Matthew Melko. The Nature of Civilizations

William E. Edwards

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

Recommended Citation
BOOK REVIEWS

PRESCIENT SUMMATION


Just over two decades after the excellent 1969 summary by one of the pioneers in the multidisciplinary synthesis of comparative civilizations, it seems time for a retrospective evaluation. I was struck by the lucidity and ready comprehensibility of Matt Melko’s informal writing style. Like H. G. Wells, he encourages reading by brief, compact sections of larger chapters. Even more significant is his obvious familiarity with a broad range of materials and diverse investigators with 98 sources incorporated in well-balanced presentations. Nor does Melko side-step the most difficult issues. Fortunately, his ambivalence regarding footnotes was resolved by extensive chapter-end notes—often even more illuminating than the main body of text. Also valuable are the listings of sources at the end of each chapter. Since I disagree with so much expressed by all other students, Melko’s statements which in my evaluation are incorrect or improbable are unexpectedly sparse, though emphasized in my discussion here.

Chapter 1, “The Concept of Civilizations,” provides the greatest number of differences with my views. Although I agree that recurrences in “comparative history” tend to be both numerous and close, this is because of similar causation, which Melko seems to downgrade; complex feedback interrelationships constitute a form of causation. I hold that interpretation of differences (in which both chance and cumulative effects play major roles) should not be relatively ignored, as Melko’s emphasis on recurrences seemingly implies (but see his “. . . Anomalies” section). Melko reassuringly “leans” toward the anthropologist’s most basic distinction between society and culture; but disappointingly some persisting confusion is still reflected. Likewise, I have never found any reasonable alternative to what Kroeber taught me 40 years ago, before his collaboration with Kluckhohn: civilization is simply complex culture, and (not clearly conflicting with Melko) only arbitrarily delimited definitionally (that is, in terms of requisites), synchronically (demographic and cultural boundaries) and diachronically (historical transformations). Melko and I agree that civilizations are integrated, however varying and imperfectly—not a mere congeries of historically intermixed complexities; Melko’s presentation here is excellent. But the universal conception (p. 8) that economic advantages confer a food surplus is fallacious; “surplus” is vital but with rare and only transitory exceptions is produced by coercive extraction of good from recurrently hungry farmers. The nature and origin of surplus, the most
fundamental requirement of both civilizations and cities, was not perceived until recognized by me long before but not published until after this book. Greater positive (trade) and negative (war) interaction between states within a civilization than outside is implied by Melko to be the result of sharing more culturally. More fundamentally is shared natural environment and propinquity. The "steady" state of many primitive cultures seems exaggerated, as even functionalist Malinowski's observation illustrate.

