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WORLD CIVILIZATION IDENTIFIED WITH FIVE EPOCHS OF HISTORY

WILLIAM MCGAUGHEY

Historical and Sociological Approaches to Civilization

In contemplating civilizations, it is possible to approach these entities sociologically and learn about them through description of the various facets of their societies and cultures. In such a way, Alexis De Tocqueville described U.S. society in the 1830s, and Robert and Helen Lynd described “Middletown” America in the 1920s. The life of a community is seen in a collection of snapshots taken at roughly the same time. Another approach is historical. The assumption here is that a civilization can be known by the story which leads from its past to its present and beyond. This story narrates important events that explain how the present society came to be. The approach to civilizations presented in this paper is historical rather than sociological. The study of civilizations becomes close to being a study of world history. In fact, world history might be considered the story of civilizations.

World History and Comparative Civilizations

The purpose of this paper is to present a scheme of world history and comparative civilizations which I believe will help to make the accumulation of historical experience more intelligible. This scheme is presented in a fuller version in my book, *Five Epochs of Civilization: World History as Emerging in Five Civilizations*, which was published last year. The book was reviewed by Matthew Melko on June 1, 2001, at the 30th annual meeting of the ISCSC on the Newark campus of Rutgers University. I made a presentation of its concepts at a workshop on the following day. This paper will respond to points made in Professor Melko’s review (see page 138), and in subsequent discussions, as well as explain the book’s thesis.

Melko considered the title of the book to be “appropriate,” but the subtitle and chapter titles “misleading.” The word “civilization(s)” appears twice in the title and subtitle, once as a qualifier for an epoch of history and once as an end toward which world history may be proceeding. This would be one point of confusion needing to be clarified. In my book, there is a certain convergence between the concept of an
"epoch" and of a "civilization," but there are also differences. An epoch is a period of time. A civilization is a social or cultural system. The apparent confusion may perhaps be resolved by suggesting that historical epochs are defined and distinguished from one another by having a certain content which is associated with a civilization. Historical turning points, which mark the beginning and end of epochs, are times when one civilization replaces another. In this way, world history and the study of civilizations are reconciled.

Civilizations and Societies

Ernest Gellner, quoted by Leonidas Donskis, has proposed that "the proper study of mankind is human groups and institutions." I would propose that, with respect to world history, those groups are civilizations. What is a civilization? Is it a society—i.e., a community of people—or is it a society’s culture? The book, Five Epochs of Civilization, comes down on the side of saying that civilization is culture. In this respect, its point of view differs from that of Arnold Toynbee, Oswald Spengler, and most ISCSC members who would hold that civilizations are geographically distinguished societies that have existed at various times. There is a Chinese society that Toynbee broke down into a "Sinic" civilization (to describe its earlier version) and a "Far Eastern" civilization (its later version). Similarly, there have been Indic, Hindu, Hellenic, Mayan, Minoan, Western Christian, and other civilizations associated with peoples who lived in particular places and times. Some of these civilizations are extinct while a few have continued. A goal of discussions at a recent ISCSC conference has been to compile a definitive list of the major or "mainstream" civilizations, with a certain consensus solidifying behind the following: Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Minoan, Classical, Islamic, Byzantine, Western, African, Mesoamerican, and Andean.

Arnold Toynbee identified the appropriate entity to be studied in history as a "society." He defined a "civilization" as a type of society. A society consists of a set of human communities which have a common culture. Another name for civilization according to him might be a "civilized society." A civilized society has certain characteristics which distinguish it from "uncivilized" or "primitive" societies. One such feature would be the capacity for history. Such societies develop towards newer and more complex forms of social organization. Through written history, they also remember the process by which the changes took place.
Primitive societies, on the other hand, are bound to repetitious tradition. They remain in much the same form for thousands of years. Their collective memory consists of oral folklore and myths.

