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CIVILIZATION IN CONTEXT*

Roger Williams Wescott

The purpose of this presentation is neither to provide new detail about civilization, nor to reach definitive conclusions about the connection between civilization and related phenomena. It is, rather, to put forward what the late Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan called “probes”—that is, explorations of ideas that may serve to expand or to reorient our perspectives on civilization and on ways in which the study of civilization either enriches or is enriched by other fields of investigation, both established and emergent. In this task of seeking to liberate the scholarly imagination, I shall, as far as seems feasible, deliberately minimize my use of scholarly apparatus.

In so doing, I shall assert what one American geologist, some decades ago, termed “the value of outrageous hypotheses.” The value of such hypotheses, needless to say, is not that they invariably, or even usually, prove to be sources of generally accepted theory. It is that unlikely-sounding ideas, when seriously and responsibly propounded, stimulate us to rethink our basic assumptions. Even if, after reconsideration, we reaffirm our earlier conclusions or draw closer than before to the conventional wisdom, we will probably have more explicit and more persuasive reasons for doing so than mere reference to majority opinion.

The seven contexts of civilization that I would like to discuss here are these:

1. the biological context
2. the linguistic context
3. the diachronic context
4. the ritual context
5. the mythic context
6. the iconographic context
7. the noetic context

they were besieged. (Sanchez Macedo, op. cit. p. 188.)
1. The Biological Context

In theory, most humanists and social scientists readily acknowledge the fact that human beings are organisms of one species, living in a world inhabited by a multiplicity of species. In practice, however, they tend to ignore this fact on the grounds that it is too obvious to belabor. It is for this very reason that I intend to give our biological characteristics, both established and putative, more than the amount of attention that might be expected, even from an anthropologist.

It is my contention that man is a thalassic organism, three times over. The term "thalassic" means "of, or pertaining to, the sea," although the sea in question can be anything from a salty ocean through a large and brackish lake to a broad fresh-water river. The first sense in which we are thalassic is a virtual truism—at least for those who accept the probability of organic evolution. During the Devonian Period (of the Paleozoic Era), consensually dated about 350 to 400 million years ago, our most likely lineal ancestors were fish, whose bony spines, strong jaws, and saline blood we have directly inherited. During the post-Devonian ages, however, our forebears became progressively less thalassic, as they moved, through an amphibian stage in the Carboniferous Period and a reptilian stage in the Permian Period, to a mammalian stage in the Mesozoic Era.

Few paleontologists dispute that our mammalian ancestors were placental insectivores toward the end of the Mesozoic, becoming increasingly arboreal primates early in the Cenozoic Era that followed it.

The first major mystery in tracing the phylogeny of human evolution occurs in the Pliocene Epoch, conventionally dated about 5 to 15 million years ago. During the Miocene Epoch which preceded the Pliocene, our ancestors were indistinguishable from those of the other great apes, all of which were tailless hominoids rather comparable in size to the bonobos, or pygmy chimpanzees, of Africa today. During the Pleistocene Epoch which followed the Pliocene, on the other hand, all of our lineal forebears seem to have been bipedal hominoids of a type unique among primates and rare among mammals generally. The transition from four-legged to two-legged locomotion was presumably made during the Pliocene Epoch. Yet no clear trace of the transition or of the human ancestors who made it survives from the Pliocene fossil record. So embarrassing is this lacuna to primatologists and paleoanthropologists that they have coined hybrid temporal terms to fill the chronological gap, referring to late Miocene remains as Mio-Pliocene and to early Pleistocene remains as Plio-Pleistocene, even though none are unambiguously Pliocene in provenience.

It seems clear, however, that at some time during this epoch, our forebears
underwent drastic transformations of anatomy, physiology, and behavior, making them far less ape-like than they had been during the preceding Miocene “age of apes.” What follows is a partial listing of those traits which distinguish us sharply from the pongids (the great apes) and from most other primates.

