples and palaces have been rebuilt and classical texts republished. There is little hope for a revival since modernization has occurred at a material level for the benefit of long-suffering subjects/citizens, yet at tremendous human costs. Whether the present pace of progress can be maintained remains unanswered because society and state deal with a number of challenges, including repeated epidemics, the growing challenge from the U.S., and a shaky financial framework. Beijing has made no secret of her desire to incorporate lost territories, including Hong Kong and Taiwan (see "Territory" in Figure 17). Integrating Macao and Hong Kong is adding part of the historical loss to the motherland, and suppression of Moslem separatists in Xinjiang prevents further loss.
USA

**Figure 18 - USA vertical integration**

### Vertical integration of modern USA: Society, civilization and state

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regime</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>Society</th>
<th>Civilization</th>
<th>State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Founding</td>
<td>1776-1828</td>
<td>Adapted British &amp; native</td>
<td>Fragmented, expanding</td>
<td>European</td>
<td>Limited by design of constitution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacksonian democracy</td>
<td>1828-1895</td>
<td>Mixed – American &amp; British</td>
<td>Industrialization, rural</td>
<td>Euro-American</td>
<td>Centralization with Civil War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American empire</td>
<td>1895-1917</td>
<td>Emergence of unique American culture</td>
<td>Urbanized</td>
<td>Euro-America</td>
<td>Expanding domestic &amp; military – Spanish-American War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World power</td>
<td>1918-2020</td>
<td>American global</td>
<td>Urban, mobile</td>
<td>Innovative; materialist</td>
<td>Increasing role, especially during Cold War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declining power</td>
<td>2020-present</td>
<td>Fragmenting</td>
<td>Mobile; secular; politicized</td>
<td>Digital;</td>
<td>Regulatory; interventionist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pandemic</td>
<td>2020-2022</td>
<td>Masked &amp; medicated</td>
<td>Compliance replaced by more resistance</td>
<td>Sci-tech civilization</td>
<td>Greater claims over society</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 19 - The contemporary American state**
With the demise of the Soviet Union, the U.S. became the dominant world power. For nearly two decades it appeared that the globe had entered an era of peace, democracy, and prosperity, accelerated by the digital revolution. Globalization promised a reduction of the national sovereignty which presumably caused wars and poverty. Human rights were advocated as necessary for a new world civilization to emerge.

This hope was dissipated on September 11, 2001, with the Al Qaeda attacks on the U.S. Huntington and others framed it as the persistence of antagonistic civilizations. The attack triggered a revival of national security and America established a Department of Homeland Security to warn and discourage further attacks. To many in the developing world, America is the Great Satan and must be destroyed. The idea of a multipolar world gained some currency but it relies on sovereign states for implementation. Instead of state dissolution, the post-Cold War order has actually consisted of vertical integration of nation-states aided by digital development, inter-state competition, a new arms race, demographic factors, and facilitation of capital transfers.

The 9/11 event awakened Americans to the fact that they live in a still-hostile world and opinions differed on how to deal with it. One segment of thought claimed that American hegemony and racism were at fault, and that foreign antagonism could be reduced by greater distribution of wealth to impoverished societies. Another solution was to open the gates and borders to greater numbers of migrants who would become taxpayers and workers in a society where population growth was stagnant.

An opposing opinion was that America had been a mostly beneficial force in world politics and remained on virtuous foundations with constitution, democracy, and market capitalism. A large influx of undocumented immigrants is seen as diluting the population with desperate workers and welfare beneficiaries, with greater possibility of ethnic balkanization in the future. Religious diversity is not considered a source of national strength among this segment of the population. These two opposing visions of America are reflected in the party politics as well in society, exacerbated by the Covid epidemic. In this perspective, U.S. society has symptoms of increasing disunity which reduces national solidarity and government ability to speak and act with a single voice. It is plausible that the U.S. may be undergoing a vertical disintegration as two parties seek power and hurl mutual condemnations.

**On the Future of Civilization**

China and the U.S. are prominent examples of new forces at work, and they illustrate how civilization has been diminished by the formation of new material systems out of former subsystems. China has much less political freedom than the U.S. and some claim that democracy may be untenable in the longer run. The heightening social conflict in the U.S. is facilitated by freedoms of speech and assembly but also demonstrates a possible outcome when and if humanist civilization declines.
Civilization is subject to further evolution and mankind has not arrived at a steady state or equilibrium — there is no normalcy to speak of.

Two global parties are likely to emerge in the future — the Statists and the Civists (Civilizationists). Statists will include Communists, Socialists and Progressives as the party of greater state involvement and supervision of society. The state embodies competence, science, economic equity, and rationality. In other words, its vertical integration has made an encompassing organization from the government subsystem with a performance record of accomplishment, if we examine mortality rates and population growth as measures of effectiveness. Wars seem less likely than in the previous century and to this may be attributed greater mutual interdependence of states, more stress on maintenance of the status quo and ease of communication.

Civists on the other hand, remain skeptical of states and tend to view them as antagonistic to freedom. They also do not welcome the intrusion of international capital into all aspects of national economies. There is suspicion of science and technology exhausting natural resources, replacing humans with machines and increasing the killing ability of new weapons. Civists oppose the overwhelming secularization of global society and embrace the unprovable ideas, especially religion, that have formed the human condition.

Does Civism Become the Enemy of Statism?

Civists recognize past and present contributions by state, science/technology, and market commerce to mankind’s vastly improved condition. For example, the Civist attitude to the three material systems was implied in the life of Jesus. When He drove the money changers out of the Temple, He was not demonizing money or capitalism. Rather he implicitly accepted the role of commerce, but it must not carry on in a sacred place. A second incident occurred when He was asked to comment on ownership of a coin, and His answer was that Caesar, the symbol for government, was a valid part of civilization with a part to play. Caesar belonged to the City of Man, to use St. Augustine’s term. After His Resurrection, the apostle Thomas (“the Doubter”) did not believe that Christ had risen until he actually touched the crucifixion wounds. Christ could have interpreted that as an absence of faith, but instead complied with the request for proof. This signaled acceptance of empirical validation — the crux of scientific inquiry.

Jesus Christ was the first Civist and more importantly, His words indicate a future accommodation between Statists and Civists. Civilizations already play a severely diminished role in states, and the alliance of states, Global SciTech Society and international economy could threaten that which makes us human — embracing the unprovable. The new systems have lengthened and improved our material lives — a fact tacitly accepted by current Civists.
The material subsystems have broken away from two major civilizations, leaving the mass of humanity vulnerable to the vagaries of progress and those who seek to command additional powers over society, climate, economy, education, communications, biology and even sexual identity. The vital task of Civists is to preserve the humanism of past civilizations and not to succumb to exclusive rationality — which has no guarantee of consistently coming up with the right answers to questions of existence and meaning.

Figure 20 summarizes the above discussion and illustrates how the modern states draw strength from the Global SciTech Society and domestic/international capital. The three systems have become relatively integrated at the expense of the humanist component of civilization. The subsystem of Moral Knowledge is increasingly vulnerable and isolated but remains vital in preserving humanity’s possessions of virtues, hopes, visions and passions. For individual existence to be exclusively rational and to become political, economic, and material beings is to drain meaning from a million-year struggle.

![Figure 20 - Intersection of autonomous systems](image)
Suggested Readings


