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POLITICS AND THE DISINTEGRATION OF CIVILIZATIONS

GEORGE VON DER MUHLL.

Why do civilizations disintegrate? Contemporary scholars have offered many answers. Soil exhaustion, deforestation, disease, population overload, protectionist trade policy, technological obsolescence in the arts of war—each has been held to have fatally eroded the foundations of the great empires of the past.¹ Toward 1470 B.C., a cataclysmic volcanic explosion not only shattered the island of Thira but is now thought to have sent out an almost unimaginable 165-foot wall of sea water across the open Aegean to Crete, overwhelming the base of the ancient thalassocracy of Minos within minutes and leaving it in legend as a dimly remembered Lost Atlantis. Volcanic eruptions many centuries later may have contributed more directly to the poorly recorded but quite terminal disruption of Javanese high culture.² Meteorologists have shown that climatic changes between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries rendered Viking efforts to maintain a civilization in the far northern oceans untenable.³ Some scientists link the unrecognized consequences of the Romans' use of lead as an aqueduct lining to the slow decline of their Empire; others foresee only too clearly the instantaneous disappearance of its Western successor (and perhaps all of civilization) in a single thermonuclear flash.⁴ Such hypotheses have by now displayed a range and inventiveness almost as awesome as their imputed consequences.

Until the past century, most observers attributed the disintegration of civilized order to more spiritual causes. In perhaps the most celebrated of these analyses, Edward Gibbon drew his study of the "fall" of the Roman Empire to a close with the summary declaration, "I have described the triumph of barbarism and religion."⁵ Gibbon courted notoriety in his time with his provocative conjunction of causes, but he could hardly claim novelty for the thesis itself: it merely echoed (though with radically reversed
Augustine of Hippo’s explanation thirteen centuries earlier for the unlamented collapse of a secular order in which he had the misfortune to live. 6

General theories of moral decay—abetted, depending on the writer’s purpose, by such agents as a wrathful God, an uncorrupted barbarian horde, or an internal proletariat—likewise formed the theme of analogous Jewish, Muslim, Chinese, and Aztec chronicles. In these accounts, the fall of great civilizations occurs as the justly deserved punishment of prideful rulers and corrupted subjects. But while these annals did not differ greatly in the preeminence assigned to the moral dimensions of the drama, individual writers could and did divide over whether to treat societal disintegration as a cyclical or a monotonic process, and whether as temporary disequilibrations of social forces or as inexorable manifestations of divine will. Such issues, which once separated Plato, Machiavelli, Ibn Khaldun, and the court historians of Imperial China from more unilinear philosophers of human history, have been carried forward unresolved into this century in the writings of Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee. 7

This proliferation of explanations for the fall of civilizations in itself requires little explanation. Individual social analysts, differently educated and positioned differently within their own societies, predictably have been influenced in their interpretive emphasis by the range and salience of the civilizations they knew, the general level and sophistication of the scientific knowledge of their period, and the moral lessons they sought to draw. But explanatory pluralism has resulted from more than differences of perspective. Undoubtedly, it reflects the complexity of social reality itself. “Disintegration” as an empirical referent must cover both the collapse in a matter of weeks of the Inca Empire and the prolonged decay of Byzantium. Only retrospective insight into divine intention can permit one to postulate a single general law covering the conversion of the Abbasid caliphate into a Mongol province, of Minoan Crete into a “Lost Atlantis,” and of Coptic Christian Ethiopia into a revolutionary Marxist regime. Absent the possibility that the rhythms of world history have been controlled by fluctuations of a single variable—a position for which there is no evidence—diversity in theorizing follows inevitably from matching theory to historical fact.
It seems improbable, on the other hand, that attempted explanations addressed to a common problem should perfectly cancel one another out. But if so, then what common elements do they contain? Evidently rather few. The similarities are mainly negative. Most notably, these accounts typically portray the disintegration of the civic cores of the ancient civilizations as a by-product of developments outside that sphere. Unsound irrigation practices, rigidities of social structure, pulverizing natural catastrophes, perhaps otherworldly religious preoccupations are held to bring changes in societal behavior that destructively spill over into the political arena. Indirectly and without deliberate intent, these developments set an agenda the government cannot meet. They alternately stress the civic order and paralyze its responsive capacity, first limiting the possibilities for effective collective choice and then undermining the will to make them.

In many cases, the connections among these forces are presented as imperfectly perceived by the society at the time, or not perceived at all. Indeed, explanations for the disintegration of the great historical civilizations seem today to gain plausibility in direct proportion to the demonstrated improbability that their rulers could have perceived the connections. The guardians of civilization, it has been argued, have been least likely to cope with debilitating factors that fell outside the range of their explanatory paradigms. Only by accident could they make the right adjustments to such hazards as trace contamination of the drinking water. The decline of civilizations thereby becomes a tale of tragedy and of terror. Its contemplation leads inexorably to reflections on the blind frailty of the human race.

Macro-Theory: Toynbee on Civilization

Among the many efforts to account for the downfall of civilizations, one has exercised a preeminent claim to the attention of contemporary macro-historians by virtue of its scope and sweep, its wealth of empirical illustrations, and the systematic form of its presentation. Arnold Toynbee's magisterial *A Study of History*—twelve volumes in all—stands essentially by itself in these respects. It represents by far the most ambitious attempt to demarcate and classify the great civilizations of the past and to arrange the details of their emergence and decline in a manner suggesting
submission to a common law. It offers a unified perspective on the most elemental processes of the largest differentiated units in which human societies can be grouped. It towers so prominently among works of its kind that critics have understandably drawn general conclusions concerning the feasibility of systematic macro-history from an assessment of its achievements and deficiencies.

*A Study of History* is in principle a study of all history. Toynbee made a determined effort to break with a eurocentric perspective within which other civilizations and proto-civilizations become mere types—"oriental," "primitive," and the like. "Europe" appears in his pages much as it does on a globe—as an offshoot, a derivative entity, that must compete for the eye with the Ferghana Valley, the Indonesian archipelago, and the Mexican plateau. Critics have inevitably uncovered the biases of a Western scholar, but it is a great merit of Toynbee's work that it continuously keeps the dynastic and religious wars of the West European nation-states in a context formed by civilizations remote in space and time. This quality is reinforced by his method of continuous comparison. For Toynbee, the major problems of history come into view when one juxtaposes similar outcomes in civilizations conventionally treated as too dissimilar to bear scrutiny in the same treatise, or when anomalies emerge from an explanation of closely related societies over entire millenia rather than in the decades within which they appear undifferentiated. A reader of Toynbee soon becomes habituated to the expectation that generalizations concerning the dynamics of a civilization will be checked against nothing less than an array of data drawn from a global history of the human race.