### Humanity’s Unpongid Traits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Trait</th>
<th>Analog</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>anatomy</td>
<td>bipedal stance</td>
<td>penguin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>limb proportions</td>
<td>marine iguana</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>jaw shape</td>
<td>frog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>female bust</td>
<td>manatee (sea-cow)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>smooth skin</td>
<td>porpoise</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>subcutaneous fat</td>
<td>most aquatic birds and mammals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>brain-size</td>
<td>dolphin</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>descended larynx</td>
<td>sea-lion</td>
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<tr>
<td>physiology</td>
<td>perspiration</td>
<td>seal</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>bradycardia(^1)</td>
<td>walrus</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ansomia (smell-blindness)</td>
<td>whale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>behavior</td>
<td>swimming</td>
<td>all aquatic animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>weeping</td>
<td>most aquatic vertebrates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>voluntary breathing</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>and vocalization(^2)</td>
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These strikingly aquatic characteristics of our species strongly suggest that our unobserved Pliocene evolution was quite different from the development that is conventionally postulated. This development has us moving directly from the Miocene tropical forest to the Pleistocene tropical grasslands, as the African and Asian baboons are in process of doing. The savanna environment, however, has not produced baboons that are bipedal, big-brained, or furless. If it has displaced them from the primate norm in any way, it has done so in a wolf-like direction, as witness their muzzles, their large canines, and the fact that the Greeks referred to baboons as cynocephali, or “dog-heads.”

Our unapelike traits imply that, ecologically if not genetically, we took an evolutionary detour during the Pliocene Epoch. This detour, as described by British science writer Elaine Morgan, was through shallow water.\(^3\) Our Pliocene adaptation to lakes, rivers, and sea-coasts, she maintains, explains both our aquatic characteristics and the fact that our water-buried remains have not been found.
The third sense in which we are thalassic has to do with our early use of watercraft, ranging from rafts through dug-outs to sailboats. Even though seas were shallower during the last Ice Age than today, there is little doubt that members of our species crossed considerable expanses of deep water to populate Australia at that time. This acknowledgement implies that our ancestors have, by accepted reckoning, been building and using watercraft of some kind for at least 30,000 years. The nature of the craft and their frequency of this use remain, of course, uncertain. But, since few prehistorians are mariners, it is likely that scholars have, if anything, underestimated the extent of early human transoceanic movement.

Till recently, it was the scholarly consensus that there had been no transatlantic crossings before 1492. In the 1950’s and 1960’s, however, Danish archeologist Helge Ingstad excavated an entire Scandinavian village at L’Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, Canada, dated to about 1,000 C.E. Since then, the question has no longer been whether pre-Columbian crossings took place but who, if anyone, preceded the Vikings. Apparent Canaanite inscriptions in both North and South America have led some Semitists to conclude that Phoenicians and others reached the New World no later that the 6th century B.C.E.

There is, moreover, evidence for even earlier crossings of the Pacific. Of this, the strongest is probably the discovery at Valdivia, Ecuador, of what seems to be Jomon Period Japanese pottery datable to about 3,000 B.C.E.

The travels and migrations of early man were, I should say, impeded far more often by mountain ranges and other vertical discontinuities of terrain than by bodies of water. For this view there is a linguistic as well as archeological evidence. Some of it is historic, as in the case of Euxeinos, or “hospitable to strangers,” the name given by the Greeks to what we call the Black Sea. Since it is stormy, most classicists have assumed that the name Euxeinos was an ironic euphemism for a navigationally inhospitable sea. But the fact that nearly all of the Black Sea coast was colonized by Greeks arriving in ships seems to me to indicate that their name for it is to be taken at face value in terms of what had become, in effect, a Greek lake.