If civilization were a society (as Toynbee regarded it), this entity would consist of a certain race of people sharing an organizational structure and communal experience. Another possibility would be to define civilization in terms of the society's culture. The cultural identity would be distinct from the group of people who embraced the culture. By this definition, civilizations would change when their cultures change, not when there is a change in political organization. By the second standard, civilization did not fall when Germanic barbarians overran the territories of the west Roman empire because there was continuity in Christianity, which was the main element of its culture. The barbarian tribes invading Europe quickly converted to this religion. It was only when the Christian faith lost its grip upon west European culture in Renaissance times that this civilization fell. So the selection of one definition or another for civilizations has an impact upon the designation of historical turning points.

The Problem of Pluralistic Societies

It is evident that racially- or ethnically-based societies are scattered throughout the earth. For millennia, most of these societies had scant knowledge of or contact with each other, and could hardly have had a common history. World historians have a problem with this. Since history is a story, the story of world history would have to be the separate stories of all these scattered societies. This scheme is organizationally untidy. Historians face the problem of deciding how much space to give to each people's history and how the different histories are related to each other.

World historians today emphasize contacts between civilizations, suggesting that these contacts provided the impetus for cultural change. Such change, they say, is the stuff of history. That partially solves the problem of fragmented history, but it ignores the internal mechanism of change within societies, analogous to life cycles in living organisms, which Spengler, Toynbee, and others have noted. Societies and cultures do, on their own accord, begin, mature, and grow old. This, too, affects the course of history.

The scheme presented in Five Epochs of Civilization regards civilizations as worldwide cultural systems. World history, then, becomes a
matter of narrating events to show how the civilizations follow each other. A single story, albeit fragmented at certain points, would suffice to present world history. There is, of course, a question of deciding how much space in the history books to give to particular events or to particular peoples' histories. If historical coverage gravitates towards creative activities more than ones which simply maintain what has gone before, then those societies which have initiated important changes in human culture merit relatively greater space in the history books. For example, Sumerian society merits greater historical attention than its power or size of populations would warrant because it initiated writing, commercial accounting, and other features of urban society. However, this "urban society" must be worldwide, or at least extended to many other societies besides the Sumerian, for the argument to hold.

With respect to space given to particular peoples' histories in books of world history, I think that the size of human populations ought to set certain parameters. India and China, for instance, have held 40 to 50 percent of the world's population during the last 2,000 years. A world history respecting the volume of human experience would not want to neglect the histories of those two areas and their people. It can also be argued that "person-years" of experience indicate the volume of history as it progresses through time. Since world population has increased from 265 million persons in 1000 A.D. to six billion persons in 2000 A.D., it is evident that world history, according to this criterion, should not neglect the modern era either. I offer this argument partly to counter Professor Melko's criticism that the historical epochs in my book seemed lately to be coming at a faster pace, violating a certain sense of proportion. However, person-years of history, not years themselves, would determine what is proportionate. If one divides world history between 10000 B.C. and 2000 A.D. into two equal segments reflecting the weight of populations, the mid-point would be set at 1577 A.D., not 4000 B.C. Approximately 18 percent of human history during this period occurred in the 20th century according to population-weighted criteria.

Are civilizations truly worldwide? To answer the question affirmatively, students of comparative civilizations would have to cite many cultural practices or features held in common among the various societies, whether or not it can be demonstrated that those societies had contact with each other. Some civilizationists agree. Shuntaro Ito, then president of the ISSCSC, said at the 25th annual meeting of this organization:
“I will not arrange vertically civilizations in isolation, but take into account lateral relations among them which indicate transformations which took place in human history on a global scale. I claim that neither the view of Eurocentric development nor the view of simple multicivilizations is sufficient as a paradigm of comparative civilizations. The former, because it is a narrow and parochial bias of Eurocentrism; the latter, because it loosens the global unity of civilizational developments by separating these from each other. Civilizations did not develop in isolation, but underwent in common several great transformations which are not parochial but global.”