But it is not so much for the scope of Toynbee's project that he has become celebrated, nor yet for his comparative methods, nor even for his extraordinary assembly of detailed knowledge. Rather, he has become best known for his distinctive thesis concerning the determinants of the rise and fall of the civilizations he studies. Here Toynbee shows exceptional deliberateness in the presentation of his argument; and it is on this conceptual fulcrum that he rests his broadest claim to have uncovered the controlling elements in the rhythms of society.

In its general form, this thesis has become well known. Toynbee's search through the annals of the great historic civilizations
led him to assign a crucial role to “challenges” and “response” in their histories. Civilizations, according to Toynbee, emerge when their members confront an environment neither too severe to leave a margin above mere survival for the development of high culture (e.g., the Arctic wastelands of the Eskimo), nor too unstimulating to produce that culture (the South Pacific islands). These environmental boundaries establish the necessary conditions for the growth of civilizations; responses within the zone of intermediate challenges provide the sufficient conditions. But responses sufficient to produce a major civilization do not suffice to sustain it. As in Greek tragedy (of which Toynbee was a close student), civilizations carry the seed of their own destruction: in time they develop lopsidedly, take on an exaggerated cast, rigidify, become ritualized, and ultimately cease to find responses appropriate to the altering challenges. Eventually, new forces—in Toynbee’s dramaturgy, an “external” and an “internal” proletariat—surface; the former characteristically presents a decisive new environmental challenge, the latter fatally weakens the capacity—and the resolve—to respond. All civilizations (including, Toynbee fears, the Western, for which he thinks the apogee may have been reached in the 17th century) appear to follow this ineluctable progression.

Toynbee repeatedly presses beyond conventional historical description in his search for explanations for the growth and decline of civilizations. His twelve volumes offer a wealth of tellingly selected data to support his script. Toynbee claims to find substantiation for his thesis in the precise climatological features of Chile and Ceylon. He writes with assurance about the intricacies of Byzantine theology and Ottoman administrative codes. Whatever the failings of his treatise, they do not derive from excessive abstraction. Yet only rarely does detail appear to be piled upon detail for its own sake. A Study of History is an impressive example of historical writing in which narration is continuously used to develop or check a theory.

Toynbee’s work is striking, too, for its sustained use of the same small set of variables to give order to the enormously variegated historical tapestry he places on display. His organizing concepts economically focus on the elemental systemic properties common to the complexly integrated cultural patterns he treats as civilizations. The pressures of ecological and social environments; the
possibilities for, and appropriateness of, the responses—these themes are traced throughout human history to the remotest frontiers of human habitation in deliberately repetitive form, and they continue to generate the same large questions and to suggest the same basic answers concerning why human energies successfully fused to produce extended divisions of labor and aesthetically or morally memorable artifacts under some circumstances but not others. A notable consequence of this systemic approach is that it avoids the rigidly deterministic mold of many preceding synthetic theories of civilization. “Challenges” must be perceived as such, and “response” likewise allows bounded space for human choice; and some deviation accordingly becomes possible in principle from the fixed unfolding of analytically specified phases of growth and decline in civilizations. Toynbee thereby partly exempts himself from the charge, justly levelled at Spengler, of postulating an undemonstrated analogy between organic systems and the cultural patterns of civilizations, and of effecting a logically unwarranted transfer of laws from the former to the latter. Metaphorical thinking is prominent in Toynbee’s writing, to be sure, but he deploys his theoretical metaphors with some caution.

A multi-volume work of such scope presents critics with a broad target. Critics have indeed found much to aim at. Many have matched Toynbee’s confident forays into the exotic past against their own more specialized knowledge and have found his wanting in several respects. Others, disturbed by what they see to be the arbitrary omissions, stretching, reversed sequences, and loose analogies required to make historical data conform to Toynbee’s “laws,” have gone on to question the objective underlying his search for recurrent patterns of action. Some are quite evidently offended by Toynbee’s lofty prophetic tone, increasingly audible in the later volumes, and have challenged his contention that the West must turn to some vaguely delineated form of ecumenical religion if it is to save itself from the fate of other civilizations.

A prime difficulty in all this controversy is that the terms of victory and defeat elude definition. Toynbee’s propositions remain true at the price of becoming circular. The severity of the Appalachian mountain environment accounts for the relapse of its mountaineers into “Celtic barbarism,” whereas the Central American rain forests provided a stimulating “Golden Mean” for the growth of Mayan civilization.12 Hookworm and pervasive
poverty establish the truth of the first proposition, the mute testimony of Mayan temples in Copan and Tikal the second. We know that the Swiss Alps offer a less taxing environment than Appalachia, and the rain forests of Nicaragua a more severe challenge than the Yucatan, because in the nineteenth century the Swiss began building railroads and watches whereas Nicaragua's Indians left nothing to attract the tourist. Similar reasoning from effect to cause indicates why the pressures from Steppe barbarians that the Chou dynasts found merely stimulating proved overwhelming and rigidifying farther west in Chinese Turkestan.13

This mode of circular induction is on fullest display in precisely those passages in which one might have expected Toynbee to avoid it most self-consciously. In a sub-section directly following one entitled "How is a Challenge Proved Excessive?", Toynbee ponders, by way of illustration, the differential fate of Scandinavian civilization in Norway, Iceland, and Greenland.14 He begins with the "indisputable" observation that "it was in Iceland and not in Norway or in Sweden or in Denmark that the abortive Scandinavian Civilization achieved its greatest triumphs both in literature and in politics." But how is one to account for that fact? Toynbee notes "two conditions which are conspicuous: the transmarine migration across arctic seas and the exchange of a bleak and barren countryside in Norway for an Icelandic countryside which was bleaker and barrener." Norway, it seems, was (relatively speaking) too "soft" an environment to stimulate the Viking genius to its fullest expression. In Greenland, on the other hand, a "Thule beyond Thule" where the countryside is "as much bleaker and barrener than Iceland as Iceland itself is bleaker and barrener than Norway," the environmental challenge, instead of stimulating "a Scandinavian response with twice its Icelandic brilliance," proved so severe that "the Greenlanders made hardly any contribution to Norse literature; they did not distinguish themselves in politics; and they betrayed a most un-Scandinavian-like lack of drive in failing to follow up and clinch the great geographical discovery—the discovery of America—which was within their grasp." The meaning of this "strange and melancholy story" is (and here I must quote from Toynbee with some bemusement):

... that the challenge of Greenland was excessive, and that the reason why the abortive Scandinavian Civilization actually attained its zenith
neither in Greenland nor in Norway but in Iceland was that in Iceland the challenge to which the Scandinavian Civilization was the response happened to be presented in the optimum degree of severity—a degree which was a mean between the lesser and the greater degree of severity in which the same challenge was presented in Norway and in Greenland respectively (p. 293).