Other linguistic evidence for human thalassophilia, or sea-proneness, is prehistoric and based on comparative philology. The Proto-IndoEuropean root *pel-/pol-,"flat," referred equally to smooth land, such as plains, and to (normally) calm bodies of water. Names derived from this root were applied to European peoples indifferently, whether they lived on plains, like the Poles, or on archipelagos, like the Pelasgians, the sea-faring folk who preceded the Greeks in the Aegean area. Outside Europe, ecological metaphors further support the equation of terrestrial...
with aquatic surfaces. The Turks and Mongols of central Asia referred to the steppes, when rainfall was adequate, as “the sea of grass” and, when drought supervened, as “the sea of dust.” And, even in driest Arabia, the bedouins referred to their camels as “ships of the desert.”

Now, as our species positions itself, however hesitantly, for manned exploration of planets beyond the Earth-Moon system, it seems only appropriate for us to conceive of this project as one of navigating the interplanetary ocean.

2. The Linguistic Context

In 1970 I employed a biotaxonomic analogy in counting and classifying civilizations.7 While conceding that, at the global level, civilization is now and always has been one (just as the biosphere is one), I held that, at the continental and subcontinental level, eight civilizations could be distinguished. It is these civilizations, which I orally nicknamed “The Great Eight,” that I would now like to classify by language affiliation, to see what, if anything, we may conclude from such classification.

From west to east, these civilizations are:

1. Mexican
2. Peruvian
3. Western
4. Hellenic
5. Egyptian
6. Levantine
7. Indic
8. Chinese

In terms of conventionally recognized language families, the Mexican, Peruvian, and Chinese civilizations show no linguistic overlap with other civilizations. The greatest degree of linguistic overlap is exhibited by the Western, Hellenic, and Indic civilizations, all of which are predominantly Indo-European. But the Egyptian and Levantine civilizations also overlap, both being predominantly Afro-Asian (or Hamito-Semitic). At this level, a plurality—but not a majority—of the world’s civilizations are Indo-European in speech.

If we follow the example of the members of The Association for the Study of Language in Prehistory, as set forth in their quarterly publication Mother Tongue.
we can go further and subsume some of these families under more inclusive language phyla. The Macro-Mayan, Oto-Manguean, and Uto-Aztecan families of Mexico then combine with the Andean (or Quechua-Aymaran) family of Peru to constitute the Amerind phylum postulated by Joseph Greenberg. More impressively, the language families of all the remaining civilizations except the Chinese are merged in a tricontinental phylum named Nostratic by the Danish philologist Holger Pedersen. At this more inclusive level of linguistic taxonomy, an outright majority of the world’s civilizations are Nostratic in speech.

The question raised by this classificatory survey is, of course, what is implied by the Indo-European plurality and the Nostratic majority just noted. In the Victorian era, because of the literary and religious prestige of such “classical” languages as Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit, there was a tendency among scholars to make two assumptions about highly inflected languages like these three: first, that they are grammatically superior to less inflected languages; and second, that they are representative of all Indo-European languages. There is, however, no objective measure of superiority among different types of grammatical structure. And the discovery of Hittite, an ancient but not highly inflected Indo-European language, throws doubt on the normative character of Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit.

If there is no distinctively Indo-European grammar, what of vocabulary? Here too we encounter indeterminacy. For, while Indo-European vocabulary is unique, it is unique for the same reason that non-Indo-European vocabularies are unique: namely, that most lexical items in all languages are arbitrary and therefore unlikely to recur elsewhere except as a result of cognition. The same observations about the grammatical and lexical distinctiveness of Indo-European, moreover, apply with equal cogency to Nostratic. We are consequently left with no firm basis for correlating the character of a civilization with the genealogy of the language or languages in which its oral rhetoric or literary tradition is expressed. Presumably, then, any language, if sufficiently cultivated, could serve as a vehicle for sophisticated self-expression on the part of any civilization.