Global transformations, by definition, change societies around the world. They represent the changing from one worldwide civilization to another. However, this situation presents another challenge to historians: worldwide civilizations (if such exist) must be incorporated into societies that are widely separated from each other. Those individual societies may have begun at different times. Their cultural elements would have developed in different periods. That would lead one to conclude that a particular civilization and its related historical epoch began in several different years, depending on which society we are considering. For instance, Civilization I may have come (give or take a few centuries either way) to Pharaonic Egypt, in the 32nd century B.C.; to the Indus Valley civilization in the 25th century B.C.; and to Chinese society in the 20th century B.C. In other words, it is not possible to say that a particular epoch of history, associated with a civilization, began on such and such a date for societies everywhere in the world. The dates are staggered for the different societies. Therefore, world history is not a clear-cut scheme in which historical epochs begin and end on particular dates but a more complex system.

The Problem of Cultural Definition

Civilizations as culture run the risk of arbitrary definition. Which culture is a civilization? Since a culture has many internal features, one needs to identify certain key elements to tell one from another. In this regard, culture is like human personality. One can develop several sets of criteria to categorize personality. Is one a “type A” personality, or an introvert, or an “other-directed” person, or a “Pisces,” or a “dominant”
or an “intuitive” type by the Meyer-Briggs classification? It would not seem that all such classifications can be equally valid or “scientific.” So, too, not every cultural element would be a key to civilizations. Historians and students of comparative civilizations must make some judgment calls. But, then, the categories could be too subjective to be meaningful.

Toynbee’s scheme avoids this problem because the fate of societies is relatively unambiguous. Societies are clearly defined bodies of people. Usually they begin when nomadic groups enter a land, settle there, and establish a political order; or, alternatively, when a particular religion transforms the previous culture. These societies end when a civilized order is overrun by another group of nomads or is absorbed, through conquest, into an alien political empire. The Hittite empire and its civilization perished in what Toynbee called the “Völkerwanderung” that took place in the 12th century B.C.—no question about this. Toynbee’s “civilization” is located in a particular time and place. Something happened to it historically.

Cultures are comparatively soft. They are subject to changing or uncertain definitions. Consider the zodiac as a guide to human personality. Part of its scheme is based on hard information. A person’s birth date is an element in this system. So is the configuration of planets and other celestial bodies at the time of a person’s birth. However, the interesting part is what this all means in terms of one’s behavioral tendencies or its powers of fortune-telling. Today’s horoscope tells me that, because I am a Pisces, “Relocation will have lasting and lucrative financial results.” That would be quite interesting to me if it were true. However, I consider horoscopes to be a work of superstition. And so it is with culture-based civilizations. They are interesting constructs but intellectually suspect.

Nevertheless, the point of this paper, and of the book to which it refers, is to make such an argument about civilizations and, hopefully, provide some useful knowledge. Civilizations have two key elements or characteristics: (1) the “cultural technology,” or communication technology, which is the dominant technique of expression within its culture, and (2) the institution or institutions of power which dominates their society. They have several minor characteristics, such as the dominant beliefs, values, and models of attractive personality. Dominance is, of course, a term subject to interpretation. One must decide in each case what seems to fit the facts.
Communication Technology as a Basis of Universal History

Let us consider this question from the perspective of the first characteristic, focused on the dominant cultural technology. The five technologies which are associated with the “five epochs” are: (1) writing, (2) alphabetic writing, (3) printing, (4) electronic recording and broadcasting, and (5) computerized communication. To peg the identity of civilizations upon use of a particular cultural technology helps them to stake a claim to universality. With respect to the question whether civilizations are worldwide, one might ask: Is writing found in societies throughout the earth? Is alphabetic writing? Is printing? The answer is generally “yes”, although there are some exceptions. Peoples living in primitive tribal communities generally have an oral, but not written, culture. The Inca society of pre-Columbian Peru communicated through knotted cords rather than visually symbolic words. The Chinese and other Far Eastern peoples have writing, but lack alphabetic writing.

It appears that worldwide civilizations do exist if defined by the dominant types of communication technology. It also seems that these civilizations arrived in an order that was largely the same in societies around the earth. Writing in an ideographic form—one visual symbol for each word—was invented before alphabetic writing; and alphabetic writing was invented before printing; and printing, before electronic communication; and electronic communication, before computers.