We know that the challenge of Iceland’s environment was “optimal” for the Vikings because prose sagas and parliamentary politics flourished in Iceland but not in Norway or in Greenland. The circle is complete; we are back at Toynbee’s initial observation. What is remarkable is only that the author, like Rabbit in a (perhaps hazily recollected) Winnie-the-Pooh story, does not appear to recognize where he has led his readers.15

Since the “bleak and barren countryside” in Norway might appear a stern enough test of other peoples, if too yielding for the Vikings, we are left to conclude that what constitutes an “optimal,” “excessively severe,” or “insufficiently severe” challenge is a function of the inner nature of a people as evidenced by its history. This unremarkable proposition is substantiated throughout Toynbee’s discussion of “challenge-and-response,” of which it forms the theoretical core. Nowhere does he offer an independent operational definition of these terms. He does, however, acknowledge various anomalies that might seem to threaten the empirical integrity of his schema. These can be disposed of through such *dei ex machina* as the “law of compensation” that he invokes to explain why the Jews of the Diaspora were subsequently able to “participate in the material prosperity which has been built up by the work of other men’s hands in a country which is not the immigrants’ home,” and why London and Paris were “rewarded doubly” for riverine sites that made them attractive to Viking raiders.16 In his theoretical discussion of his key terms, Toynbee further considers those challenges that have proved too severe for one people, yet an optimal stimulus for another—e.g., the temperate forest of northwestern Europe that so “effectually baffled Primitive Man, unequipped . . . with implements for felling the forest trees, and ignorant of how to turn the rich underlying soil to account by cultivation,” as to drive him “poleward” to the “frozen Tundra”; or the oil-fields in the Azerbaijani wastelands which “challenged one human society after another to master them for human ends before the challenge [was] eventually answered.”17 Here explanation merges so inti-
mately with description of what did in fact happen as to become inextricably entwined.

Toynbee employs similar methods to account for the breakdown and disintegration of civilizations. But at this point it may be more profitable to note a further theoretical curiosity in Toynbee’s schema. *A Study of History* is a study of civilizations—their emergence, their efflorescence, their breakdown, their ultimate disintegration. Toynbee devotes much care to identifying, distinguishing, relating, and classifying the nineteen or more civilizations that he proposes subsequently to discuss. Yet it is one of the more remarkable facts about his treatise that nowhere in the twelve volumes does one encounter either a denotative or an operational definition of the unit to which all his propositions purportedly apply. Insofar as one can infer what Toynbee means by a “civilization” from his use of the term, it would seem to refer to societies in which a spatially extensive division of labor has been given a unifying symbolic expression through an aesthetically distinctive and morally complex religious code. But this definition does not serve very well to identify what most scholars would consider the most important features of “Sinic” civilization, nor does it adequately explain Toynbee’s classification of “Yucatec,” “Mexic,” and “Mayan” civilizations as separate entities.

What the absence of an explicit definition of “civilization” does do, however, is to give Toynbee very considerable theoretical latitude for adjusting his propositions to the data of history. For this purpose it serves admirably. Because Toynbee sometimes implicitly equates distinctive religious orientations with civilizations, he portrays the supersession of “Sinic” civilization by a (Mahayana Buddhist) “Far Eastern” civilization embracing the Yellow and Yangtze River basins of Sinic civilization, the southeast coast of China, Korea, Japan, and—with less certainty—the Chinese interior. On other occasions, however, he finds it convenient to recognize that Japan evolved very largely as an isolated insular kingdom that borrowed selectively from China in the sixth and seventh centuries but blended these borrowings with its own distinctive cultural patterns in a feudal setting radically different from that of the imperial Chinese state. Toynbee discerns an “Iranic” and an “Arabic” civilization “beneath the surface of the tardily and forcibly unified Islamic Society,” but he puzzles many Islamicists by withholding a similar designation from the
"abortive" Ottoman civilization on the ground that it proved insufficiently creative in developing and extending Islamic theology. The puzzle is at least partly resolved, however, when one considers the awkwardness of being otherwise obliged to fit the "premature" emergence of an Ottoman "universal state" into Toynbee's schema. Similarly, the boundary line between "Orthodox Christianity" and "the West" appears to expand and contract with the theoretical exigencies of establishing a rhythm of three and a half "beats" in the "breakdown" of civilizations. And Toynbee, in his eagerness to find cases to demonstrate the pervasive role of "challenge" and "response" in history, draws as freely on sub-divisions within civilizations (e.g., "Dixie-Massachusetts-Maine") as on whole civilizations to prove his point. Such flexibility may add to the apparent plausibility of his propositions. It does persistently raise the question, in the later volumes, of what is emerging or breaking down.

This is indeed a crucial question; and it is a question, as I have indicated, that Toynbee does not squarely address. He does not address it, one may conjecture, because of his assumption—implicit throughout every volume—that all the definitive achievements of a civilization occur synergistically (and therefore more or less simultaneously), with the very important but ambiguous exception of "universal" religions. There is a certain surface plausibility to this assumption. Athenian democracy seemed never more vital than during the construction of the Parthenon; Julius Caesar's Rome was also Virgil's. Shakespeare and Sir Francis Drake both added luster to the reign of "Good Queen Bess"; China's borders reached their outermost extent in the Tang and Qing dynasties during the Golden Ages of pottery, poetry, and painting. But these cases are selectively cited. Machiavelli could write in despair about the unmitigated corruption of Florentine politics in a period in which the Florentine School of painting was reaching its greatest glory. Homer's voice is a lonely one from the "Dark Ages" of Greece; Leibniz independently invented the calculus in a Germany prostrated by the Thirty Years War. And the dimensions of human achievement so correlated are often selectively weighted as well. Spectacular surviving artifacts count for more than those that lie in ruins; aesthetic achievement ranks above practical accomplishment. Two or three brilliant painters endow their contemporaries with a halo
effect and distract attention from a paucity of poets and physicians. Elite culture matters more than general well-being. By what criteria do we judge the *Aeneid* a greater accomplishment than the invention of the steam engine? What calculus enables us to distinguish a "Golden Age" of supreme achievement in three or four creative activities and none in others from a "Silver Age" of high but not quite imperishable attainment in all known fields of human endeavor? What are we to make of evidence that public and private sanitation deteriorated sharply during the European "Renaissance"?