Regarding Chapter II, "How Civilizations Develop," quibblers can always find a few flaws: Mexicans had writing, Mesopotamians had empires, and other civilizations had isolation equivalent to Egyptians (p. 39). As in biological evolution, synchronous cultures manifest various taxonomic levels analogous to species, order, and phylum. Historically, these taxons are, like their biotic counterparts, constantly metamorphosing, diverging, diffusing (though in organisms limited to intraspecific variants), and terminating (usually by competitive displacement). Because nobody else had supplied a 12-volume mass of relevant data and interpretations, Toynbee was understandably perhaps overly emphasized by Melko, though properly in most instances he only summarizes Toynbee's mostly highly doubtful generalizations and interpretations alongside others' contrasting views, without advocating or rejecting. Although some Toynbee pronouncements are accepted, for others skepticism is indicated, as of Toynbee's almost entirely fallacious concept of "challenge" causation. Toynbee asserted that a civilization's geographic expansion does not manifest success but disintegration (p. 148). Such distortions reflect a common fallacy in historical interpretations: even if "life cycles" are intrinsic to civilizations—and at least some such tendency is clear, however vague and varied in form and chronology—a rapidly progressing young professional should not be considered in his dotage simply because we know the destination of paths of glory. The nature of what has been recorded led Toynbee vastly to exaggerate the role of migration. Even when migration was highly significant, as in recurrent westward waves from eastern and central Asia, they were usually but briefly en masse and with the encouraging of denser populations were culturally absorbed almost as thoroughly as biologically by the ostensibly overwhelmed and mostly displaced predecessors (invading Hungs, Finns, and Turks). Migrations by North American Indians commonly ensued from aboriginal depopulation, mostly by European diseases abetted by the effects of warfare promoted by European economic and power politics. The unprecedented migration from Europe of the past few centuries was powered by acceleration in technological evolution to produce unique differentials in warfare capacity. Now we know that civilizations were invented more than once; my insular theory shows how and where, and the "compelling reason" for civilization is primarily cultural selection. With Toynbee, Spengler, and among others occasionally even Kroeber at times crossing the boundary between science and metaphysics, an apparently extreme example is Bower's fluctuations between energy and complexity (p. 37).
With such fuzzy analysis, the developmental lag in that which by Melko's approach could be a purely scientific multidiscipline is hardly surprising. “In Defense of Determinism” is original and excellent. “Political and Economic Patterns” is another fine chapter (III), but it contains a few lapses: “states represent attempts to solve” certain feudal problems overcredits individuals and rationality; “the recurrent development of [states] suggests the most effective response” is mostly invalid, because states reflect the tendency to conquest and the effects of cultural selection. “Normally defense has an advantage…” is true only for my warfare Stage II, typified by fortified city-states. In Warfare Stage I, attackers maintained an advantage from the dim past when warfare began—an advantage which persisted until the development of II's effective defensive works (Jericho’s walls and tower of 7000 B.C. earliest known; many Mycenaean acropolises until unsustainable by Dark Age depopulation; the Aztecs’ artificial island-city; occasionally primarily natural features like Masada or Pueblo cliff-dwellings). In Stage III the advantage reverted to aggressors (third millennium Akkadians with siege machinery, long eschewed by Greeks but adopted over the entire Mediterranean after Alexander). Rome’s fall effected a reversion to II and in large areas even to I. Although Upper Egypt, Macedonia, and northernmost China are lumped by Melko as peripherals (p. 50), unification of Egypt could have originated, a millennium before Melko’s unifier Mentuhotep, according to my insular theory, nowhere but in the attenuated area “far up the Nile.” Very different was conquest by the Macedonian Philip, with his cavalry phalanx in an area mostly lacking the relatively stable Stage II city-states of Greece. Quite distinct from both the others was consolidation by the cumulative effect of Chinese crossbows, cavalry, and a series of exceptional statesmen culminating, a century after Philip, in the First Emperor, Shih Hwang-ti. Melko (p. 53) correctly doubts both the usually invalid supposed fostering of unity by polarization, and the promoting of more states by a balance of power (Toynbee and Wright). Minor states can reduce stability, unless a dominant power has sufficiently consolidated them that they no longer comprise truly independent polities (Roman “allies” vs. Hannibal), and thereby promote empire instead of balance. The effects of hypermilitarism render the view of Melko (and Toynbee for universal states) of ready restoration of feudal and state systems exaggerated in my view (e.g., post-Roman history). The courage to support a minority generalization and, even more, to suggest a novel one is commendable: thus science advances. “A primitive society has never developed a state system without undergoing a feudal phase” seems inductively reasonable but has nevertheless experienced myriad refutations. In Virginia, Powhatan’s true conquest-state, however transitory about 1600, was quickly developed directly from minute, unconsolidated tribal units. Likewise, rapid unification of Egypt, with the Delta quite certainly never consolidated but conquered piecemeal from the attenuated river valley, can be confidently interpreted by insular theory generalizations as never
having experienced a feudal phase (which, unlike Virginia's Stage I would fairly surely have produced rapid fortification and II's relative invincibility). Versus Coulbourn, very few if any Greeks about 950 B.C. could claim nonprimitive status: as at Catal Huyuk and Old Indus, the less complex the civilization the greater its fragility. Thus I find the models (pp. 54-57) stimulating and suggestive of mostly but not universally valid general principles. "Patterns of War" makes many good points, with examples; but the rational altruism of "... an empire might be the most tempting solution" has been at most very rare, though exceptions may include Haremhab and Chao Kwang-yin. Similarly, if Philip while a Greek hostage identified with his companions, recognized their chronic political problem, and read the unification solution long before proposed by Herodotus, he largely as a self-anointed public savior might have decided on rectification. I also doubt the generalization that power gravitates to the center in transitional times (p. 60). "Patterns of Government" is in fact filled with principles of appreciable value—to whatever extent they may be consistently valid. Regarding "Economic Patterns," initially urbanization is accomplished only by the coercion of a food surplus, as noted above. As usual, the Notes here are highly significant.

Since this review, despite omitting most observations, is becoming overly lengthy, it is well that I feel less inclined to comment on Chapter IV, "Intellectual and Emotional Patterns," except to note that the indicated dichotomy in all societies between primarily material versus primarily spiritual individuals asserts far more intercultural similarity than actually exists. Yet all of "Attitudes toward Society" (pp. 78-86), such as: 'Federations require . . . considerable patience and vitality. Empires require only general acquiescence, is exceptionally good.

In "A Model of Development," Chapter V, the elaborate chart of characteristics of feudal to state to imperial systems (pp. 102-103), supplemented by even more extensive tables (pp. 105-107) seems, as Melko recognizes, overly complex, generalized, and ambitious for 1969's developmental stage or today's. Yet this must be highly commended as a courageous, synthesizing summary which is both stimulating and helpful in organizing masses of data for all students of civilizational history. It is far easier to improve an imperfect model than to formulate one de novo.

