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It seems unavoidable to begin with an introduction that was a staple of Toynbee reviews: what an amazing reach, how learned Wescott is, and this learning is far from superficial. It stops you on every page. And what a vocabulary. But readers familiar with Toynbee reviews may now be thinking a word my daughter has just taught me to spell: “uh-oh.”

But it is not likely that the late Roger Wescott saw himself as the Second Coming of Toynbee. A second Spengler, maybe, in the John the Baptist sense of preparing the way for someone greater still to come, if you allow that Wescott prefers to make the smooth places rough. As his subtitle suggests, he takes a dim view of consensus, particularly if he thinks such consensus prematurely cuts off legitimate debate.

Take, for instance, Gunnar Heinsohn’s contention that historical dates have been unduly lengthened by premature acceptance of inadequate textual evidence. This is dealt with several times, always briefly, with Wescott concluding that we have no accurate dating, not even relative dating, before the time of the Achemenids. That the synchronic existence of the Sumerians and the Chaldeans, the Old Kingdom and the New Kingdom would make emmersauce of most scholarly studies of the Ancient World does not seem even to occur to Wescott. He has given us the lead and the initial sources. Before we waste our lives any further, we should go look at these sources and reconsider.

Again, Wescott champions catastrophism, the view that change comes about suddenly out of catastrophe, in many fields. He believes that everywhere the opposite view, gradualism, reigns. Gradualism suits our worldview better, it implies a more orderly universe, and the minority who hold catastrophic views are perceived at best as marginal eccentrics.

We all know from Kuhn that normal science tends to cut
off debate. Where a satisfactory line of inquiry has been found, meaningful results are coming in, journals are established to report the activity, and textbooks are being written to teach future practitioners the basics, it is unreasonable to expect these practitioners to stop and review the basic accepted premises. Without normal science, of course, it is difficult to get any work done.

The book is organized topically, and while Wescott introduces each section from a current perspective, he does not seem to be perturbed that he is presenting articles and reviews he wrote in the seventies that accept traditional chronology: for instance Julian Jaynes’ concept of the bicameral mind, or the Myceneans, who never existed, having memories of the Minoans. This is baffling, at first. But Wescott may be saying, if you accept traditional chronology, as I did, then this would follow. But if you no longer accept this chronology, then you will have to find alternative explanations. In any event, reading Wescott is sometimes like the archaeology he admires. The reader has to be prepared to make leaps and inferences.

But didn’t Wescott have the urge to seek these alternative explanations himself? At a relatively late stage in his career, apparently not. If you are using all your energy to apply brakes to a speeding train, you are not concerned about what should be done after the train is stopped. Wescott loved creative hypotheses, the more the better, and as with Jaynes, he does not require conclusive support. Let Jaynes, Velikovsky, Heinsohn and von Danae kin get their ideas on the table, and let the scientific community consider them before rejecting them as outside the realm of paradigmatic consideration.

Toynbee and Sorokin provide answers to the questions they raised, and many since, beginning with Quigley and Coulborn, have been modifying those answers, refining and softening them, but essentially working within a paradigm that Coulborn openly recognized as normal science. Wescott is calling for a pause in this activity, and particularly a consideration of whether rapid advances in historical method and knowledge do not call for a widening of inquiry, perhaps a nesting of civiliza-
tional inquiry into a broader frame of reference, including natural science, prehistory, and futurism. In this, though in a different way, he resembles Arthur Iberall, Stedman Noble, Christopher Chase-Dunn and Thomas Hall and others who, in their various expansions, make those of us who cannot even manage civilizations feel rather provincial, rather as Toynbee made us feel when we were doing our graduate dissertations on Changes in the Style of Amber Glass Trade at the Mouth of the Elbe During the Reign of Rupert XXVIII of Hofsteunsier-Glazbruken.

When Wescott compares Pacific Rim civilizations, for instance, he covers oceanography, geology, ecology, cultigens, race, language, prehistory, history, climates, polities, religion, the arts and--finally--civilizations. Nothing is developed; it is an enjoyable but superficial trip. Along the way, then, the reader might do well to take the book as a traveler takes a vacation. You can consider classification of civilizations one day, the prehistory of the Pacific Rim another, and the vocabulary always, noting what you may want to explore further on your own, without feeling compelled to learn more about every novelty encountered.

Often Wescott’s insights don’t seem to have much use, even for him. His taxonomy of civilizations from global to Florentine, reminds us that there are national, regional and local differences within every civilization, but the local differences are likely to remain the province of the social historian or the cultural anthropologist.

On the other hand, his central idea on the geographical boundaries of civilizations has taken on significance as counterpoint to world systems core-periphery concerns. Wescott suggests that instead of trying to sort out overlapping boundaries of civilizations, it is better to look for the cores. Having established those, you can identify overlapping areas without worrying too much about whether Spain is Western or Islamic. It might be interesting to compare civilizational and world systems cores, once the world systems analysts get around to delineating their systems.

On temporal delineations, Wescott’s interests go back to
precivilizational and even human origins. So the advent of civilization may be seen as just another catastrophic leap into the unforeseen consequences of towns, irrigation, wheels, standardization, stratification and things like that.

Still, the classification of civilizations is one area in which Wescott is not bound by a foolish consistency: he is a pioneer of consensualism in that his “Great Eight” classification represents an effective attempt to delineate civilizations on which most civilizationists agree. At a session held at the Mobile meeting in 2000, a group of ISCSC members unwittingly endorsed—though not under the same names — Wescott’s “Great Eight” civilizations: Mexican, Peruvian, Western, Hellenic, Egyptian, Levantine, Indic and Chinese. These, the group agreed, were civilizations on which there seemed to be little debate.

Nor is he averse to the idea of global civilization, except that he believes it began with the Mongols linking of East Asian, South Asia, Islamic and European civilizations.

Unlike some civilizationists, Wescott does not depreciate world systems analysis. He thinks they are admirable in their reach and flexibility, especially Gunder Frank. He praises Christopher Chase Dunn and Thomas Hall for their ethnographic sophistication, though he thinks they treat their “conceptual dichotomies” as too discrete. But world systems analysts, he thinks, tend to be too abstract and too prone to political and economic reductionism.

Wescott’s interest in language is always fun. He sees himself as a historiologist, dissentualist, saltationist, futurist, monogenist, phyleticist, nostraticist, anomalist, catastrophist, quantalist, diffusionist and aquaticist. (My spellcheck is not helping with any of these.) If you had asked him if he was also a thalassacast, he probably would have replied that he would prefer to be considered a ponticist. But he is tolerant of the errors of tellurists, actualists, auchtochthonists, consensualists, polygenecists and compostrianists, and like other tolerant figures of history, has often been willing to sit at table with them.

The reader might wish for some afterwords that would
have developed the reasons for believing in a shorter chronology, explained what was diffused when, established which of the many traits mentioned were crucial to the formation of civilizations, and why and how civilizations are so different in style. But Wescott’s focus has been on reopening discussion, not closing it with final explanations (though Spengler gave final explanations for everything and closed nothing).

If the reviewer expresses frustration and exasperation, Wescott would no doubt feel his book has been a success.

Matthew Melko