One also observes that the arrival of a new technology does not mean the end of the previous technology. Even though people today send e-mails by computer, they also read printed newspapers, listen to the radio, and send handwritten letters in their society’s alphabetic or ideographic script. Two hundred years ago, they were limited to the newspapers and handwritten letters. The culture fills up with an increasing number and variety of communication devices; it does not completely drop the use of the old ones as new ones are added. Nor, contrary to the criticism raised in Melko’s book review, does this scheme imply that use of the previous epoch’s characteristic technology diminishes in absolute terms as a new epoch brings a new technology.

In this respect, civilizations do not end though they have a clear beginning. Something of the manuscript or print culture lingers on in the electronically paced societies of the 20th and 21st centuries. It is doubtful that the old cultures will ever completely die out. On the other hand, historians are able to determine with some precision the times when their communication devices were invented. Writing, in an ideographic form, was invented in ancient Sumer (Mesopotamia) in, per-
haps, the 33rd century B.C. Alphabetic writing was developed in Palestine or Syria in the middle of the 2nd millennium B.C. Gutenberg's invention in 1454 A.D. sparked an explosion of printed literature in Europe. Patent applications pinpoint the invention of various electronic communication devices in the 19th and 20th centuries. The first commercial radio station in the United States began broadcasting in 1920. Can one say, therefore, that the age of radio broadcasting began in 1920? Yes. Did it end when television broadcasting took off in the 1950s? No.

An argument is made in *Five Epochs of Civilization*, however, that the newer communication technology, having certain superior qualities, supersedes the old one with respect to dominant cultural influence. Like a growing child, its culture has more creative energy and so comes to dominate historical events in that age. It is not a matter of one culture replacing another, but of a new culture being added to what existed before. Therefore, the invention and widespread adoption of a major new communication technology provides a line of demarcation between historical epochs.

**Development of pluralistic institutions**

Historians are aware of changes that have taken place within the structure of human society during the past five to six thousand years. Societies have grown larger and have acquired a more complex set of institutions. The tribal societies of prehistoric times were organized in small communities. Their leaders combined several functions. Starting with temple cultures in Egypt and the Near East, societies have grown more pluralistic. First, the institution of monarchy separated from the temple priesthood. Then, thousands of years later, there was a philosophical challenge to monarchical power which led to the creation of the world religions. In the middle of the second millennium A.D., commercial interests challenged the duality of church and state in western Europe. Secular education took the place of religious instruction. In the 19th and 20th centuries, a “fourth estate” centered in journalism and in mass entertainment became a center of power challenging all others. World history is related to this process of institutional transformation.

The first and greatest historical transformation occurred when city-states were formed in agricultural societies. Those urban communities became centers of a new civilization which was more tightly organized than before, whose society was more stratified, which exercised
control over a broader range of territory, and had written language. Set against this type of community were nomadic societies whose livelihood depended on tending herds of animals.

The first institution to emerge was government. The royal court appeared alongside the temple as a center of power in the early mideastern city-states. World history in the first three thousand years following Egypt’s unification in 3,000 B.C. was the story of political empires expanding from cities into control of extended territories, which held nomadic invaders in check and fought rival empires. Wars shaped history in this period. Government as an institution developed in size and scope of activity. The Egyptians, Babylonians, Hittites, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Chinese, and other peoples each made an appearance on history’s stage as an imperial power. Emperor worship and rule by priest-kings characterize religion practiced in this civilization. The culmination of the first historical epoch was the formation of four large empires in the Old World—the Roman, Parthian, Kushan, and Chinese—in the second and third centuries A.D.