"The Feudal System" does not provide a good general description of "... the first step beyond a nomadic or other subsistence culture. . . ." "The Time of Troubles" is a fascinating section but indicates far more uniformity than has existed, as to a lesser extent does "The Japan System." The foregoing generalizations are evaluated in "Does the Model Work?" (pp. 133-135), which ignores all but political forms and the complications arising from intercivilizational contact. A generalization is declared successful if it applies to a majority of independent cases. By such a meaninglessly generous 50.1% criterion, it never rains even briefly a single day in this country's wettest major city, Seattle.
In VI, "When Civilizations Collide," transmission and conflict between civilizations are considered. Survival of Peruvian civilization (Steward) and whether civilizations rearise (Toynbee) are interestingly discussed. Very incomplete survivals have long persisted, but the contention that: "So far there has been no case of a civilization in such a [well established pattern] phase being destroyed by another" is simply untrue. "When destroyed, its patterns have already been in disintegration [as in] American civilizations, or it was [a] Toynbee . . . 'abortive.'" Such claims can only be validated by redefinition after the facts to fit the preconception. Of the twelve civilizations "on which there is reasonable agreement" (p. 133), the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Cretan, Middle American, and Andean were in no instance destroyed by internal disintegration but, though in some cases weakened environmentally or socially, were destroyed by one or more foreign conquerors. One partial exception consists of Minoans, destroyed by Mycenaean nonlinguistic but cultural (Cycladian common ancestry) cousins, who 300 years later, in rare support of Toynbee, went down fighting each other. The other partial exception is the Mayan branch of Middle American—a branch which, when mostly eradicated by Spaniards, was still rebuilding from tenth century Classic Maya collapse, due to soil overutilization or, somewhat as Thera's eruption may just possibly have triggered sufficient social disruption to tilt the Minoan scale to the Mycenaens, due to an external environmental determinant: drought, excessive rainfall, locusts, maize blight, or epidemic disease; but a Toynbeean econotheocratic breakdown might also have been the cause. If Indian includes Old Indus, that civilization was likely primarily destroyed, if not by environmental deterioration, by Vedic horse-drawn chariot invasion roughly 1700 B.C., with in any case uncertain proportionate survival in recent Indian cultures after much further loss and change by Mongol and other conquests. Classical and Byzantine have been largely destroyed and transformed beyond recognition in most respects by a combination of internal decline and external incursions. Only the Chinese, Japanese (some half Chinese by the eighth century, with accelerating borrowings from Western after 1868), Islamic (also the product mostly of Mesopotamian and other ancestral as well as neighbouring civilizations), and Western (largely Classical-derived and Islamic-influenced) have withstood destruction. Thus Toynbee's claims of nondestruction though accepted by Melko and many other students as well, are in my view mostly discredited—except regarding the necessarily in large part subjective relative weighting of the internal decline of the "disintegrating" civilian versus external factors, including demographic increase, technological progress, and increased organizational effectiveness and improved (or at least better-maintained) "morale." In any case, rise and decline in cultural selection must be viewed not in absolute but in relative terms. Internal improvement in respect to regional cultural selection did not assure Aztecs or Incas of survival when distant civilizations, with much longer evolving civilizational bases, were acceleratingly increasing technological and organizational differentials.
"The Barbarian Menace" is well discussed, including recognition, rare among those social scientists who should be constantly aware of its basic crucialness, of population growth rates and effects. But its final assumptions and conclusion that some of the peripheral areas may emerge as the centers of new civilizations are at best questionable. All such populations, even the Chinese, are being Westernized at an accelerating pace, however long ancestral traditions may decliningly persist.

In Chapter VII, "The Civilization to End All Civilizations," Melko asserts that Western Civilization is not in a class by itself and does not threaten the development of all other civilizations. As an anthropologist, emotionally I would like to agree, but rationally I cannot. For three million years, cultures have evolved and diversified, but with accelerating complexity and politicomilitary differentials. Western Civilization has won the race. Henceforth it will, assuming no nuclear self-destruction, acceleratingly diffuse through all other cultures and areas, with English (a lowly seventh in numbers even among Indoeuropeans two centuries ago) almost surely the universal language. Of course, some regional diversification will continue to form, but overshadowed by the trend to homogenization, especially through improving, expanding mass media. Yet this does not mean that future culture is fixed for all time; to the contrary, Western Civilization, especially in technology, is changing acceleratingly. So in 2490 worldwide culture will in many respects be more different from that of 1990 than present civilization differs from that of Mesopotamia in 3010 B.C.—again assuming we survive at all. But by then we will be exploring and, where suitable alterable conditions exist, colonizing other portions of our galaxy. In time, distance isolation may suffice to effect a higher rate of galactic cultural differentiation than further homogenization. (Already, despite the predominant trend to biological homogenization, we are evolving in the most fundamental organic respects at a far faster pace than our ancestors ever did). The trick will be to muddle through the next century or so.

In conclusion, Matt Melko's The Nature of Civilizations, despite my concentration on points of difference for more value to the reader, was not only an excellent book in its day but still provides a sound, prescient (only in part due to Melko's subsequently taking the lead in channeling many of comparative civilizations' investigatory paths), fascinating, well-written, remarkably concise, yet comprehensive summary of this new, uniquely broad discipline, any summary of which presents the author with an enormous challenge as most tend to learn more and more about less and less. I learned a lot from this book. If you haven't read it for many years, you can too. I urge that it soon be republished, either with relatively few revisions or more readily prepared addenda following updated sources at the end of each chapter. Meanwhile, at least some copies, enough for some to consider as a supplementary text for various courses, are fortunately still available from the publisher.

William E. Edwards