Toynbee is too good an historian to remain oblivious to these anomalies. His solution is characteristic of his approach. In identifying his nineteen civilizations, he appeals to an intuitive sense that civilizations form culturally distinctive and indivisible entities, sometimes citing great architectural monuments, sometimes philosophical tracts, sometimes political institutions to support his case. Since, in this undertaking, he remains unconstrained by any explicit criteria for demarcating his units, he is free to highlight whichever features suit his case in establishing that a civilization *as a whole* has reached one of the phases that his theory requires. It is quite true that Toynbee includes in his study certain subsections devoted to elaborations of "criteria" for "growth," "breakdown," and "disintegration." But inspection reveals that these criteria, often well-stated as abstract formulations, quickly become *ad hoc* illustrations of the process itself. Here the instances of human achievement that fall outside the initial cluster can be selectively passed over or turned to advantage to establish the desired periodicity of "breakdown" and "revival." Contexts dissolve, explanations and illustrations intermingle, and disconfirming data are swept away in a cascade of religious metaphor. The possibility of keeping one's eye on the conformity of any one unit of civilization to Toynbee's "laws" largely disappears in this turbulent flood. Not only Toynbee's magisterial style is implicated in the celebrated "relentless inevitability" of his vision of history. This quality derives even more from his methods themselves.

A sense of inevitability is, of course, very much in accordance with Toynbee's explicit script. The frailty of humanity, the *hubris* to which it is subject in its golden moments, the irresistible rhythms of breakdown and disintegration form the Graeco-
Christian weft across which—especially in his later volumes—he weaves his tapestry of history. But there is yet another sense in which his approach pre-determines his destination. Toynbee’s theoretical posture is that of a disinterested observer who records the emergence of large-scale concentrations of human energy amid undifferentiated small-scale societies; the creasing of this energy in the form of great historic civilizations; and its inexorable subsidence and absorption into an entropic slough. It is very much to his purpose to note the conditions under which such events occur, to label and compare the stages through which civilizations pass, and to draw conclusions concerning the probable fate awaiting our own. What is missing in his pages is any theoretical postulate concerning the motives of the participants in these ventures. Stages unfold; laws are fulfilled; civilizations metaphorically effloresce, bloom, and die. But these collective properties and dynamics of civilizations do not result from the intentions of individual actors, or even from the unintended consequences of their interactions. The laws civilizations follow are “higher” laws—laws revealed by the passage of time, independent of human wish and human design, dissociated from individual behavior and therefore not open to reversal at that level. Toynbee’s conclusion follows: we must seek grace, trusting in a Providence we cannot propitiate.

There is an awesome majesty and mystery in this vision. But there are theoretical costs to it as well. Toynbee’s treatise contains no sustained and consistent model of how human beings learn from experience. The lack of these feedback loops renders indeterminate why some societies respond more effectively than others to challenges. Clearly, some do; and Toynbee can only treat these “correct” responses as happy accidents, manifestations of the “temper” of a people—in essence, as unpredictable and therefore inexplicable. That is not a very satisfactory resolution of an important theoretical issue. The same problem arises in relation to the “breakdown” of civilizations. As soon as one grants that individuals are differentially motivated to persist in collectively self-destructive behavior, and that differing structural arrangements will reinforce or retard such behavior, the theoretically specified expectation that all civilizations will undergo a degenerative process of comparable periodicity becomes puzzling. It may be that over several hundred years the degree of
complex interdependence and the probability of strategic structural rigidities in the face of changing environments is such that by some law of averages all civilizations are doomed to disintegration—but that is a very different argument from the one Toynbee advances.

A Study of History is a magnificent failure. It displays an historical panorama of unrivalled grandeur; it offers a challenging perspective on macro-history; it generates profoundly compelling and analytical problems; it advances a series of stimulating hypotheses concerning its subject matter; it employs juxtapositions and makes connections that are frequently breathtaking in effect. Despite serious questions about its factual arrangements and its interpretations, it maintains an intimate tie between theoretical approach and data; and the scholarly erudition it evidences is almost beyond belief. But it is a failure all the same because—paradoxically—it cannot fail. Its numerous protective devices assure, in a larger sense, its irrefutability. And a theory that is conceptually protected in principle from refutation cannot properly count as an explanation of those relationships it is the distinctive task of the theory to explain.

Micro-Explanation: The Retreat to Induction

Toynbee's failures matter because A Study of History matters. In its scope and depth, as in its length and density of argument, it seems to stand at some probable outer limit of human achievement. Toynbee stumbled into some of the same pitfalls as his predecessors, but he did so by a very much more circuitous and sophisticated route. Since, in the judgment of most critics, he did in the end so stumble, his mishap has been taken as indicative of problems inherent in the enterprise of theoretical macro-history itself.

Contemporary historians have been quick to carry these observations to their logical conclusion. They now tend scrupulously to dwell on the complexity of relationships revealed by empirical microanalysis. Explicitly or implicitly influenced by the methods of Sir Lewis Namier, they have acquired a professionally-induced resistance to simplifying labels, and more readily accord their trust to those who document the social reality such labels
obscure. Confronted by a far more awesome array of historical monographs than the great synthesizers of the past, serious scholars today are inclined to sense a more sustained tension between the pursuit of truth and the search for recurrent patterns. Multi-variant explanations along multiple dimensions—the more the better—signify mastery of the subject matter. The contemplation of history no longer yields vistas of "progress," or of cumulative dialectical opposition, or even of predictable cycles. Historians speak more readily of miscarried intentions, of the insufficient self-consciousness of every era (including their own), of the tragedy—or better, the "irony"—of their subject.

Schematic treatments of human history now almost automatically excite critical suspicion. Because of its symbolic relationship to current political conflicts, Marxist historical analysis forms a case in itself; neither its proponents nor their critics can remain oblivious to the social relevance of their conclusions. More instructive is the fate of other less politically engaged efforts to achieve a macro-historic synthesis. Toynbee's we have already examined. But what of the others? Some of these works—if not those of Vico, then those of Hegel, Buckle, Spencer, and Spengler—attained a certain popular acclaim; and professional historians accordingly felt called upon to point out the factual omissions and distortions, the arbitrary stretching and contraction of crucial categories, required to give plausibility to their bolder generalizations. Today the victory of the critics is complete. Not only are the objects of their criticism effectively discredited; they are very seldom read.

Yet this victory has had its price. It has obscured the costs of eschewing the search for larger patterns in history. Civilizations break down for many reasons. It does not follow that each case of disintegration is unique in the sense that ad hoc explanations must be devised afresh in each case to account for the breakdown. Radical nominalism may be an understandable—even an appropriate—response to the gross categorizations and mechanistic generalizations of a Spencer or a Spengler. But an unqualified rejection of their methods and objectives can constitute a metaphysical dogmatism of its own. Pushed to an extreme, dogmatic nominalism amounts to the contention that organizing discrete historical phenomena into categories and patterns per-
mitting cross-civilizational comparison is intrinsically invalid. It implies that explanations are logically conceivable in forms other than as specific applications of general propositions. Most strikingly, it appears to deny the desirability—let alone the necessity—of economy in thought.