The second epoch came with the formation of scripturally based, philosophically inspired or creedal religion which was quite different from religions based on rituals aimed at influencing nature. Its seeds were sown during the “Axial Revolution” in the 6th and 5th centuries, B.C., when philosophers made a moral critique of government. In the story of this civilization, virtuous individuals confronted a brutal state and, in their death, became martyrs or prophets of a higher truth. The four Old World political empires of the first epoch found a counterpart in the three world religions—Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam—which claimed a part in society’s governance. Hinduism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeanism, and Nestorian and Monophysite Christianity, and ethical philosophies such as Confucianism, Taoism, and neo-Platonism, were also part of the religious equation. This civilization reached a peak in the first half of the second millennium A.D. Religion and secular government, often at war against each other, were the two major centers of power in society at this stage. The significant historical developments during this epoch had to do with religion, its theologies, conflicts, structures, and relationships with government. With the exception of China, imperial governments never again reached the level of dominance that they had achieved in the previous epoch.

The humanist culture of the Italian Renaissance marked a departure from the Christian civilization in Europe. Around 1500 A.D., the cultural movement begun in northern Italy started to spread to other parts
of Europe and then to the rest of the world. The new civilization had a commercial flavor. New forms of business organization and of banking and accounting techniques were employed in Renaissance Italy. Merchants and bankers controlled the civic life of its important cities.

Columbus sailed to America in search of spices and gold. Commerce and industry, aided by secular education, were harnessed to the cause of national power. Petrarch’s rediscovery of the Greek and Roman classics began a tradition of humanist scholarship which molded western education. Government, organized at the level of the nation state, was transformed by democratic revolutions. Printed publications, including mass-circulation newspapers, appeared.

The new secular culture admired artistic, musical, and literary genius. Other creative individuals made discoveries in science and technology. To be “civilized” meant to be educated in the excellent works of one’s culture. This epoch of world history differed from others in that western Europeans took the lead in shaping its civilization. Europeans gained a technological and military advantage over nonwestern peoples and colonized them. At the end of the epoch, there was a backlash against the cruelty and coercion of European colonialism and the slave trade. This civilization, in its imperial phase, self-destructed in the two “World Wars” of the 20th century, fueled by economic and political competition among the European powers.

The fourth civilization was focused upon institutions devoted to news and entertainment. After the previous civilization had produced two world wars and a host of angry ideologies, people grew weary of it all. They retreated instead into lighthearted diversions whose experiences were supplied quite cheaply by new technologies of sound recording, motion pictures, radio, and television. As public attention became riveted upon their images, mass entertainment became a source of power in society.

Commercial products were successfully introduced to consumers through radio and television advertisements exhibiting an attractive lifestyle. Commercial broadcasting became more than a type of business. Through advertising, it provided a link between customers and product providers in all sectors of industry. It controlled the political process as well through access to the voters’ hearts and minds. So now we have “the communications media,” along with government, religion, commerce, and education, as constituents of society’s power base. When computer technology becomes more fully developed, it may contribute yet another institution of power; but this development remains in the future.
These, then, are the parameters of change in the scheme of world history presented in *Five Epochs of Civilization*. The introduction of a major new communication technology, such as writing, or printing, or radio broadcasting, indicates that a new civilization is about to emerge. The appearance of this technology is not synonymous with the civilization itself but is a kind of lead indicator. The other key element is, as we said, the emergence of a new institution or institutions as a source of power in the society. In this respect, too, civilizations do not end entirely because the institutions do not end. It is a matter of pluralistic societies filling up with a greater number and variety of institutions.

Putting the two together, we have this scheme of civilizations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Civilization Name</th>
<th>Communication Technology</th>
<th>Institution of Power</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prehistoric</td>
<td>The spoken word</td>
<td>Ritualistic priesthoods, tribal leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilization I</td>
<td>Ideographic writing</td>
<td>Royal/imperial government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilization II</td>
<td>Alphabetic writing</td>
<td>World religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilization III</td>
<td>Printing</td>
<td>Business firms, secular schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilization IV</td>
<td>Electronic communication</td>
<td>News media, entertainment providers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilization V</td>
<td>Computer technology</td>
<td>The Internet and/ or ?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Other Aspects of Civilizations**

If these characteristics indeed represent key aspects of civilization, then there might be certain relationships between them. First, the new communication technology should appear in roughly the same period as the development of its related institution. Indeed, it seems that writing in its ideographic form was developed at about the same time (4th millennium B.C.) that the first city-states appeared in Egypt and Mesopotamia. Alphabetic writing spread throughout the Old World during the time when the great philosophers and religious prophets lived. Gutenberg built his printing press shortly before the Europeans began to explore the oceans and colonize nonwestern peoples.