3. The Diachronic Context

Diachronic context is embeddedness in time. I have deliberately eschewed the phrase “historical context” because history, as documentation of the past, by definition excludes undocumented prehistory. Yet, when placed in a time-sequence, history necessarily issues from prehistory. If, moreover, we follow Kenneth Boulding and others in equating civilization with food-production through the domestication of plants and animals rather than with literacy and urbanism, civilization itself
becomes prehistoric as well as historic. This is true a fortiori for civilizations which, like the Peruvian, were urban and metallurgic but (as far as we can now tell) not literate.

During the past decade, however, the greatest question concerning the diachronic context of civilization has been one raised by the German historical sociologist Gunnar Heinsohn, who now maintains that the chronology of the ancient world which we have accepted for the past century is grossly inflated. The reasons for this inflation, as seen by Heinsohn and other chronological revisionists, are several:

1. the nationalism of Alexandrian priests like Manetho of Egypt and Berossus of Babylonia, eager to prove their countries the world’s oldest, which they did chiefly by misrepresenting contemporaneous rival dynasties as sequential and nation-wide in authority;

2. the pietism of Jewish and Christian scholars, who, by equating venerability with antiquity, were led to place Biblical figures in an unrealistically remote past;

3. ego-inflation on the part of Egyptologists, Assyriologists, Indologists, and Sinologists, intent on enhancing the longevity of the civilizations in whose study they specialized;

4. overreliance on retrocalculations based upon erroneous astronomic identifications, such as that of Sopdet (or Sothis) with Sirius;

5. gradualistic progressivism, denying the possibility that major cultural gains or losses can occur suddenly and catastrophically;

6. consensualism, or excessive respect for that majority of scholars responsible for having created the prevailing chronology of recent decades.

If Heinsohn is right, then the following chronological sequence of civilizations, which till recently I accepted without hesitation, is in doubt:

1. Levantine
2. Egyptian
3. Hellenic
4. Indic
5. Chinese
6. Mexican
7. Peruvian
8. Western

By his reckoning, all of them except Western civilization (which could be reclassified as late Hellenic) began at about the same time—to wit, 1,000 B.C.E. In addition to upsetting many an academic apple-cart, this scheme eliminates Toynbeeian patterns of apparetion and affiliation and opens the door to a theory of global environmental causation. It also makes the notion that all civilizations are poised to enter a post-civil cultural stage (and to do so almost simultaneously) easier to accept.

Beyond iconoclastic passion, what justification does Heinsohn have for annihilating two millennia of ancient history? Chiefly, he says, an archeological one. He accepts as historical only those periods for which there is stratigraphic as well as documentary evidence. Where there is literary evidence only, he treats the “history” involved as legend. Thus, in Egypt he collapses the three “kingdoms” (actually a relatively recent construct) into one. And in Mesopotamia he conflates the Mitanni with Medes, the Quti with the Scythians, and so on. While I have not yet accepted all of Heinsohn’s historical restructuring, I am now convinced that all consensual dates prior to those of Alexander of Macedon are open to question.

4. The Ritual Context

Of all aspects of civilization, there is probably none about which we are more poorly informed, in historical terms, than the ritual aspect. The reason for this is not far to seek: while myths, for example, are readily recorded in narrative form, rites, if they are to be adequately represented, require a special body movement notation, like that of Rudolf Laban or Gertrude Kurath for dance—if not, indeed, videotaped recording. But both dance notation and videotaping are extremely recent inventions. The result is that, even when static visual representations of ceremonies are available, we must rely on inference in the reconstruction of premodern movement sequences. And our difficulty is compounded when the ceremonials which we wish to recreate are rites associated with religious practices, such as those of early Mexico and Peru, which have been superseded by those of an alien and imported faith.

In terms of cultural evolution, ritual activities may be classified as belonging to three broad types: (1) shamanic rites, such as masked healing dances, characteristic of foraging societies; (2) priestly rites, such as human sacrifice, characteristic of horticultural societies; and (3) secular rites, such as graduation ceremonies, characteristic of urban societies. Obviously, however, the rites of civilization are not
exclusively of the secular urban type. Shamanic and priestly types persist in them as Tylorian survivals. But there is a tendency for urban societies to stereotype most shamanic rites as primitive and some priestly rites as barbarous. The Romans, for example, regarded human sacrifice as retrograde and considered its practice by Carthaginians a valid excuse for their own destruction of Carthage.