Universalizing the methodological program of close-grained empirical studies seems to do just that. The virtue of revealing the full complexity of human interaction underlying grosser substantive categories has become so evident as to invite the inappropriate corollary that micro-analysis is inherently superior to macro-analysis. There are many difficulties to maintaining this position. One is that it provides no check against its reduction to absurdity: if villages are more “real” than civilizations, then why not concentrate on kinship networks, the nuclear family, the individual, and so on into infinite regress? The obvious answer—that community social systems may have emergent “global” properties not observable in the isolated individual—applies analogously to the costs of reducing civilizations to the villages they contain. Choice of unit for analysis is one of convenience, not of truth. The proper issue is what is gained—and what is given up—by shifting one’s focus among levels of societal organization.

But do civilizations have discernible boundaries in the same sense as villages? Clearly they do not. Villages are typically surrounded by fields; one generally knows when one has crossed a boundary between them, but in any case one cannot be simultaneously present in two villages. Civilizations are more ambiguous entities. In common usage they have (or had) geographical extent and determinate membership. But civilizations are probably more usefully thought of as states of mind—distinctive patterns of orientation—and, as such, they can be said to overlap, coalesce, fade out, or become transmitted across deserts and oceans and over generations. It is not at all self-evident that all elements of a civilization must hang together, or even what constitute the necessary and sufficient elements for defining a civilization; and thus, without impropriety, one may speak of a concrete individual’s being a product of—or “embodying”—two or more civilizations. These ambiguous qualities of civilizations assure ample room for dispute over the characteristics, reach, degree of uniformity, duration, demarcation, and bases for sub-divisions in
discussions of "a" civilization. They also undeniably complicate the problems of speaking coherently and operationally about the "breakdown" or "distintegration" of a civilization.

Since all these points regarding "civilizations" are crucial to a later argument, I do not wish to pursue them here. Rather, I wish to note the impasse to which they lead. For it is precisely such considerations that have given rise to the search for levels of social reality that can satisfy the most stringently nominalist criteria. But if, as I have argued, the methodological canons accompanying the reduction of macro- to micro-units constitute not so much a solution as a strategic retreat, the direction of the advance itself becomes ambiguous. The losses in either case remain as salient as the gains.

One obvious move is simply to side-step the methodological issue altogether. A particularly distinguished instance of this maneuver is William McNeill's *The Rise of the West.* As his subtitle ("A History of the Human Community") more accurately indicates, McNeill aspires to nothing less than presentation of global history on a grand scale. He has proved remarkably successful in this ambitious venture. Not even the most exotic outposts of humanity—New Guinea, Greenland, Easter Island, the upper Amazon Valley—escape his synoptic scrutiny; and McNeill explicitly justifies the limited space he devotes to these regions. The scope of his history is not idle show; for it is one of McNeill's great contributions to generate important new analytical questions through synchronically charting the differential emergence, development, and eventual contact of scattered centers of human activity. At the same time, McNeill quite clearly wishes to avoid the controversies that have brought more schematized treatments of world history into disrepute. He distinguishes the cultural aggregates he calls "civilizations" from smaller-scale, less complex societies; he is very much interested in the diffusion and interleaving of distinctive cultural forms, and he has many plausible and perceptive suggestions to offer regarding the principal sources of the vitality, dominance, and fossilization of the different cultures. But he is careful not to claim an organic unity for the civilizations he studies, and he puts forward no dubious organic analogy to explain their rise and decay.

McNeill's work—to judge from the efflorescence of "world"
histories over the past two decades—has evidently restored the respectability of macro-history in the eyes of many historians. Its influence, however, rests at least in part on McNeill’s decision to forego any attempt at explicit general theorizing. His treatise is studded, to be sure, with striking comparative observations. McNeill is also at some pains to show the systemic pressures that alter the equilibria of dominance among organized foci of human action. Yet the comparisons emerge as flashes of imaginative connection, not as requisite references entailed by his approach; and the systemic adjustments among civilizations, too, are highlighted or passed over in accordance with the author’s sense of their thematic significance. His explanations are those of a learned historian sensitively attuned to the distinctive dynamics of each of the many societies he discusses. What McNeill has accomplished, then, is an imposing compression of human history into a self-consciously selective and sophisticated narrative in which he effectively exploits the multidimensional comparative possibilities of a global perspective. It is a splendid accomplishment; but it is the triumph of an author, not of a method.

The very quality that commends McNeill’s work to normally skeptical professional historians forms also its principal limitation. The Rise of the West is an awesomely eclectic book. McNeill acquires his authority cumulatively through closely argued passages—often long footnotes, in which he shows himself master of an astonishing array of diversified information. His approach obliges him to build his intimately contextual hypotheses concerning the fate of civilizations and proto-civilizations out of a knowledge of the different smelting properties of iron and copper (p. 132, ft. 2), the meteorological characteristics of the South Pacific (pp. 262-264), the subtleties of Bactrian art forms (Plates 70-73), and the importance of alfalfa to Parthian cavalry techniques (p. 352). Civilizations, he implies, are such complex entities that one must keep an open eye and an open mind to the possibility that, in any given case, the most disparate, variegated, and obscure variables may actually, through a chain of complex connections, critically destabilize the equilibrium defining its boundary relations with other civilizations or sustaining its distinguishing institutions. The networks of orientations and relationships we deem civilizations are so intricately compounded of such variables that no lesser approach will do.
McNeill may well be right; but if so, then the task of accounting for the disintegration of civilizations is ultimately hopeless. His imposing achievement obscures, but does not invalidate, this rather bleak proposition. Not only does the methodological corollary of his (and other empiricist historians') approach imply the need for exceptional erudition to master the constellation of variables pertinent to each of a series of historical cases. It does not even suggest a point of departure for further inquiry.

Problems of both kinds beset the inductive models currently favored. Most obviously, much crucial data regarding the more ancient civilizations remains incomplete and unreliable. In many instances, it may well prove irretrievable in any more trustworthy form. Analysts in search of patterns must therefore confront the temptation to endow groups for which data is not available with the statistical properties of individuals on which it is. But a greater difficulty arises in refining and integrating the immense collage of information about past civilizations that has already been unearthed. By any definition, whole civilizations are units of extraordinary complexity. To reconstruct their essential properties and critical relationships in the absence of theoretically established criteria of factual relevance requires a panoptic grasp of detail and entails much uncontrolled selection. The historian of whole civilizations must match climatological and topographical features with trade patterns and techniques of warfare, demographic estimates with personal narratives, religious ideals with daily practice, global developments with what could have been understood of them by members of particular civilizations indifferent historical eras. This task is made immeasurably more complicated by the numerous levels of physical and social organization from which the findings are drawn and the multiplicity of disciplinary perspectives from which they are assessed. One cannot simply aggregate such elements into a comprehensive pattern. Any pretense to theoretical connectedness must be sacrificed in the attempt.