Second, there should be an inherent relationship between these two elements. Such a relationship might be an imperial bureaucracy's need...
for written records to carry out its tax-collection and other functions. Or, it might be the use of printed textbooks in schools, or of printed newspapers to advertise and sell commercial products. The relationship between an invention, such as the motion-picture projector, and the entertainment found in movie theaters is obvious.

A civilization, however, has a softer side associated with its values and ideals. The ideal of goodness, as defined by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, influenced Christian society. In the age of printed literature, people came to prize the beauty of a creative artist’s personal style. Shakespeare, Rembrandt, and Beethoven became cultural heroes, not because they were good persons but because they had the vision and ability to create exquisite works of art. In the age of electronic entertainment, ideals were centered in a performer’s ability to deliver a good performance, whether in athletics, film-making, stand-up comedy, or music. The ideal of “rhythm” fits that type of talent.

In summary, the scheme presented here paints historical epochs and comparative civilizations with the same brush. Civilizations are not geographically scattered societies but successive stages in the development of a single world civilization. They are cultural positions along the path of humanity’s progress. This scheme contains the idea of historical turning points marking the places where human societies changed direction. The successive communication technologies created a type of public space where significant events took place; and those events fueled history.

**Comparison with Shuntaro Ito’s Scheme of Civilizations**

To evaluate this scheme, it may help to compare it with that presented in Shuntaro Ito’s presidential address to the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations at its 25th annual meeting in Pomona, California, in June 1996. The title of his talk was: “A Framework for Comparative Study of Civilizations”. Ito’s model of civilizations is quite similar to the one described above, with some differences.

Ito expressed sympathy for the historical views of “multicivilizationists like Danilevsky, Spengler, and Toynbee who criticized Eurocentric, unilinear developments of civilizations.” However, he disagreed with their tendency to regard civilizations as isolated organisms which develop according to an autonomous mechanism. He referred to transforming processes which affect societies globally. These cultural transformations, or “civilizational revolutions,” occur first in what Ito called “pioneer areas” and then spread to neighboring societies.
Ito presented a list of 23 "civilizations"—identical in number to those identified by Toynbee and defined in much the same manner. The five great transformations cut across these civilizations, providing a second dimension to the study of comparative civilizations. Ito compared his two-dimensional scheme to the "warps and woofs" found in weaving. "Warps and woofs complete a textile of my framework of civilizations," he wrote.

My use of the term "civilization" pertains to the "woof" aspect only. The term "society" would describe the various communities associated with the "warp" dimension. Even so, Ito refers to "urban civilizations," "axial civilizations," and "scientific civilization" in the same way that I use the term, "civilization."

Ito's thesis of the "five stages of global transformations" is expressed in these words: "I believe that mankind has come to the present having experienced in common the five great civilizational revolutions. These are: "the Anthropic Revolution," "the Agricultural Revolution," "the Urban Revolution," "the Axial Revolution," and "the Scientific Revolution." All cultural areas were to undergo these revolutions sooner or later, primarily or secondarily (i.e., originally or by influence from other areas.)"

By coincidence, Ito's five revolutions are the same in number as the five epochal changes identified in my book. Apart from terminology, his scheme of civilizations is structurally the same. Also, Ito's "Urban Revolution" and "Axial Revolution" are identical with respect to time, place, and event to the turning points which I associate with the beginnings of the first and second civilizations. The differences are: First, Ito makes the "Anthropic Revolution" and the "Agricultural Revolution" the first two items in his list of woof-type civilizations. Second, the last item, the "Scientific Revolution," differs from the turning point which begins the third civilization in my scheme; and his suggestion of an impending "Environmental Revolution" as a sixth event in the series is also different.