5. The Mythic Context

Myths of paradise and disaster in the past are a near universal of human societies at every level of cultural complexity. As far as I am aware, neither this nor any other major mythic theme is distinctively civilized in the sense of being restricted to literate urban communities. It is true that Greek mythology, for example, was rationalized and embellished to a greater degree than that of its “barbarian” neighbors. But this Hellenic distinctiveness was one of style rather than of content. Whether their protagonists were gods or mortal heroes, Greek myths still portrayed atrocities, such as rape, murder, castration, and cannibalism, and violations of decency, such as bestiality, incest, adultery, and fornication.

According to anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn, there is no more nearly universal theme in human folklore than that of catastrophe—both physical, in the form of world-wide fire and flood, and cultural, in the form of antisocial behaviors like those listed above. Until the early nineteenth century, catastrophist models of our past—based largely, though not entirely, on Biblical narrative—dominated the Western scholarly world.

During the past century and a half, however, catastrophism has generally been superseded, at least among scientists, by the paradigm that William Whewell termed uniformitarianism. Uniformitarianism (or uniformism, for short) has two main components: James Hutton’s actualism, the doctrine that those forces which shaped our planet in the past were no different from those which shape it today; and Charles Lyell’s gradualism, the doctrine that most major geological and biological changes occur so slowly as to be imperceptible at any given moment.

Those historians and prehistorians who have sought to base their reconstructions of our undocumented past on a combination of traditional narrative and scientific archeology have faced a major problem: the apparent incompatibility of traditional catastrophism and scientific uniformism. Feeling forced to make a clear choice, most chroniclers have opted for uniformism, if only because myth connotes fantasy and science, validity.
Yet questions remain. With regard to the demise of the dinosaurs, catastrophism has made an undeniable comeback. If mammoths too are conceded to have suffered relatively sudden catastrophic extinction, catastrophism will have reentered not only the paleontological picture but the archeological picture as well. For we have clear petrographic depictions of mammoths, which are generally conceded to have vanished no more than 10,000 years ago—within the life-span not only of hominids generally but of modern humanity specifically.

A rehabilitated catastrophism would clearly lend new credence to mythology as a source of information about the human past. And it might give at least indirect support to the aquatic theory of human evolution, since it seems unlikely that uniform environmental conditions would have so drastically reshaped and reoriented a large (and presumably reluctant) primate.

6. The Iconographic Context

Human iconography resembles human mythology in an important respect—namely, that the same basic themes appear in precivil and in civil society. Pictorially, concentric circles (variably referred to as the sun-sign and the cup-and-ring design) and serpentine lines occur with roughly equal frequency from the Upper Paleolithic through the megalithic to the fully historic period. As with myth, so with icon: what changes is not so much the substance of what is depicted as the style. In the case of iconography, the lines become straighter and the curves smoother, but the designs persist.

One type of depiction which is rarely treated as iconography but perhaps should be is cartography. Maps are often regarded as purely utilitarian devices for facilitating travel. Yet they can clearly be more. They can be works of art. They can also be cosmograms, or depictions of the world and our place in it. Moreover, the world that they depict need not be physical only. It can be mental as well. Some aboriginal Australian “maps” seem to be dreamscapes, in which gods, men, and monsters commingle.

Even in our own time, some artifacts commonly regarded as paintings might equally well be called maps in this extended sense. The abstract expressionism of Jackson Pollock, for example, could be thought of as a mapping of the artist’s mind.

One of the most interesting maps ever made is the early 16th century Piri Re’is map from Turkey. Despite its post-Columbian date, it seems to have been copied from pre-Columbian maps that not only give a remarkably accurate rendering of the
east coast of both Americas but also outline the land (as opposed to the ice) mass of Antarctica! Whatever speculations this document may encourage, it certainly appears to fit our initial characterization of man as a thalassic organism.