In the work of a skillful analyst like McNeill, these disparate variables and propositions can be fit together with at least literary (if not fully scientific) persuasiveness. But a further question remains: is the purported explanation true? That question is not so easily answered. Even if the total package of explanatory propositions accounts for the data in question, it is still not clear which
elements were necessary and sufficient to that desired end. All could be essential; some could be so, but trivially and dispensably so; some could be false, but outweighed by others that are true. The same considerations apply if the explanation is subsequently falsified. And in either case, it remains unclear which elements should be preserved or rejected in forming an explanation for analogous events in other settings. The temptation therefore grows to pack as many plausible propositions as possible into an explanation since at least some are probably true. In short, this approach leaves readers to deal, not with theories that deserve increasing confidence because of their ability to withstand cumulative testing, but with analysts who obtain that confidence through their argumentative skills, their demonstrable knowl-
edgeability, and their success in appealing to the reader’s own sense of probabilities. The route they follow is one that has borne much traffic; but for all that, it is none the more likely to lead in the end to an accurate and economical identification of the critical systemic determinants of the fate of civilizations.

Criteria for a General Theory of Civilization

The preceding survey points to four somewhat paradoxical conclusions. Civilizations as objects of conceptual representation are highly complex and variegated entities. The causes of their disintegration are accordingly almost surely multiple. Precisely because civilizations are so complex, however, and because the causes of their disintegration are so various, historians have acted prematurely in abandoning the quest for general macro-
historical theories that can potentially simplify and order the objects and processes to be explained. But finally, this quest cannot properly be pursued through employing nonoperational concepts yielding tautological truths.

These conclusions carry certain methodological corollaries. Together the corollaries establish criteria that any macro-
historical theory must meet if it is to hold much promise. These criteria are both negative and positive.

Negatively, these criteria require:

1. That the theory provide theoretically specified boundaries to what is to be explained. If a civilization is thought of as the total set of distinctive metaphysical, religious, aesthetic, technological, political, and
interactive patterns of orientation within a large-scale society, then providing an explanation for changes within that set is probably beyond the reach of any general theory except at the price of arbitrary selectivity. The effective thrust of this criterion is to raise questions about the feasibility of developing systematically interconnected propositions applying to any unit conceived in these terms.

2. That the theory avoid postulating a systemic unity for which there is no evidence among the variables defining civilizations and then making that unity a predicate of further analysis. To treat civilizations as basic objects for analysis presupposes that the complexes of patterns that differentiate them can validly be grouped within mutually exclusive boundaries. It further requires the analyst to show that the various elements within a complex so segregated will respond sensitively to a change in any one component pattern. Until it establishes that civilizations have determinate boundaries and internal systemic coherence, any theory that treats civilizations as social units rather than as labels of convenience remains suspect. In particular, writers such as Spengler and Toynbee build a misleading premise into their analyses in their unsubstantiated prediction that a civilization as a whole can be said to "rise" or "fall."

3. That the theory leave space for both accident and design, for both natural catastrophe and human error, in accounting for the forces contributing to the disintegration of civilizations. A theory that is obliged to deny such forces denies empirically ascertainable reality. But since no theory can encompass all such stresses on civilizations except through tautology or radical rejection of the criterion of explanatory economy, the search for comprehensive explanations in this area appears misplaced. A general theory of disintegration can only be contingent; it cannot be expected to do more than indicate systemic tensions and strategic vulnerabilities that will become catabolic when triggered by exogenous forces.

4. That the theory eschew deterministic analogies, organic or mechanical, that imply inevitable stages through which all civilizations must pass. Such analogies are the source of misplaced efforts to force the historical data of civilizations into periodicities in order to establish a symmetry of processes and outcomes. Since the necessity for the "laws" to which civilizations are held to be subject is itself typically unexplained, these efforts are usually gratuitous.
To hold promise, a macro-historical theory of civilizations should have at least two further properties:

5. It should establish connections between systemic outcomes (e.g., the "breakdown" of a civilization) and individual action in terms that make the latter the primary endogenous source of explanations for the former. Insofar as the outcome is not attributable to exogenous forces (e.g., seismic sea waves) that by definition fall outside the predictive range of the theory, it should be predictable—and therefore explicable—as the consequence of actions undertaken by human beings with systematically attributable motives. To make this connection, one need not argue the implausible—that the fate of civilizations directly reflects the intentions of their members. It is enough to show that the logic of the situation confronting individual actors is such that the aggregate effect of their predictable behavior will correspond (in the absence of significant exogenous forces) to that fate.

6. As a necessary condition for meeting the preceding requirement, the theory should contain only such variables as can be systematically related to one another. In a sense, this condition is merely an element of any definition of a theory. An explanation that fuses meteorological conditions, military technology, profit motives, and the will of God into a non-additive aggregate may in fact provide a quite realistic account of why a particular civilization disintegrated. It cannot be said, on the other hand, to have any of the qualities that make theories useful devices for simplification, generalization, and contingent prediction.

Taken together, these six criteria all point to the same conclusion. A macro-historical theory that can meet them is not likely to be of service in explaining fully and directly the disintegration of total civilizations. Civilizations are likely to remain beyond the direct reach of such theories because civilizations as objects of conceptual representation are simply too ill-defined, too heterogeneous, too complex. There is no reason to suppose they can accurately be represented as integrated systems, and none for thinking that they follow laws deriving from the predictable consequences of the interaction of individuals with systematically ascribable motives. Accordingly, the pursuit of general theories to account for their breakdown in these terms is probably a futile endeavor.
A very simple shift of focus may suffice to point a way out of this impasse. Civilizations as such are probably not amenable to incorporation in a general theory of societal catabolism; but the political regimes that form their civic core quite possibly may be subject to such laws. It is the central argument of this essay that an attempt of this nature at general theory holds promise, and that by identifying certain crucial elements in the disintegration of the great historic bureaucratic empires one may contribute in a theoretically manageable way to an explanation of the disintegration of the civilizations in which they were embedded.

Two questions must be addressed to make this contention plausible. If one switches the focus from civilizations to empires, the shift of focus implies some reason for thinking that a general theory of the disintegration of such regimes can meet the six criteria of the preceding section more effectively than a theory that directly addresses the fall of civilizations. One should therefore be expected to indicate why a political theory of imperial regimes might have greater success in fulfilling these criteria. It will then still be necessary to consider the metaphorical assertion that the historic bureaucratic empires formed the “core” of their civilizations.