Two questions need to be asked, therefore, to decide between these alternative models: First, does world history (or the study of civilizations) properly begin when the human species emerged from an ape-like condition, or does it begin with urban society? Second, what is the most appropriate turning point in world history after the age introduced by the Axial Revolution? Is it a "Scientific Revolution," as Ito suggests; or would some other type of event make a better break point?

With respect to the first point of difference, it is unquestioned that
the changes associated with Ito's "Anthropic Revolution" and "Agricultural Revolution" are critically important transformations of man's condition experienced by societies around the earth. The question is where the study of history (or of civilizations) ought to begin. Ito's scheme occupies a position closer to so-called "big history," which treats everything from the "big bang" on as a legitimate part of historical study. Mine, more cautiously, follows Toynbee in dividing "primitive societies" from "civilized societies" and proposing that history begins with the beginning of civilizations.

Ito himself seems to agree when he writes, regarding his diagram of civilizations: "(T)hese major civilizations (in the diagram) are civilizations after the Urban Revolutions, for I define 'civilizations' par excellence as those after the Urban Revolution... The 'Urban Revolution' defines civilization par excellence, because civilization means to become civil, to have an urban way of life."

Where History Should Begin

A way to argue that the historical study of civilizations should begin with urban societies would be to point out that they, unlike primitive societies, have developed the art of writing. Writing gives access to humanity's interior consciousness of past experiences at a time when none of the participants or eye witnesses to its events are likely to remain alive. If, therefore, world history is a story of humanity's collected experience, only a story based on written records can produce narration from the point of view of one who had experienced the events first hand. Until sound recording devices were invented in the late 19th century, only writing could preserve a person's exact words, giving an intimate view of his thoughts, after the person had passed from the scene. Therefore, historical records seem to depend on the existence of writing in the society being studied. Since writing began with the Urban Revolution, there was no previous history as such.

To a certain extent, however, knowledge transmitted through speech can be remembered and, at a later date, be written down. Much of our knowledge of ancient folklore comes to us by such means. It is a service to humanity for scholars to interview elders of tribes without a written history and write down what has been passed on to them through countless generations by word of mouth. Archeological research may also uncover physical clues from the past to shed new light on long lost cultures.
Two techniques of recent vintage include analysis of spoken language and DNA mapping. In the first case, scholars are able to determine from close study of words in several different languages which languages, and, therefore, which groups of speakers, have a common linguistic heritage. They can determine which languages were derived from another. This helps to date the languages and determine their past geographical distribution. In the case of DNA mapping, geneticists can determine which groups of people are biologically related to each other. They have found, for instance, that, while most native Americans came across the Bering Straits from Asia, a small group of Ojibway Indians share closer genetic links with Europeans, suggesting that their ancestors may have migrated across the north Atlantic ocean.

Such techniques of modern scholarship and science push history's record deeper into the past. Perhaps at some point an ample record will exist of experience in societies which lacked writing. But, for now, history proper can be said to begin with those societies whose story is evidenced by written records. I would argue, then, that there is nothing wrong with looking at a smaller slice of human experience than what some scholars would propose, and calling this "history." Such a decision does not imply that the previous kinds of experiences were unimportant. Neither does it imply that precivilized peoples, who are sometimes called "uncivilized" peoples, are morally or culturally inferior to us. We would simply be choosing to study a particular segment of human experience associated with a particular type of society and leave the rest for other disciplines.

Where to Place History's Subsequent Break Points

The fifth "revolution" in Ito's scheme of civilizations is what he called "the Scientific Revolution." This occurred in Europe during the 17th century. The shift in intellectual attention from religious philosophy to patterns observed in nature laid the foundation for the great material advancement which Europeans and others subsequently experienced. After this great age of scientific discovery came the "Industrial Revolution," beginning in England during the late 18th century, when scientific principles were applied to mining, manufacturing, transportation, and other commercial enterprises. Ito also mentions a "third stage" of the Scientific Revolution, which he calls the "Informational Revolution". It is concerned with information-processing or computer technologies, centered in North America and Japan.
In my scheme, the next break point after the Axial or spiritual revolution would be that cultural transformation which took place in northern Italy during the 14th and 15th centuries A.D., associated with the Renaissance. This is what began the third epoch of civilization. The 17th Century revolution of scientific knowledge would fall within this civilization but not be its starting point. Then, after the third civilization would come the fourth civilization, which is concerned with mass entertainment. And a fifth, computer-based civilization, has just come into view. Here, then, is a difference of opinion regarding the definition of civilizations. What justification might I offer for this scheme?