7. The Noetic Context

Noetics is the study of consciousness. The noetic context of civilization is that which places it in the larger framework of human thought. Students of material culture, like anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, tend to think of civilization as a bundle of traits—not only those which we mentioned earlier, like literacy, urbanism, and metallurgy, but also some which we did not, like statecraft, masonry, and fine arts. Those scholars with a noetic orientation, however, would be more inclined to think of civilization as a state of mind.

Still, what is civilized state of mind? It can hardly be intelligence, since no current test of intelligence (as opposed to knowledge) seems to reveal more intellectual ability in urbanites than in preliterate. Nor does it seem to be an emotional set different from that of persons in preliterate cultures. Despite intermittent use of the term savages to denote individuals living in hunting and gathering societies, there is no objective evidence that they are more savage—meaning crueler—than individuals in more complex societies.

Even when the term civilized is used to mean polite, it is dubious that courtesy can be used as a dispositional criterion to distinguish the literate from the preliterate. For there are many preliterate societies, particularly those with unilineal kinship systems, in which the etiquette involved in relations between kinsmen is considerably more elaborate than in our own. The same can be said, particularly in pastoral societies, about hospitality to strangers.

A better noetic criterion for distinguishing preliterate from civilized may be that of German philosopher Karl Jaspers, who (though he drew his distinction in terms of historical periods rather than of cultural complexity) called the former mythic and the latter scientific. In so far as science is a systematically formalized procedure, it certainly seems more typical of civilized than of preliterate society.

Perhaps the most challenging noetic hypothesis of recent years is that of British biochemist Rupert Sheldrake, who has advanced a theory of "morphic resonance" with regard to the spread of new patterns of structure and development. Although Sheldrake applies his thesis to phenomena ranging from the growth of crystals through embryonic morphogenesis and organic adaptations to human
thought, it is only human thought that I shall deal with here. In effect, he takes expressions like “climate of opinion” and “winds of doctrine” literally, in that he argues that new ideas can radiate outward from a center of initiation in the absence of verbalization or other direct sensory transmission—not by telepathy but through the formation of a sort of cognitive template. Predictably, most of Sheldrake’s colleagues have declared this process intrinsically impossible. Yet experiments have tended to support his thesis. If valid, it has major implications for the invention vs. diffusion debate, especially as it relates to New World civilization. For the pyramid complex could, by Sheldrake’s reckoning, have been transmitted to the Americas from Egypt or Mesopotamia without any physical or verbal contact between the hemispheres, by morphic resonance alone.

8. Other Contexts

It goes without saying that there are factors affecting civilization which I have omitted from this brief presentation. Most of them, quite as much as the seven factors just discussed, illustrate and further justify the anonymous contemporary dictum “text without context is pretext.” But I have omitted them because it seemed to me that they had already been more than adequately explored in widely read publications by well known authors.

Of these omitted contexts, the most obvious is the environmental. With reference to our physical environment, I have found little to add to the Toynbeean formula of challenge-and-response, in accordance with which we should not expect civilization to emerge either in unstimulating habitats like that of the Ituri forest of Zaire or in overwhelming surroundings like those of the Arctic Circle. In accepting this formula, however, it may be that I have too readily joined the anthropological consensus, which treats environment as a limiting rather than a stimulating factor in the development of civilization. Years ago geographer Ellsworth Huntington advocated a more positive view of temperate environments as precipitant of civilization. Perhaps, with the development of more sophisticated concepts and techniques, climatologists will discover good reason for a more balanced view of the relation between nature and culture—a view of nature as something more than merely the raw material that culture molds. In any case, cognitive innovation does not always consist of a blanket rejection of the thinking of the past. Sometimes it involves resuscitation of prematurely discarded ideas.
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