By definition, a political system forms a single analytic plane on which to order the variables to be explained by a general theory. One may think of a political system as a theoretical construct corresponding to those aspects of human action directed toward acquiring, managing, or influencing the management of the power to make decisions that collectively and effectively bind the members of a total society or its subdivisions. Analytically abstracting these aspects from the totality of human activity assures in principle that one can systematically coordinate propositions concerning political action without category error in a manner demarcating endogenous political variables from the exogenous variables of the residual realm of human action and of the natural world.

Shifting one’s theoretical focus to sets of political interactions that can be represented by conceptual systems has the very important additional advantage of taking behavioral systems with rela-
tively determinate boundaries as the units for analysis. The boundaries among these units are demarcated by jurisdictional proclamations and agreements that specify who is bound—or whom political leaders are attempting to bind—through purportedly collective decisions. But what can justify the internal conceptual unity implied by the term political system? The justification derives directly from the logic of the situation implicit in the conceptualization of politics as the attempt to acquire or manage the power to make collectively binding decisions with reference to a total social unit. The struggle to acquire or exercise sovereign power in this sense necessarily implicates all those who seek it or who are bound by the outcome. It obliges all political actors to remain attentive to effective challenges to the defining rationale for political states—namely, the claim to a monopoly over the legitimate use of force as a predicate of the sovereign power to make collectively binding decisions. Breaches of this monopoly may occur routinely in feudal systems, during expanding guerrilla or civil wars, in instances of neo-colonialism, or in those settings in which the “national” government’s writ scarcely runs beyond the capital city or proves ineffectual in confrontations with corporate groups. But given the logic of political action, such disarticulation of the power to make binding decisions for a jurisdictionally defined unit remains inescapably consequential for all political participants, who, if they do not simply evade attempts to make such decisions effectively binding, must enter into relationship ranging from negotiation to open warfare. Even under conditions of political disarticulation, their interactions may be said to form a system.

The systemic implications of the struggle to assert or disarticulate political sovereignty permit one to give operational meaning to the concepts of “breakdown” and “distintegration.” The “breakdown” of a political system may be said to occur when the participants in a formally integrated polity begin to predicate their actions upon perceptions of the government’s generalized incapacity to manipulate politically strategic variables in accordance with its goals.31 “Distintegration,” which Toynbee distinguishes from “breakdown,” may be thought of as a limiting condition in which this incapacity has become so manifest that a government’s efforts to assert its authority simply cease to form consequential premises in the decisions of other actors within the
former system. When this degree of political entropy has been reached, the very concept of a “system” as an interrelated set of variables theoretically differentiated from an “environment” ceases to have an empirical referent.

To focus on the implications of sovereignty for the ordering of political action is not, however, to proclaim the sovereignty of politics as a causal force in society. In demarcating endogenous and exogenous forces, the concept of a political system in no sense denies the potential significance of an irruption into the political arena of such exogenous forces and a volcanic explosion, religious chiliasm, or an invader profiting from a sudden shift in the balance of military technologies. What it does do—all it can do—is to specify the elements that will be implicated in mediating these forces within the system and how such elements will interact. Disease is not an endogenous political phenomenon; but how the collective forces of a society are deployed in response to an epidemic quite clearly is. No general theory of political systems could anticipate the coming of a Pizarro to Peru; but such a theory could be expected to reveal the structural vulnerabilities of the exceptionally centralized Andean Empire that led to its swift disintegration following Pizarro’s capture of the Great Inca. Like any other scientific theory, a theory of political systems is quite properly contingent: it specifies a determinate relationship among its variables, but it does not predict that the fate of any particular political order will unfold in a predestined sequence. Whether and when an actual political system disintegrates is left, within the theory, to the mutable play of natural forces and human choice.

But if an analysis of political systems offers advantages not open to those who seek to construct similar theories to account for the basic processes of civilizations, the question remains of how to connect the fate of the empirical political systems of the past to the civilizations in which they were embedded. To justify this somewhat synecdochic undertaking, it will be helpful to consider various possible relationships between historical political systems and the more diffuse and broadly encompassing patterns of orientation we call civilizations before considering the validity of taking a political part for a cultural whole.

Four broad patterns emerge from an inspection of past civilizations. In some cases, a single identifiable civilization embraced
numerous sovereign political entities. The Greek city states, though leagued in defense of a common culture against the Persians, had quite obviously reverted to acting as independent sovereign entities by the time of the Peloponnesian Wars. The medieval caliphates of Baghdad and Córdoba stood at opposite ends of a self-consciously and aspirantly unitary Muslim civilization. Conversely, certain empires—most conspicuously, the Achaemenid, Roman, and Mughal—included elements of more than one distinct civilization within their jurisdictional borders. Among those instances in which a single bureaucratic empire was more or less coterminous with the effective geographical extent of a civilization, two further possibilities can be found. In some cases, an alternative social institution (typically, a church or cadre of literati) so powerfully knit a common cultural system together as to preserve the unity of a civilization throughout fluctuations in the fortunes of the corresponding political order. The collapse of the Maurya and Gupta empires did not fundamentally disrupt the continuity of Hindu civilization at a time when it was still largely limited to the Indian “sub-continent,” since this civilization had always been firmly anchored in the caste system in any case. The Western Christian and Chinese civilizations likewise survived the disruption of the spatially coterminous Carolingian and Chinese dynastic empires. In contrast, the fate of the Persian, Egyptian, Aztec, and Andean civilizations shows that at some point the survival of a civilization may become inextricably dependent on the survival of the corresponding political regime.

The destruction of the Achaemenid, Sassanid, Aztec, and Andean empires was so complete, and so intimately associated with the continued coherence of the civilizations they defended, as to raise few issues concerning the concept of continuity in either sphere. Other cases are more problematic. About the only point on which historians of Rome are now in full agreement is that the selection of 476 A.D. as the date of the “fall” of the Western Empire is at best one of convenience. Byzantine civilization was more definitively brought to a close in its original heartland with the conquest of Constantinople and its conversion into Istanbul by Sultan Mehmed II in 1453, but by that time Russian Orthodox patriarchs had already made clear their intention to establish a “Third Rome” in Moscow. To speak of the Egyptian and Chinese “empires” is to obscure the fact that often only geographical
isolation concealed the degree of political entropy in these regions during the "times of troubles" between dynasties. In the Chinese case, a dynastic name—as in the decision to refer to the period 618-907 A.D. as the period of "Tang" China despite the devastating disruption wrought by the An Lu-Shan and Huang Chao rebellions of 715 and 874 respectively—has had much the same effect.