The Scientific Revolution surely began a culture which has changed the earth’s landscape and created many new types of artificial objects. Scientific knowledge is a prerequisite to those technological wonders that are so evident in modern life. But, civilization, in my view, is not primarily about hardware. It is about values, and in a technical sense, about new communication technologies and institutions of power. Only a relatively few intellectuals are directly engaged in the production of scientific knowledge or share its passion; many more simply enjoy its fruits.

In contrast, the great majority of people have first-hand experience with commercial activities and secular education. The career system leading from the school system into various money-centered occupations may be the main motivational structure shaping modern life. So it seems fitting to put the period of the Italian Renaissance at the beginning of this epoch. For it was then and there that the marriage between humanist (or secular) culture and commercial occupations was forged. The great explosion of European adventure and migration into other parts of the world also began at that time.

Many would scoff at the idea that popular entertainment is the foundation of the civilization which we inhabit in the present epoch of world history. Melko’s review wondered if “entertainment is not something that has always been desired, but is not, and never was, central for most people.” Yet the news media and the various enterprises engaged in entertainment production are increasingly recognized as being more than a mere subset of commercial enterprise. Lightweight though it may seem, popular culture commands the attention of most young people in our society. Television shows, major sporting events, new blockbuster films, and hit recordings of popular music are the closest thing that we have today as a national culture; no longer is it the great novel or a well-known poem. This, then, I would argue, is a culture of sufficient heft to
become like civilizations of the past.

If our assumptions hold true, another civilization is coming along with the development of computer technology which, though electronic, is different in kind from previous electronic devices that merely recorded or broadcast sensory images. Intimate, one-on-one communication between man and machine has now become possible. But we must await further developments of this technology before reaching conclusions as to what its civilization ultimately will become.

I would agree with Ito that an “Environmental Revolution” may be around the corner, which would constitute another turning point of world history. The consequences of a nuclear, biological or chemical catastrophe, environmental exhaustion, and overpopulation could be so severe as to overwhelm civilization as we know it and force humanity into another mode of existence. However, that has not yet happened. While there are hints of it in certain parts of the world struck by famine, overpopulation, and disease, residents of First-World nations are still largely insulated from that possibility. Colonization of other bodies in the solar system would be a positive side of civilization in the aftermath of the Environmental Revolution, but this future, too, is undeveloped.

The Marxist view of history, whose epochs depend on changes in society’s fundamental economic relationships, has some contemporary appeal as does Alvin Tofler’s view, focusing on industrial or occupational changes. Stedman Noble stresses the importance of agriculture, wheeled chariots, and iron production in the history of civilized societies. Ideals, beliefs, and values seem weak in comparison. Yet it is these soft things, I believe, which are the essence of culture-centered civilizations. Granted, physical conditions underlie culture; but the human spirit creates it.

Finally, with respect to the question of whether or not popular entertainment can comprise a civilization, let me suggest that, because of this civilizational shift, our very enterprise hangs in the balance. We at the ISCSC are ones who care about the definition of civilizations. The majority of our contemporaries do not seem to care. In promotional efforts related to *Five Epochs of Civilization*, I have found that there is no category associated with civilization, or even with world history, within our society’s communication structure. There may be “food,” “sports,” “entertainment,” and “lifestyle” editors at major newspapers, but hardly a reporter who deals with the larger questions of history and society. And this reflects the direction of popular interest. So, as persons pursuing Civilization III dreams in a Civilization IV era, we have our
work cut out for us. This question of civilizations must somehow be made interesting and relevant to our fun-loving contemporaries.

Bibliography