Regardless of the historical patterns of congruence and the conceptual problems of defining continuity, it can be argued that the great bureaucratic empires of the past were so strategically embedded within their encompassing civilizations as to constitute the single most important matrices of the determinants that shaped the latters' fate. As instances of the simultaneous destruction of an empire and a coterminous civilization make obvious, the political system must frequently be depended upon to mobilize and deploy the military force necessary to fend off invaders bent not only on seizing territory but on extirpating the distinctive cultural practices associated with that territory. State assurance of some minimal level of internal security is even more evidently an indispensable condition for the emergence of any civilization at all, as Thomas Hobbes quite unforgettably contended. But effective and broadly extensive political systems are also well placed in a positive sense to generate or to extract the "surplus" societal resources required to create and sustain—whether directly, as in the construction of the pyramids, or through infra-structural support of universities, churches, academies, and communication systems—the artifacts and symbols by which a civilization becomes defined. While the examples of Hellenic philosophy, Dutch painting, and church-building in feudal France are a reminder that organized state support is neither a sufficient nor even a directly necessary condition for the creation of a high culture, for much of the world the definitive culture of a civilization has been the culture of a court. In some societies—Balinese, Javanese, and Cambodian are said to be instances—the function of the political order is held to have been precisely that of providing a material exemplification of cultural ideals.

One could readily adduce further examples—including the characteristic exchange relationships through which emperors have sought and have generally obtained clerical sanction to claim
divine ordination for their rule—to elaborate the decisive connection between the political and cultural orders of past civilizations. As this last instance suggests, these connections were so widely recognized at the time as to have become institutionalized in many civilizations. It may therefore be more useful to emphasize what these rituals portend. Political symbols and ceremonies have been everywhere so organized as to emphasize the collective nature of the decisions taken by those who occupy authoritative positions within the hierarchies created by a political division of labor. However plural the nature of the social communities held formally accountable to these decisions, it remains very much to the interest (though not always to the perceived interest) of those who occupy the top positions within political hierarchies to economize on the use of force by identifying themselves with the unifying symbols of the most comprehensive cultural unit corresponding to their jurisdiction. Rulers have a powerful incentive to fuse the cultural and political identities of those whom they cannot afford to segregate or dominate; and when a significant spatial correspondence exists between total civilizations and political empires, the logic of this strategy implies that those who rule the latter will seek to intertwine the two in a common destiny.

In the heady days of decolonization, the Ghanaian leader Kwame Nkrumah declared in self-consciously Jacobean cadences, “Seek ye first the political kingdom, and all else will follow.” The subsequent history of Ghana—indeed, of all Africa—has shown his advice to be overly simple in its application to developmental politics. As a guide to the study of civilizations, however, his proposition has much to recommend it. To focus on the political dynamics of the historical empires is, in large measure, to focus also on the implicated cluster of variables which in their interaction have repeatedly tied the prospects for civilizations to the fate of their embedded political systems.

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NOTES


5. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 2 vols. (New York: The Modern Library, n.d.), Ch. 71; cf. also Ch. 15. In his subsequent inventory of the “four principal causes of the ruin of Rome,” however, Gibbon “reserved for the last and most potent and forceful causes of destruction, the domestic hostilities of the Romans themselves” (p. 1448).


8. Consider William McNeill’s suggestion that the Roman Empire may have been brought to an end less by Christianity, taxation policy, dependence on an imperial border army, and the irruption of barbarians than by such factors as the Roman aristocracy’s custom of bathing in very hot water, which kills the sperm of male bathers (a hypothesis that renders the survival of the Japanese over two millenia somewhat problematic). McNeill, *op. cit.* (Ft. I), p. 392, Ft. 109.


11. Ashley Montagu has collected a representative sampling of such criticisms in *Toynbee and History: Critical Essays and Reviews* (Boston: P. Sargent Co., 1956). The essays by Pieter Geyl and Pitirim Sorokin are especially useful on the broader methodological issues. See also Edward Gargan (ed.), *The Intent of Toynbee’s History* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1961).


18. *Op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 51-146. Although Toynbee explicitly says at one point that his survey of human history yields nineteen civilizations (p. 129), both he and various critics seem to think on some occasions that he
has brought anywhere from twenty-three to thirty-three civilizations within his purview. The uncertainty seems to derive from the status of “fossil” (Tibetan Lamaistic), “abortive” (Celtic), or “arrested” (Ottoman) civilizations in later chapters, and from his decision to subdivide his “Orthodox” and “Far Eastern” civilizations.


23. These attitudes were at one time said to characterize primarily historians of the “Anglo-Saxon” tradition. But despite the greater enthusiasm on the Continent for Marxist, “structuralist,” and other forms of nomothetic historical writing, the models provided by such well-received community studies as Emmanuel Ladurie’s Montaillou, village occitan de 1294 a 1324 (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1975) and Jacques Gernet’s study of medieval Hangchow, Daily Life in China on the Eve of the Mongol Invasion (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1962)—not only in the specific achievement of their “thick-textured” reconstruction but equally in their insistent disaggregation of larger organizing concepts and generalizations—suggest that a similar trend is on the ascendant there as well.

24. The “irony” of history is the constant theme of Herbert J. Muller’s thoughtful The Uses of the Past (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952). See also Hayden White, Meta-History (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1974).

25. An exception must be made for Hegel, whose Philosophy of History is often studied as part of a reviving interest in his general philosophy. Oswald Spengler is recalled as author of an unread treatise with a memorable title; Spencer inaccurately occupies a symbolic status in newspaper columns as an unqualified prophet of laissez-faire. The obscurity of Buckle is close to complete.


27. Interestingly, the sociological theorist Talcott Parsons’s Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall Inc., 1964)—a work radically different from McNeill’s in analytic approach—appeared at approximately the same date and has had a somewhat similar effect among social scientists.

28. Cf. the encomium by H. R. Trevor-Roper, on other occasions an exceptionally acerbic critic of such macro-historians as Arnold Toynbee:

This is not only the most learned and the most intelligent, it is also the most stimulating and fascinating book that has ever set out to recount and explain the whole history of mankind. . . . How do civilizations change their form? How did the West acquire a character so different from its rivals? These are tantalizing questions, which many philosophers have sought to answer with easy generaliza-
George Von der Mühll

... or in a prophetic voice. Mr. McNeill adopts the hard way. He has tackled the most intricate problems of history, sociology, economics; he has used the evidence of archaeology, religion, technology, and art. His scholarship is impressive alike in its range and exactitude...

(New York Times Book Review, June 7, 1964)

30. For a more general discussion of the problems of inductive empiricism, see Popper, op. cit. (Pt. 23).

31. A somewhat similar formulation is employed throughout Juan Linz's The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Crisis, Breakdown, and Reequilibration (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

32. The Levithan, many editions, Ch. 13.